



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CAMBODIA

UNPACKING THE RANKINGS



ASIACENTRE

Religious Freedom in Cambodia

Unpacking the Rankings

Asia Centre
2026

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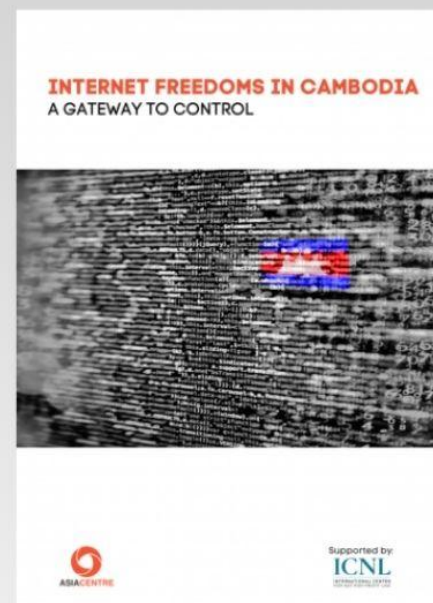
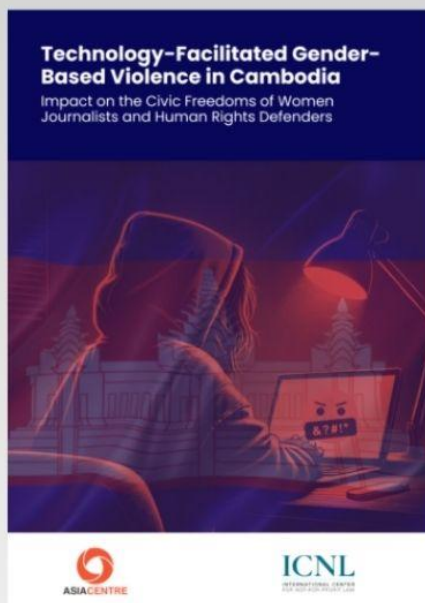
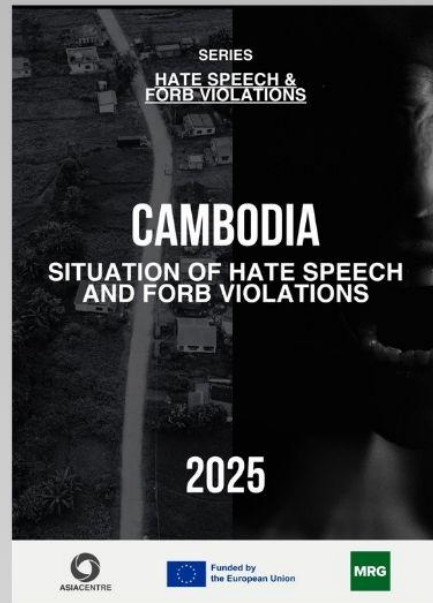
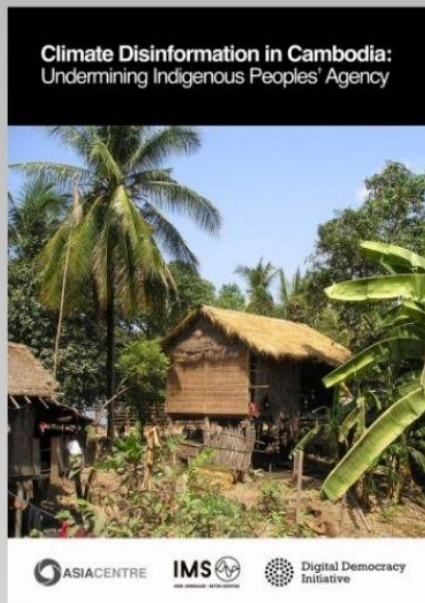
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PREFACE

Challenges to the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) are not new in Cambodia, yet they remain under-discussed due to ignorance and fear.

Religious Freedom in Cambodia: Unpacking the Rankings addresses this silence by examining the state of FoRB in the Kingdom, specifically interrogating the anomaly between favourable global rankings on religious freedom and the country's poor standing in broader human rights and democracy indices.

While overt inter-religious conflicts are rare, this report reveals that Cambodia faces longstanding structural challenges not captured by global rankings on religious freedom and social hostilities.

These include the state's revision of national laws that negate FoRB rights in the Constitution, oversight and marshalling of Buddhism for political legitimacy, bureaucratic induced discrimination experienced by Muslim and Christian communities and the destruction of Indigenous Peoples' sacred sites for development. More importantly, even when rights violations are reported to international mechanisms, the intersectionality with FoRB is frequently overlooked, rendering religious freedom issues invisible in official reporting.

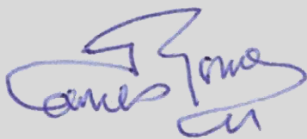
This complex landscape is hidden by the global rankings.

Religious Freedom in Cambodia: Unpacking the Rankings disentangles this complex mix and presents the first publicly available policy analysis of FoRB in the Kingdom. Its part of Asia Centre's, *Asia FoRB Policy Initiative*, launched on 20 August 2026 during the Asia Centre Summit 2026, "Religious Freedom in Asia: Representation, Restriction, Rights".

By bringing focus to these under-discussed issues in Cambodia and the region, the report aims to foster informed dialogue and encourage constructive, evidence-based action. It is designed to serve as both a knowledge resource and a practical toolbox for those engaged in the Cambodian human rights landscape.

We hope that confidence to engage in informed conversations among the international community, national policymakers, civil society, and religious leaders will promote inclusivity, improve administrative fairness, and ensure peaceful coexistence among Cambodia's diverse ethno-religious communities.

On behalf of the Asia Centre, I trust this report and its recommendations will help foster a more equitable environment for FoRB in Cambodia.



Dr James Gomez
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Asia Centre

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cambodia's favourable international standing in global indices on religious freedom presents an incomplete picture of the situation on the ground. While the Kingdom formally guarantees religious freedom in its Constitution and has ratified key international human rights instruments, these protections are undermined by national laws that negate those rights, as well as by persistent state influence over religious institutions, unequal bureaucratic treatment of minority communities, and the politicisation of religion.

This report provides the first comprehensive assessment of the state of FoRB in Cambodia. It argues that while there is an absence of overt inter-religious conflict, the lived experiences of religious communities are deeply influenced by political considerations, restrictive national laws, and the bureaucratic administration of religion. Consequently, boundaries are placed on the political expression of Buddhist monks, while legal and bureaucratic privileges granted to Buddhism contribute to structural inequality for minority religions and Indigenous Peoples.

The report identifies four major areas where FoRB is undermined in Cambodia:

- **Political Control over the Buddhist Order:** The state actively manages Buddhist institutions to reinforce political legitimacy. This includes pressuring senior monastic leadership to align with government interests, restricting the political participation of rank-and-file monks through threats of defrocking and criminal prosecution, and using religious platforms to advance state narratives during cross-border conflicts.
- **Barriers for Religious Minorities:** Minority religious groups—including Muslims, Christians, and those of Indigenous faiths—face systemic challenges. These include discriminatory administrative practices, restrictions on worship and religious expression, and limited representation in the public school curriculum, which continues to privilege Buddhist education.
- **Threats to Indigenous Sacred Sites:** Indigenous Peoples face severe threats to their spiritual and cultural practices due to economic land concessions, environmental governance policies, and the lack of secure communal land rights. The destruction of ancestral forests and sacred sites directly erodes the spiritual traditions inseparable from Indigenous community identity and governance.
- **Weaponisation of Religion:** The Cambodian-Thai border conflict (2025–2026) brought to surface the inappropriate instrumentalisation of religion. Religious sites were allegedly used for military purposes, Buddhist institutions were mobilised to bolster political narratives, and religiously-framed hate speech was employed to dehumanise and deepen hostility between populations.

To address the gap between formal legal protections and practice, the report advances the following recommendations:

- **United Nations Mechanisms:** Strengthen monitoring and diplomatic engagement by advocating for legal reforms that protect religious freedom and minority rights in alignment with international standards. Reporting mechanisms should underscore the distinctiveness of FoRB violations, as well as their intersectionality with other human rights issues.

- **Cambodian Government:** Ensure the separation of religious institutions and bureaucracy from political interests and undertake comprehensive administrative reforms to avoid unequal and differentiated treatment of religious groups. Programmes for clearer legal awareness among local officials and FoRB literacy initiatives should be established to address and prevent minority discrimination.
- **International NGOs and Development Partners:** Support locally led advocacy, research, and legal reform initiatives in line with international human rights standards. Development partners should ensure that aid and capacity-building programmes include rigorous human rights assessments that reflect the vulnerabilities of religious minorities and Indigenous Peoples.
- **Civil Society Organisations:** Build broader advocacy networks to monitor and document FoRB violations, develop specific trainings and workshops for community leaders, raise public awareness, and support minority communities in navigating legal and administrative barriers.
- **Independent Media:** Strengthen the training of journalists on FoRB issues and its intersectionality with human rights. Establish safety protocols for media professionals, and foster investigative collaboration between media and civil society to improve reporting on religious discrimination.
- **Faith-based Organisations:** Promote genuine inter-faith initiatives at the local level, to actively collaborate against religiously framed hate speech and prejudices. Increase transparency and implement internal frameworks to safeguard religious institutions' autonomy from political pressure.

Protecting FoRB in Cambodia requires a concerted effort to move beyond surface-level indices. Meaningful progress depends on addressing regressive national laws, political interference, Buddhist privilege and bureaucratic administration that results in structural discrimination and exclusion.

By ensuring accountability, institutional independence, and inclusive governance, religion in Cambodia can serve as a foundation for social equality and cohesion rather than a mechanism for political privilege and social control.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CLT	Collective Land Title
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPP	Cambodia People's Party
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ELC	Economic Land Concession
ESP	Education Strategic Plan
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination
(I)NGO	(International) Non-Governmental Organisation
IO	Information Operations
IPs	Indigenous Peoples
KII	Key Informant Interview
MLE	Multilingual Education
MoCR	Ministry of Cults and Religion
MoE	Ministry of Environment
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
NSDP	National Strategic Development Plan
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

1. Introduction

This Chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how religion is governed and practiced in Cambodia. First, it charts the historical evolution of religion in the Kingdom – particularly Theravada Buddhism – as a tool to secure political legitimacy. Second, it explains how the privileged position of Buddhist institutions creates structural inequalities that marginalise minority religious groups. Third, this Chapter juxtaposes Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) indicators against democracy and human rights indices demonstrating a disconnect between the two. Finally, it notes how the reporting of human rights violations to United Nations (UN) mechanisms do not draw out the intersectionality of these violations with FoRB.

1.1. Methodology

Research for this report consisted of three phases. First, desk research which drew from a range of primary and secondary sources, including international laws, documents in UN human rights mechanisms (including the treaty bodies, Universal Periodic Review (UPR) processes and Human Rights Council (HRC) special procedures), national legislation and policy documents, statements and publications from relevant government agencies, as well as reports by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and media reports. The research helped define the study's scope and identify knowledge gaps.

Second, the Research Team conducted 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives from the Buddhist majority, minority communities (Muslim, Christian and Indigenous Peoples) and legal advocates.¹ The interviews addressed the knowledge gaps identified during the desk research and informed the analysis and recommendations presented in Chapter 4. A safety protocol was implemented throughout the research process to ensure key informants' confidentiality and anonymity and to securely store all research data.

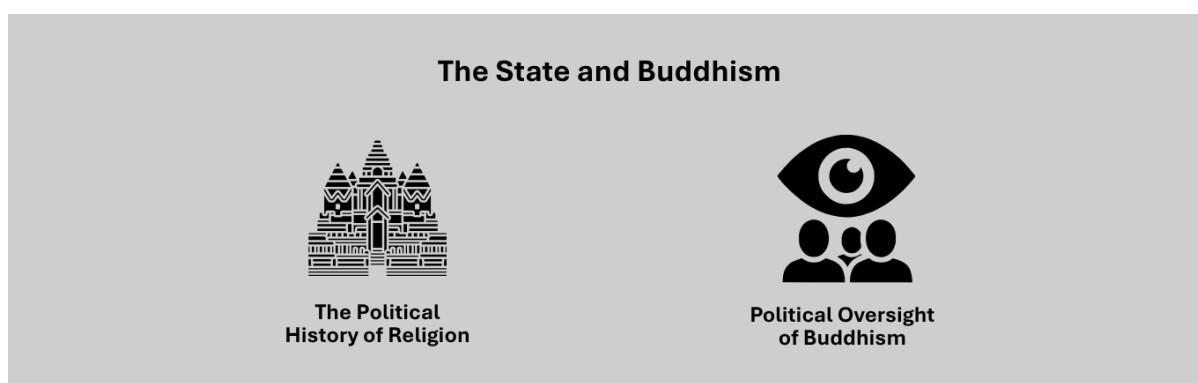
Third, the report underwent an internal review by the Asia Centre team, followed by consultative discussions with relevant stakeholders in Cambodia and a validation meeting to review the findings and recommendations. Feedback from these processes was incorporated into the final draft prior to publication.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

A fundamental, non-derogable human right protecting the freedom of every individual to hold, adopt, change or abandon a religion or belief of their choice, including the right not to practice any. Articulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

¹ See the profiles of respondents in Annex 1.

1.2. The State and Buddhism



This section provides the historical context necessary to comprehend FoRB issues in Cambodia examined in the report. It is presented in two parts. First, it traces the relationship between religion and state power throughout Cambodia’s political history. Second, it examines the control exercised by the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) led government over Buddhist institutions in Cambodia.

Buddhism in Cambodia

In 2026, Cambodia recorded an estimated population of slightly above 18 million ([World Population Review, 2026](#)), where 97.1% or approximately 17.5 million identified with Buddhism. To note, however, this does not necessarily reflect high levels of religious observance or institutional participation ([Hackett et al., 2025](#)). Instead, Buddhism in Cambodia is best understood as being deeply intertwined with cultural identity, social practices and conceptions of Khmer national identity, extending its significance beyond individual belief or practice ([Lawrence, 2022](#); [Evans et al., 2023](#); [Kent, 2024](#)). Hence, Buddhism’s central role in Cambodian society is its significance as a source of cultural identity and political legitimacy – which explains the rationale behind administering political oversight while assigning it privileges.

1.2.1. The Political History of Religion

This section traces the historical relationship between religion and state power throughout Cambodia’s political development.

From the early history of the Khmer kingdoms, religion has played an important role in legitimising political authority, although the nature of this relationship changed over time. From approximately the 1st to the 13th century CE, Hinduism was central to Khmer political and religious life, with kingship associated with the devaraja tradition, which linked royal authority to divine legitimacy. This relationship was particularly prominent during the Angkorian period (9th–13th century), when rulers commissioned monumental religious complexes including Pre Rup and Angkor Wat ([UNESCO, n.d.](#)).

Following the decline of the Khmer Empire from the 14th century onwards ([Perkins, 2019](#)), Theravada Buddhism gradually became the dominant religious tradition. As divine notions of kingship declined, Cambodian rulers increasingly positioned themselves as protectors and patrons of Buddhism, reshaping rather than severing the relationship between religious authority and political legitimacy (*Ibid.*). This period also saw the increase of religious minority communities, most notably the Cham Muslim community. Cham migration into Cambodia occurred over several centuries, with established

Cham communities documented in Cambodia by at least the 15th century. Following the gradual decline of the Kingdom of Champa in present-day central Vietnam, further waves of Cham migrated into Cambodia, where they established communities while preserving their Islamic faith and cultural traditions. Although Buddhism remained the principal source of political legitimacy, successive Cambodian kingdoms generally accommodated the continued presence and religious practices of Cham Muslims ([Bruckmayr, 2006](#)).

The religious-political structure described above changed under French colonial rule, as the monarchy's role shifted toward that of a symbolic head of the modern colonial state. Rather than dismantling Buddhism, the French colonial administration sought to bureaucratised and institutionalise the religion in order to make it more legible and governable. The colonial state centralised the Sangha hierarchy, standardised Buddhist education and regulated religious elites, transforming Buddhism into a more administratively controlled institution at the national level, with its legitimacy preserved among the Cambodian population ([Harris, 2005](#)). Religious minorities also occupied an important position during the colonial period. Christianity has been present in Cambodia since at least the 16th century. This Christian population expanded under French colonial rule, including through an influx of Vietnamese Christians between 1861 and 1865 ([Keith, 2012](#)). Although the French permitted Christian institutions to operate, Buddhism retained its privileged position and continued to underpin Khmer political and cultural identity ([Ibid.](#)).

Sangha

The Buddhist monastic order responsible for preserving Buddhist teachings, regulating monastic discipline and overseeing the religious life of monks and temples. Although the Sangha is formally distinct from the state, it has historically been closely intertwined with political authority in Cambodia. Successive governments have relied on the Sangha to confer moral and religious legitimacy upon rulers. Under Cambodia's Theravada Buddhist tradition, the monastic community has historically been organised into two Sanghas representing two nikaya (fraternities): Maha Nikaya and Dhammayuttika Nikaya. Each nikaya maintains its own hierarchy headed by a Supreme Patriarch. Between 2006 and 2024, both orders were placed under the leadership of Ven. Tep Vong as the Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia's unified Sangha.

It is important to note that monks were not merely passive subjects of colonial governance. Monasteries remained important centres of education, literacy and community life, and some members of the Sangha became involved in emerging nationalist movements during the later colonial period ([Clayton, 1995](#); [Sagawa, 2009](#)). Therefore, following independence in 1953, some monks continued to participate in nationalist, social and political movements, reinforcing the Sangha's longstanding role as an influential moral authority capable of shaping public opinion beyond the control of the state ([Harris, 2005](#)). This occurred as the newly independent Cambodian state continued the processes of political modernisation initiated under colonial rule. Although the direct administrative control exercised by the colonial state over Buddhist institutions declined after independence, Buddhism remained Cambodia's principal religious institution and an important source of political legitimacy.

Following the Khmer Rouge's seizure of power in 1975, the newly established Democratic Kampuchea regime fundamentally dismantled Cambodia's religious institutions. Between 1975 and 1979, the regime sought to transform Cambodian society through the creation of an atheist, agrarian communist state, viewing existing religious institutions and social structures as obstacles to this project ([Keyes, 2010](#)). As a result, religious traditions were targeted as "reactionary" forces incompatible with the

regime's ideology, as they represented alternative sources of authority and social organisation outside state control (*Ibid.*).

Buddhism suffered the most extensive disruption due to its central role in Cambodian society. More than half of the country's Buddhist monks were executed, while survivors were forcibly disrobed under fear of persecution. Because monks held significant social authority, the Khmer Rouge viewed the Sangha as a competing institution that had to be erased (*Harris, 2015; Ginsburg and Schonthal, 2022*). Temples were converted into storage facilities, prisons and were used as extermination camps (*Keyes, 2010*). Christian and Muslims communities were also viewed as being incompatible with revolutionary ideology, and thus also faced violent persecution. Cham Muslims experienced particularly severe persecution due to the regime's targeting of both their religious practices and ethnic identity, while Christian communities also faced suppression through the closure of churches and persecution of religious figures (*U.S. Department of State, 1993; Kiernan, 2019*). What this 4-year period shows is that unlike previous governments, which sought legitimacy through their relationship with Buddhism, the Khmer Rouge attempted to eliminate religious authority altogether and establish the regime as the sole source of political and moral legitimacy (*Keyes, 2010*).

Following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was established, with the United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea serving as its principal political organisation. Amongst the emerging political leaders of the new regime was Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge cadre who defected to Vietnam in 1977 and returned to seize Cambodia with the support of Vietnamese forces in 1979 (*Hong and Soksreinith, 2018; Path and Nhem, 2021*). He quickly rose within the new government, serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1979 before becoming Prime Minister in 1985 (*Human Rights Watch, 2015a; Haas, 2024*). Although becoming Prime Minister placed Hun Sen at the apex of the PRK government, his political authority during this early period remained more institutionally embedded and dependent on the support of the ruling party than the highly personalised and dominant authority he would later become. His consolidation of political power was, in part, enabled by the increasingly direct roles he played in shaping the relationship between the state and the Buddhist establishment (*Sutton, 2018*).

As a way to return to the pre-Khmer Rouge days, Buddhism's symbolic importance was reinforced in Cambodia's post-conflict reconstruction. Monks gradually resumed their traditional roles as religious leaders, educators and community figures. This reconstruction of the Sangha occurred under close state supervision, with the PRK, and Hun Sen leading it, exercising control over ordinations, appointments and religious administration through state-aligned religious authorities (*Keyes, 2010; Lawrence, 2022*). One figure that emerged in prominence during this period was Venerable Tep Vong (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2.2).

Following the constitutional reforms establishing the State of Cambodia in 1989, Buddhism was formally reinstated as the state religion and the Sangha was further institutionalised (*Cham and Keo, 2018; US Department of State, 1990*). However, rather than granting institutional autonomy, the government rebuilt Buddhist institutions within a framework of state oversight. This included supervising the administration of the Sangha, limiting the independence of Buddhist institutions (*Keyes, 2010; Osborne, 2014; Heng, 2008*). Religious leaders were incorporated into the political structures of the United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea to cultivate public support, while the Sangha itself operated under the administrative authority of Front officials (*Lawrence, 2022a*).

At the same time, Cambodia entered a period of political transition that culminated in the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 and the establishment of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) (*United Nations, 1991*). Although the transition introduced multiparty politics and greater formal protections for religious freedom, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which replaced the

United Front, entered this period with significant institutional advantages inherited from its role as the dominant political force during the preceding post-Khmer Rouge decades. CPP retained substantial influence throughout the transition period. State influence over Buddhist institutions therefore remained largely intact, and the reconstruction of Buddhism continued to occur within a political environment where religious authority remained closely connected to state legitimacy (Harris, 2023).

These patterns of political oversight persisted following Cambodia's democratic transition, creating an enduring tension between formal commitments to FoRB and continuing governmental efforts to manage Buddhism as an institution central to political legitimacy, as the following subsection demonstrates.

1.2.2. Political Oversight of Buddhism

The period immediately after the establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993 was characterised by two parallel developments. On the one hand, the 1993 Constitution established a democratic constitutional order that formally recognised international human rights principles – including FoRB (see Section 1.5) – and incorporated them into Cambodia's domestic legal framework (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2008). On the other hand, the CPP concurrently strengthened its influence over the Buddhist establishment as one primary structure through which the state sought to reinforce political legitimacy. Senior monastic leadership consequently became increasingly intertwined with state authority, signalling the deflection of political Buddhism towards authoritarian alignment (Harris, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2022). This process occurred in tandem with political developments, where although the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) initially shared power with the CPP in a coalition government following the 1993 elections. However, the CPP retained substantial influence over the state apparatus and progressively consolidated its political dominance (Harris, 2008) against the FUNCINPEC Prime Minister. This culminated in the 1997 political crisis, when armed clashes between CPP and FUNCINPEC forces resulted in the CPP's victory (Peou, 2019).

Political Buddhism

Political Buddhism is the concept that encompasses situations in which Buddhist monks, institutions or movements participate in political life, influence public policy, mobilise public opinion, advocate for social or political change, or are themselves mobilised by political authorities (Suksamran, 1977). In countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, Buddhist institutions have at times emerged as influential political actors. In Cambodia, by contrast, successive governments have generally sought to limit the autonomous political role of the Sangha while simultaneously moulding and harnessing Buddhism to reinforce state legitimacy.

The CPP's grip on Buddhism can be best illustrated by the rise and leadership of Venerable Tep Vong, who served as Great Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha between 2006 and 2024 (Harris, 2008). Tep Vong rose to prominence following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, when PRK reconstructed the Buddhist Sangha under state supervision. Appointed head of the unified Sangha in 1981,² he simultaneously occupied senior positions in the United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea³ and as Vice-President of the National Assembly (Ibid.). These overlapping religious and political roles

² The Sangha was briefly unified during the People's Republic of Kampuchea. It then split back into 2 orders following the proclamation of the Kingdom of Cambodia (the current political order).

³ Member of the Central Committee of the Solidarity Front for the Construction and Defence of the Motherland of Kampuchea which oversaw religion in Cambodia in lieu of a ministry of religion that existed in pre-Khmer Rouge.

closely aligned the leadership of the Sangha with the ruling government and established a model of state supervision over Buddhist institutions that continued after 1993. Throughout this period, Tep Vong consistently supported Hun Sen's leadership (*Ibid.*). By the time he became the Great Supreme Patriarch in 2006, Tep Vong was widely regarded as the principal intermediary between Hun Sen, as leader of the CPP, and the Buddhist establishment – a role that strengthened governmental control over the Sangha while diminishing its capacity to act as an autonomous moral authority.

The growing alignment between the Sangha and the CPP generated increasing dissatisfaction and dissent among rank-and-file monks, particularly among those who viewed Buddhism as having an independent responsibility to address injustice, corruption and inequality (*Osborne, 2014; Lawrence, 2022b*). This expectation reflected a longer tradition within Cambodian Buddhism, where monks had historically served as educators and moral authorities and, at times, participated in broader social and political debates. As mentioned above, this included the decolonisation struggle. Although this tradition was violently interrupted by the Khmer Rouge's destruction of the Sangha, the restoration of Buddhist institutions during the 1980s enabled politically engaged monastic activism to re-emerge following the democratic transition in 1993 (*Harris, 2015*). Following the 1993 democratic transition, this tradition increasingly intersected with emerging human rights and democratic discourse, with some monks becoming involved in civic movements promoting accountability, social justice and the protection of communities affected by land disputes and human rights concerns (*Lawrence, 2022a*).

Within this context, politically active monks increasingly invoked constitutional rights and international human rights norms to challenge state authority and the growing alignment between the Sangha and the CPP. The participation of monks during the 1998 post-election protests demonstrated this growing activism. Allegations of electoral fraud and corruption triggered widespread demonstrations that resulted in 34 deaths, including two monks, and exposed divisions within the Sangha over CCP's role in politics (*Watson, 1998*). In response, in 1999, the Ministry of Information required all Buddhist sermons intended for broadcast to be submitted to the Ministry of Cults and Religion (MoCR) for prior review, a restriction that was reaffirmed in 2005 following renewed concerns over monk activism and human rights advocacy (*Heng, 2008*).

The CPP's efforts to limit monks' political participation extended to the electoral process. The Constitution (2008) allowed monks to vote and, to a large extent, be allowed to express their political views (See Section 2.1). However, in response to the growing political engagement of monks, including support for opposition parties ahead of the 2003 elections, Tep Vong issued an order prohibiting monks from voting and threatened to defrock those who did. He argued that monks should refrain from political participation and that the Sangha should remain focused on its religious role (*Naren, 2003; Samean, 2003a; Chandara, 2006*). Local authorities and religious leaders also discouraged voter registration through administrative barriers and informal pressure (*Samean, 2003b; Soenthrith, 2003*). Despite these restrictions, many monks asserted their constitutional right to vote, including by writing an appeal to the King (*Lawrence, 2022a; Soenthrith, 2003*). Facing sustained criticism internally, Tep Vong rescinded the voting ban in 2006 and acknowledged monks' constitutional electoral rights (*Chandara, 2006*).

Tensions surfaced again following the contest over the 2013 general election results. Allegations of electoral fraud sparked Cambodia's largest anti-government demonstrations since the 1990s, with widespread participation from opposition supporters (*Hiebert and Nguyen, 2014*). Although relatively few monks participated, their presence carried considerable symbolic significance because it challenged the effort to curb their political expression and impose "political neutrality". The protests exposed growing public dissatisfaction with the CPP while prompting an increasingly restrictive response towards politically active monks (*Human Rights Watch, 2015b*).

The post-2013 landscape is defined by Hun Sen's acceleration of CPP's grip on political power to protect against such challenges to its rule. On the "secular" side, the government dismantled organised political opposition by prosecuting senior opposition leaders such as Sam Rainsy, dissolving the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), and forcing independent media outlets and civil society organisations to close or operate under severe restrictions. On the "monastic" side, the government intensified its oversight of the Sangha by disciplining monks and strengthened the authority of the senior Buddhist hierarchy. Following the 2013 election protests, monks participating in demonstrations increasingly faced intimidation, arrest and threats of defrocking (*ibid.*). In 2017, for example, authorities intensified surveillance of politically active monks and discouraged their participation in public demonstrations ahead of the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (USCIRF, 2018). In 2020, activist monk Luon Sovath was forcibly defrocked for criticising government policies in what was widely regarded as a politically motivated action (*Sun, 2020b*).

In 2021, the government signalled further restrictions on monks via a Law on Religion, which has reportedly been under development since (*U.S. Department of State, 2022*). As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the draft law represents the latest effort to strengthen state oversight of religious institutions. Another development was in 2023, when Hun Sen stepped down as Prime Minister. However, his continued leadership within the CPP and his position as President of the Senate have allowed him to remain an influential figure in the relationship between the state, the CPP and the Buddhist establishment. This relationship has also been reflected in statements by the Mahanikaya and Dhammayut Nikaya Committees, whose senior Buddhist leaders have referenced Hun Sen's leadership positively and encouraged others to support him (*Punreay, 2023*). Hun Sen's succession by his son, Hun Manet, formed part of a broader generational transition within the CPP, which also saw a number of senior government positions pass to members of established political families (*Kent, 2024*).

In 2025, following the resurgence of the Cambodian–Thai border conflict, Hun Sen and senior government officials actively engaged Buddhist monks and religious institutions to promote state narratives centred on national unity, sovereignty and patriotism (*Thepgumpanat and Lach, 2025*). While the use of Buddhist symbols and institutions to reinforce national identity during periods of conflict is not new in Cambodia, the 2025 Cambodian–Thai border conflict represents one of the clearest recent examples of the state directly mobilising Buddhist authorities to support narratives of sovereignty and national unity. Previous conflicts, including the Cambodian civil war and disputes over the Preah Vihear temple area, similarly saw political actors invoke Buddhist identity and Khmer cultural heritage to reinforce national narratives (*Ngoun, 2018*). This reflects the continuing mobilisation of the Sangha in support of government objectives and illustrates how Buddhism remains closely intertwined with political power in Cambodia.

1.3. Religious Minorities

In 2026, the three main minority groups identified in the Kingdom were as follows: Muslims, Christians, and peoples of Indigenous faiths (the majority of IPs in the country). In Cambodia, the experiences of these minority communities demonstrate that FoRB extends beyond state management of Buddhism. It is also shaped by ethnicity, national identity, migration, land rights and security concerns. This section provides an overview of Cambodia's three biggest religious minority communities to contextualise the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3.

Minorities

Any group of persons which constitutes less than half of the population in the entire territory of a State whose members share common characteristics of culture, religion or language or a combination of any of these. A person can freely belong to an ethnic, religious or linguistic minority without any requirement of citizenship, residence, official recognition or any other status (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), n.d.).

Religion	Population (Share)
Buddhism	17,478,000 (97.1%)
Islam	360,000 (2%)
Christianity	54,000 (0.3%)
Other (including Indigenous beliefs)	90,000 (0.5%)

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning (2025)⁴

Islam has been present in Cambodia with the migration of the Cham people, the country's second-largest ethnic minority, who were originally indigenous to present-day South Vietnam and today account for the majority of Cambodia's Muslim population. (U.S. Department of State, 2023). During the Khmer Rouge era, the Cham community was a target of genocide, with estimated survivors reported approximately between 170,000 and over 200,000 (Kiernan, 2003; Osman, 2006). While the number of overall Cambodian deaths under the regime was around 20% to 25% (Britannica, 2026), Cham people were especially targeted with disproportionate ferocity (Williams, 2023; Peat, 2025). Depending on the demographic model applied, the Cham death rate is estimated to be roughly 35% to over 50%. The community has recovered since the Khmer Rouge period but continues to face discrimination and social stigma. These perceptions have resulted in episodes of restriction and heightened scrutiny, especially with the 9/11-induced War on Terror (Eng, 2013).

The other main group of Muslims is the Chvea people, also called Malay people because of their origin to the Malaya-Indonesian region (Mohan and Chantarasingh, 2020). Unlike Cham Muslim, who are preserving their Cham language, Chvea people speak mainly Khmer. As of 2024, the Muslim community was reported to maintain more than 1300 mosques nationwide (Cambodianess, 2024).

Muslims in Cambodia can also be differentiated based on Islamic sects. Approximately 90% of the Muslim population in Cambodia adhere to Sunni Islam, specifically to the Shafi'i school of Islamic law (Mohan and Chantarasingh, 2020; Pall, 2023). A small minority, the Cham-Bani, practice Kan Imam San, which differentiates itself from orthodox Islam by performing rituals and traditions unique to their origin, ethnicity and culture (Mohan and Chantarasingh, 2020; Medeville, 2026). Both groups are recognised by the state as two distinct Islamic communities, each with its own leadership. The majority of Muslims

⁴ The data comes from the Cambodia Inter-censal Population Survey 2024, which was conducted to bridge the gap between major enumerations. The most recent official population censuses conducted by the Royal Government of Cambodia were in 2008 and 2019 (National Institute of Statistics, 2008; 2020).

are led by the Mufti of Cambodia, who also serves as Chairman and Head of the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in Cambodia, while the *Oknha Khmour* represents the followers of Kan Imam San (Hasram, 2023). All Muslims in Cambodia are represented in official government relations through deputy governors appointed in Muslim-populated provinces,⁵ under the oversight of the Cambodian government (Khmer Times, 2022a).

Christianity has maintained a continuous, albeit relatively small, presence amongst the Cambodian population since the sixteenth century through early Catholic missionary activity. This presence later expanded modestly in number during the French colonial period (Lipsey, 2026). The community is religiously diverse, comprising both Catholics and Protestants, and is primarily made up of ethnic Chinese Christians and ethnic Vietnamese Catholics (US Department of State, 2023). In recent decades, Christianity has increasingly expanded beyond established ethnic minority communities through evangelical Protestant churches, many of which have been supported by foreign missionary networks. Cambodia has between 1,500 and 2,000 churches recorded throughout the country (OMF International, 2022; Cambodia Churches, 2024). South Korean churches have become a major force in Cambodian Christianity since the arrival of the first South Korean missionary in 1993 and today account for around half of all foreign missionaries in the country (Chang, 2015). A more recent example is the expansion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has developed a growing presence in Cambodia since missionary activity began in the 1990s (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2025b). In August 2026, the first church of Latter Day Saints was unveiled in Phnom Penh, after breaking ground in 2018 (Carruthers, 2026). During the inauguration attended by different faith leaders, the Church emphasised its extensive humanitarian and community-development activities (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2026). This approach and a low political profile have facilitated its quiet tolerance by the Cambodian government.

Although Christian communities were rebuilt following the Khmer Rouge period, Christianity continues to be perceived by some as a foreign religion associated with French colonialism, Western influence as well as the Vietnamese people⁶ (Ravasco, 2004; US Department of State, 2023; Rome Reports, 2016). This distrust is manifested via restrictions imposed on Christian religious activity: limitations on public proselytisation, police monitoring of religious gatherings and the deportation of Christian refugees (Women Peace Makers, 2024). KII 11, a Christian respondent interviewed by Asia Centre in September 2026, explained how restraint over public proselytisation in Cambodia has been internalised:

“For the past 20 years the government has given warnings that we Christians should not proselytise people home to home or in the public space. [...] So I feel like such pressing actions are not common anymore. We can share about Christianity but with respect and keeping the public space safe”. (KII 11)

⁵ These provinces include: Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampot, Koh Kong, Kratie, Monduliri, Pursat, Preah Sihanouk, Stung Treng, and Tboung Khmum (National Institute of Statistics, 2025)

⁶ Cambodian nationalist narratives have long portrayed Vietnam as the country's principal historical rival, reflecting centuries of territorial expansion by successive Vietnamese kingdoms into former Khmer territories in the Mekong Delta. During the French colonial period, these sentiments were further reinforced by the migration of large numbers of educated and semi-educated Vietnamese to French Cambodia to staff the colonial administration, placing many Vietnamese in positions of authority over the predominantly Khmer population. Many Vietnamese migrants were also Catholic, adding a religious dimension to existing ethnic and political tensions between Khmer Buddhists and Vietnamese communities.

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in Cambodia, collectively referred to as the *Khmer Loeu*, consist of numerous communities concentrated in the country's northern and northeastern provinces ([Open Development Cambodia, 2023](#); [IWGIA, 2026](#)).⁷ Meanwhile, communities such as the *Kuy* and *Chong-Samre* inhabit areas along the Cambodian–Thai border in Preah Vihear, Siem Reap and Kampong Thom provinces ([Taylor, 2006](#); [Network of Indigenous People in Thailand, 2012](#)). IPs in Cambodia do not adhere to a single organised religion but rather practise a diverse range of spiritual beliefs and customary traditions that may collectively be understood as Indigenous faiths. Others have adopted Buddhism or Christianity through historical interaction, assimilation, missionary activity or personal choice, though these religions are often practised alongside enduring Indigenous belief systems through forms of religious syncretism ([Minority Rights Group - Cambodia, 2019](#)).

Spirituality remains deeply embedded in relationships with ancestral lands, where rituals, ceremonies and customary practices are inseparable from community identity, livelihoods and systems of governance ([Amnesty International, 2022](#)). Consequently, threats to Indigenous lands, natural resources and traditional ways of life are not solely issues of culture or development, but also constitute FoRB concerns because they directly undermine the ability of Indigenous communities to practise, preserve and transmit their spiritual traditions (UN Special Rapporteur on Cambodia, [2012](#); [2025](#)). Therefore, their faith has been and continues to be severely threatened by the destruction of their sacred sites and ancestral forests for development projects via economic land concessions or hydroelectric dams (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3). In 2025, Asia Centre's report, *Climate Disinformation in Cambodia: Undermining Indigenous Peoples' Agency (2025)*, highlighted how physical threats to Indigenous sacred sites are often exacerbated by climate-related disinformation campaigns. Such campaigns undermine the agency of Indigenous communities to effectively advocate for their land rights and defend their sacred sites.

The experiences of Cambodia's Muslim, Christian, and Indigenous communities, demonstrate that FoRB is shaped by more than the formal recognition or regulation of religious practice. Rather, religious freedom is mediated by historical narratives of national identity, ethnic difference, migration and state development priorities. Understanding these intersecting dynamics is essential to assessing how Cambodia's legal and administrative frameworks influence the rights and lived experiences of religious minorities.

1.4. FoRB Rankings versus Human Rights Indices

International indices provide comparative tools for assessing complex political, social and human rights conditions. However, in presenting countries through “rankings”, nuances can be reduced - resulting in the failure to fully capture specific country contexts. This section examines the indices measuring both FoRB and broader civil and political rights to investigate a notable anomaly: Cambodia consistently performs relatively well on FoRB rankings, yet performs considerably poorly on measures of democracy, human rights and civil liberties.

To explore this divergence, Table 2 presents regional indicators for restrictions on religious practice, social hostilities, and religious choice while Table 3 compares Cambodia's performance on widely used measures of democratic governance. Taken together, these indicators suggest that existing FoRB metrics may not fully capture the realities of religious freedom in Cambodia, particularly regarding state influence over religious institutions and administrative restrictions on minority communities. This raises a critical question: why does Cambodia's performance on religious freedom indices appear so much more positive than its performance on broader democratic benchmarks?

⁷ Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Kratie, Preah Vihear and Stung Treng.

Country	Government Restrictions Index (2026) (Pew Research Centre) ⁸	Social Hostilities Index (2026) (Pew Research Centre) ⁹	Freedom of Religion Index (2025) (V-Dem Institute) ¹⁰
Brunei	6.6 (very high)	2.0 (moderate)	
Cambodia	5.0 (high)	0.2 (low)	2.76
Laos	6.7 (very high)	3.6 (high)	2.23
Malaysia	7.7 (very high)	3.1 (moderate)	2.38
Myanmar	7.3 (very high)	3.0 (moderate)	2
Philippines	2.0 (low)	2.9 (moderate)	3.72
Singapore	6.7 (very high)	1.0 (low)	
Thailand	4.6 (high)	4.4 (high)	3.54
Timor Leste			3.69
Vietnam	7.3 (very high)	2.6 (moderate)	1.32
Indonesia	7.9 (very high)	6.0 (high)	3.5

Cambodia performs relatively well compared with much of Southeast Asia on FoRB because within the country there are fewer publicly reported incidents of overt restrictions on religious choice and practice, and the absence of open inter-religious hostilities compared to many of its neighbours which explains why both internal and external perceptions are one of comparatively limited conflict and restrictions on FoRB. These perceptions are also partly shaped by the limited visibility of FoRB violations in public discourse, as revisions to national laws, administrative restrictions, social discrimination and state oversight of religious communities are often left unspoken and receive less attention from independent media. Additionally, when reporting discrimination as well as minority rights, land rights and civic space violations to UN human rights mechanisms the intersectionality with FoRB is overlooked (see Chapter 1, Section 1.5).

⁸ The Government Restrictions Index measures the extent to which government laws, policies and actions restrict religious beliefs and practices, with scores ranging from 0 to 10, where higher scores indicate greater government restrictions on religion.

⁹ The Social Hostilities Index measures the extent to which private individuals, organisations, and social groups engage in religion-related hostility or violence, with scores ranging from 0 to 10, where higher scores indicate greater social hostilities involving religion.

¹⁰ The V-Dem Freedom of Religion Index measures the extent to which public authorities respect individuals' and groups' rights to choose, change, and practice their religion without government interference, with scores ranging from 0 to 4, where higher scores indicate greater respect for freedom of religion.

Table 3: Freedom, Human Rights and Democracy Indexes

Country	State of Civic Space (2025) (CIVICUS)	World Press Freedom Index (2026) (RSF)	Freedom in the World Score (2026) (Freedom House)
Brunei	30/100 (repressed)	96/180 (52.58)	27/100
Cambodia	27/100 (repressed)	151/180 (33.28)	22/100
Laos	5/100 (closed)	154/180 (32.54)	13/100
Malaysia	50/100 (obstructed)	95/180 (52.73)	53/100
Myanmar	10/100 (closed)	166/180 (26.38)	4/100
Philippines	38/100 (repressed)	114/180 (46.79)	58/100
Singapore	30/100 (repressed)	123/180 (44.57)	48/100
Thailand	34/100 (repressed)	92/180 (53.97)	33/100
Timor Leste	72/100 (narrowed)	30/180 (75.29)	73/100
Vietnam	13/100 (closed)	174/180 (21.15)	20/100
Indonesia	42/100 (obstructed)	129/180 (43.02)	56/100

In contrast, Cambodia performs considerably poorly across rankings that measure civil and political rights. CIVICUS classifies the country’s civic space as “repressed”, while the World Press Freedom Index places Cambodia among the lowest-ranked countries globally. Freedom House similarly places Cambodia among the least free countries in the world. Collectively, these indicators point to severe restrictions on freedom of expression, political participation, media independence and civic activism, reflecting the country’s increasingly authoritarian political environment.

Viewed together, these two sets of indicators reveal an important anomaly. Cambodia appears to perform relatively better on indices ranking FoRB than on indices measuring democracy, despite the increasingly restrictive environment on religious freedoms described in the preceding sections. This suggests that FoRB violations remain comparatively under-documented, under-reported and receive less sustained attention than restrictions on civic space, elections or media freedom. As a result, existing FoRB indicators may not fully capture the ways in which religious institutions and communities are subject to political influence and administrative restrictions or how restrictions on civic space indirectly constrain the exercise and discussion of religious freedom, as has been explored earlier in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.

Cambodia’s relatively favourable FoRB indicators succeed in masking the following: state control over religion; absence of critical discussions around FoRB issues; as well as the omission of intersectionality between human rights and FoRB violations in international reporting mechanisms. Ultimately, this results in a lower perception of FoRB deficits in Cambodian society.

The next section highlights how this intersectionality is omitted in the reporting to the different UN mechanisms to which Cambodia is a party.

1.5. FoRB in International Reporting Mechanisms

This section examines Cambodia’s engagement with international human rights frameworks and the extent to which these mechanisms recognise and address FoRB. There is a disconnect between

Cambodia's formal ratification of core international human rights treaties and the practical implementation of religious freedom on the ground beyond the language of harmony and discrimination. Partly, this can be attributed to the reports to UN monitoring mechanisms which often focus on civic rights, land rights and ethnicity and treat FoRB as a secondary or non-concern.

Cambodia's Human Rights Framework

Cambodia's contemporary human rights framework emerged from a UN-led peacebuilding process following the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the 1993 elections administered by the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UN Peacemaker, 1991; United Nations, 1991). Along this process, the government ratified the core international human rights treaties, with UN bodies supporting extensive reforms to align laws with international human rights standards and building the capacity of authorities implementing such laws (OHCHR Cambodia, n.d.). Despite these commitments, Cambodia has struggled to effectively implement these principles in practice (Human Rights Watch, n.d.; Freedom House, 2026).

Cambodia is party to several international instruments that explicitly protect FoRB. In 1992, it ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (General Assembly, 1966). Article 18 of the Covenant reads:

"Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion ... and freedom ... to manifest ... in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion ...

Freedom to manifest ... may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. ...".

In 1993, Cambodia became a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (General Assembly, 1965), thereby observing Article 5 of the Convention:

"... States Parties undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law, notably in the enjoyment of the following rights: ... the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ...".

In terms of committing to safeguarding IPs' rights, Cambodia approved a UN resolution, later known as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) ([General Assembly, 2007](#)). Article 12 states:

"Indigenous Peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions ...; the right to maintain, protect and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites ...

States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects ... through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples concerned".

A review of Cambodia's engagement with UN human rights mechanisms, however, suggests that FoRB concerns have been recognised but seldom treated as a central human rights issue compared with other rights concerns.

In Cambodia's most recent ICCPR Periodic Review Process (from 2019 to 2025), the Cambodian government only briefly touched on FoRB in the context of ensuring the full enjoyment of religious freedom of detainees ([Royal Government of Cambodia, 2019b](#)). This information contradicts the concluding observations by the Human Rights Committee, which expressed concerns about systemic exclusion and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities ([Human Rights Committee, 2022](#)). The Cambodian government responded by emphasising its commitment to harmony and criminalising discrimination. For the latest completed ICERD Periodic Review Process (2018 to 2019), the Cambodian government stated that no cases of religious discrimination were recorded by the courts in 2020 and emphasised that the Constitution guarantees equal rights and freedoms for all citizens ([Royal Government in Cambodia, 2018](#)). By contrast, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concerns over the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, persistent discrimination against IPs, unresolved land rights issues, intimidation of Indigenous communities, and inadequate measures to prevent hate speech ([Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2020](#)). While these concerns primarily centred on racial and ethnic discrimination rather than FoRB specifically, they nevertheless highlighted structural conditions that may undermine the effective enjoyment of FoRB by minority communities. In response, Cambodia reiterated its commitment to judicial reform and the development of a national human rights institution.

In addition, Cambodia has undergone four cycles of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). During the first cycle (2009–2011), there were concerns related to the impact of economic land concessions, which displaced Indigenous communities from their sacred sites, though its FoRB implications were not highlighted ([OHCHR, 2009](#)). During the second UPR cycle (2012–2016), several states recommended greater protection for ethnic and religious minorities, including incorporating minority languages into the education system to reduce discrimination. However, these recommendations largely framed minority issues through the lens of ethnic and cultural rights rather than explicitly recognising their intersection with FoRB, particularly where language, identity, and religious practices are interconnected ([OHCHR, 2013b](#); [UPR Working Group, 2014](#)). In the third cycle (2017–2021), recommendations included strengthening the legal framework to protect religious freedom and ensure equality, particularly for Indigenous Peoples ([UPR Working Group, 2019](#)). In particular, recommendations highlighted

Cambodia's lack of enactment of an Anti-Discrimination Law. During the fourth UPR cycle in 2024, the Cambodian government highlighted programmes aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of Indigenous communities, including multilingual education and cultural preservation initiatives (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2024). However, its national report devoted limited attention to religious discrimination and provided little assessment of progress in protecting FoRB (*Ibid.*). By contrast, submissions from civil society organisations and United Nations stakeholders continued to document some concerns relating to discrimination, exclusion and restrictions affecting minority communities (OHCHR, 2024; UPR Working Group, 2024). However, similar to state reporting mechanisms, these submissions often addressed these issues through broader frameworks of human rights, minority protection, land rights, and civic space rather than explicitly identifying their implications for FoRB (*ibid.*). This contributes to the limited visibility of FoRB concerns within international monitoring processes.

A similar pattern emerges from the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, where FoRB concerns had not been a major point of contention. Nevertheless, successive Special Rapporteurs made several key recommendations. Earlier reports emphasised the relationship between Indigenous land rights and religious freedom, recognising that deforestation, land dispossession and forced displacement undermine Indigenous spiritual practices and can lead to the criminalisation of community leaders defending sacred territories (UN Secretary General, 1998). Between 2021 and 2023, the focus expanded to include structural and bureaucratic barriers faced by ethnic Vietnamese, Muslim communities and some Indigenous groups in accessing birth registration, education and citizenship, thereby limiting their enjoyment of a range of fundamental rights, including FoRB (UN Special Rapporteur on Cambodia, 2021; 2022; 2023). The 2024 report paid particular attention to the nationality and documentation challenges experienced by Vietnamese and Khmer Krom communities, especially children born in Cambodia, which continue to impede access to basic rights and legal protection (UN Special Rapporteur on Cambodia, 2024). More recent reports have further broadened the analysis to include the criminalisation of environmental and Indigenous rights defenders opposing land grabs, as well as the transnational repression of exiled political opponents, reinforcing the view that FoRB concerns are embedded within wider patterns of civic space restrictions, discrimination and governance failures rather than addressed as a standalone human rights issue (UN Special Rapporteur on Cambodia, 2025). The limited recognition of how these violations connect intersectionally with FoRB concerns remains the main weakness in the reporting to UN mechanisms. To date, violations affecting religious minorities are often documented as issues of ethnicity, citizenship, land rights, or political repression rather than restrictions on FoRB.

Overall, Cambodia's engagement with UN human rights mechanisms indicates that FoRB has been consistently alluded to but not fully put forward as an intersecting concern, particularly in relation to Indigenous land rights, minority rights, and nationality. Rather than being examined as standalone religious freedom issues, these concerns are often addressed through broader frameworks of discrimination, cultural rights, and civic space, limiting the visibility of FoRB as a distinct area of human rights concern.

This chapter has established the context necessary to understand FoRB in contemporary Cambodia. It has examined the evolving relationship between religion and political authority, the increasing state oversight of Buddhist institutions and the experiences of Cambodia's principal religious minority communities. It has also highlighted a notable discrepancy between Cambodia's relatively favourable FoRB indicators and its weaker performance on broader measures of democracy, civil liberties and human rights, as well as the limited recognition of FoRB concerns within international human rights reporting. These findings provide the basis for the following chapter, which examines Cambodia's legal and institutional framework for FoRB and assesses the extent to which formal protections are reflected in practice.

2. Legal and Bureaucratic Framework

This chapter examines the legal and administrative architecture governing FoRB in Cambodia against the realities of state oversight. It analyses the Constitution and national legislation alongside national policy priorities and the administrative role of the Ministry of Cults and Religion (MoCR) in managing religious affairs. The chapter establishes the legal and bureaucratic framework helpful for reviewing the specific FoRB challenges detailed in Chapter 3.

2.1. The Legal Framework



Cambodia’s legal framework formally recognises FoRB as a fundamental right while simultaneously establishing mechanisms for state oversight of religious affairs. This section examines how constitutional, criminal and land-related laws shape the protection and regulation of religious practice, highlighting areas where legal provisions create an unequal experience for the diverse religious groups of Cambodia.

2.1.1. The Constitution

The first legal instrument considered in this section is the Constitution of Cambodia (2008). As the country’s foundational legal document, it provides the baseline for the protection of FoRB and informs how other laws are interpreted. Although FoRB is enshrined in the Constitution, this subsection identifies three constitutional limitations that undermine the full enjoyment of this right in practice.

In Article 31, the Constitution provides the foundation for the protection of FoRB in Cambodia. It states:

“... Cambodia recognises and respects human rights as stipulated in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the covenants and conventions related to human rights, women’s rights and children’s rights.

Khmer citizens shall be equal before the law, enjoying the same rights and freedom and obligations regardless of ... religious belief. The exercise of personal rights and freedom by any individual shall not adversely affect the rights and freedom of others. The exercise of such rights and freedom shall be in accordance with the law”.

Article 31(1) commits Cambodia to respecting the human rights contained in international human rights treaties to which it is a party. Article 31(2) complements this commitment by guaranteeing equality before the law and prohibiting discrimination, including on the grounds of religion, thereby reinforcing the equal protection of all religious communities.

More directly on FoRB, Article 43 stipulates:

“... Khmer citizens of either sex shall have the right to freedom of belief.

Freedom of belief and religious worship shall be guaranteed by the State on the condition that such freedom does not affect other beliefs and religions or violate public order and security.

Buddhism shall be the religion of the State”.

In doing so, Article 43 guarantees FoRB. However, its protection is subject to three limitations. First, Article 43 itself introduces restrictions on FoRB by qualifying that it “does not affect other beliefs and religions”. Such a qualification, however, provides authorities with discretionary power to interpret any expression – possibly including religious critique, public advocacy or minority practices – as “affecting” other beliefs. Another qualifier for the enjoyment of religions or beliefs is that it does not violate “security”. This limitation is not consistent with Article 18 of the ICCPR which does not include “security” among the permissible grounds for restrictions ([Human Rights Committee, 1993](#)).

Second, Article 43 designates Buddhism as the state religion. While international law does not necessarily prohibit states to have state religions, the Human Rights Committee has stressed that governments must remain neutral and ensure equal protection of all religions. State endorsement of a single religion may therefore create structural inequality, indirect discrimination and a damaging effect on minority religious practice (*Ibid.*). This privilege of Buddhism is reinforced by other constitutional provisions, including Article 13, which grants senior Buddhist monks seats on the Throne Council to select monarchs; and Article 68, which requires the state to promote Buddhist institutions. Taken together, these provisions institutionalise Buddhism’s privileged position within the constitutional framework. The impact of which will be explored in Chapter 3.

Thirdly, there is an inconsistency between the constitutional guarantees of FoRB and the legislation enacted to implement them. Article 34 guarantees Khmer citizens over the age of 18 (understood as regardless of religion) the right to vote. However, because the Constitution permits restrictions on this right to be prescribed by law, subsequent legislation has been used to limit the political participation of the religious establishment, especially Buddhist monks.¹¹ In practice, as discussed in Chapter 1,

¹¹ Art. 34 of the Law on the Election of Members of the National Assembly (2008b) prohibits religious priests, among others, from standing as candidates for the National Assembly unless they renounce their priesthood or defrock before the start of the electoral campaign. Additionally, voters need an identifiable head of hair to obtain a government ID card but monks shave their heads completely as part of their monastic vows, hence they are technically hindered in their right to political participation ([Vida, 2017](#)). This administrative barrier has been noted by the MoCR, which agreed to review the requirements to access official documentation for voter registration. A Buddhist monk interviewed by Asia Centre has noted that as long as monks present their religious identification documents they should be allowed to vote, but restrictions may arise based on their political views (KII 13). The 2024 Law on Civil Registration, Vital Statistics and Identification could improve monks’ access to valid voting documents by streamlining and digitalising the identity of all residents in Cambodia ([BNG Legal, 2024](#)). However,

Section 1.2.2, these restrictions have been used as a basis to exclude monks from participating in elections, particularly when they are perceived to support opposition parties (Lawrence, 2022a). Similarly, Buddhist monks are effectively prevented from fully enjoying the rights guaranteed under Article 35 which allows for all citizens to exercise their right to participate actively in political, economic, social and cultural life. This contrasts with countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, where Buddhist institutions have at times emerged as influential political actors. In Cambodia, these restrictions are primarily directed at neutralising the Sangha's potential to emerge as an independent political force capable of mobilising public opinion or challenging state authority (Lawrence, 2022a; U.S. Department of State, 2022). Article 15 of the Law on Political Parties (Kingdom of Cambodia, 1997) permits religious representatives to hold membership in political parties but prohibits them from engaging in activities that support or oppose political parties, thereby restricting monks' full participation in political party activity (OHCHR Cambodia, 2017).

Overall, Cambodia's constitutional framework provides a formal basis for the protection of FoRB, but broad limitation clauses, preferential treatment of Buddhism and inconsistencies across related legislation weaken these protections in practice. As a result, the legal framework affords the state considerable discretion in regulating religious affairs, creating conditions in which FoRB may be restricted beyond international human rights standards. This discretionary power is notably leveraged to stifle the political agency of the Sangha, effectively neutralising the monks' potential to act as independent moral and political authorities within the Cambodian landscape – as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

2.1.2. The Criminal Code

Several provisions in the Criminal Code (2009b) covers crimes related to or against religion. It therefore guides the practice of FoRB in the country. However, as legislation derived from the constitutional framework, several provisions of the Criminal Code raise concerns regarding their compatibility with FoRB principles. This section outlines the major provisions of the Criminal Code provisions and identifies its alignment – or lack thereof – with FoRB principles.

In Chapter 5 (Violation of Personal Dignity), Section 2 (Discrimination), Articles 265 to 273 lay out prohibitions to discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief (among others). Articles 265 and 266 criminalise the denial of goods, services or employment on discriminatory grounds. Articles 267 to 269 extend these protections to employment by criminalising unlawful discriminatory hiring and dismissal practices. Article 270 broadens the scope of the law by providing for the prosecution of government officials who engage in religious discrimination. Article 272 also authorises additional penalties for individuals convicted of discriminatory offences under Articles 265 to 271, including the temporary or permanent loss of certain rights, disqualification from practising a profession, and publication of the sentencing decision. Lastly, Article 273 holds businesses legally liable for religious discrimination, including refusing to provide goods or services or dismissing employees on the grounds of religion or belief. The effectiveness of these legal safeguards is hindered by the absence of precise definitions for "discrimination". Furthermore, the provisions do not provide the necessary measures to prevent discrimination before it escalates into criminal conduct. Consequently, relying solely on reactive, punitive provisions limits the state's capacity to address the roots of prejudice. However, it is not unusual for government officials to refer to these provisions to demonstrate Cambodia's strong anti-discrimination legislation (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2023a).

The Criminal Code also provides protections against religiously motivated defamation, insult and incitement to discrimination or violence. These offences are addressed in Articles 305, 307, 309, 494,

the exact administrative procedures of the law and their implementation are still evolving, ultimately leaving the status of monks' voting right unclear.

495 and 496. Articles 305 and 307 criminalise public defamation and public insult, while Article 309 provides enhanced protection where such offences are committed against an individual or group on grounds including religion or belief. Articles 494 and 495 criminalise public and direct incitement to commit a felony or disturb public order through speeches, writings, images or other forms of communication. Article 496 extends these protections by criminalising incitement to discriminate against, or commit violence against, a person or group on the grounds of religion or belief. Collectively, these provisions establish legal safeguards against religiously motivated discrimination, incitement, and violence. However, the broad and ambiguous terminology used in several provisions – particularly concepts such as “public insult” and “public order” – creates scope for discretionary interpretation and enforcement (*Human Rights Committee, 2011*; see Chapter 3, Sections 3.1.3 and 3.3.3).

In addition to these penalties, the Criminal Code also lays out crimes directed towards Buddhism (as the state religion) or Buddhist monks, nuns and laymen, carrying even more weight. Articles 508 to 512 set out offences relating to the unauthorised wearing of Buddhist monks’ robes, as well as the theft of or damage to Buddhist sacred objects and places of worship. Articles 513 to 515 set out offences relating to violence towards Buddhist monks, nuns or laymen and Article 516 criminalises insults directed at them, where an “insult” is defined as “words or gestures that could diminish a person’s dignity”. The approach to offenses against Buddhism, however, raises several significant concerns. First, it creates inequality under the law by affording Buddhism specific criminal legal protection that is not equally extended to other religious communities. Second, specifically concerning insults (Article 516), the law leaves room for accusations of blasphemy and other subjective “offenses” which are not clearly defined or universally recognised as punishable by law. It, therefore, presents challenges regarding its compatibility with Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Table 4: Provisions and Articles Governing FoRB in the Criminal Code (2009)

Article No.	Provision	Punishment
265	Refusal to supply goods or services on discriminatory grounds	<u>Fine:</u> KHR 10,000 – 2 million
266	Subjecting the supply of goods or services to conditions on discriminatory grounds.	<u>Imprisonment:</u> 1–12 months <u>Fine:</u> Fine: KHR 10,000 – 2 million
267	Refusal to hire on discriminatory grounds	<u>Imprisonment:</u> 1–12 months <u>Fine:</u> Fine: KHR 10,000 – 2 million
268	Subjecting an offer of employment to conditions on discriminatory grounds	<u>Imprisonment:</u> 1–12 months <u>Fine:</u> Fine: KHR 10,000 – 2 million
269	Termination of employment or removal from office on discriminatory grounds	<u>Imprisonment:</u> 1–12 months <u>Fine:</u> Fine: KHR 10,000 – 2 million
270	Discriminatory denial of rights by public officials	<u>Imprisonment:</u> 6–24 months <u>Fine:</u> KHR 1–4 million
273	Criminal liability of legal entities for discriminatory practices	<u>Fine:</u> KHR 1–10 million <u>One of the Following:</u> Placement under judicial supervision pursuant Prohibition from carrying on activities Publication of sentencing decision Broadcasting of sentencing decision
305	Public defamation of a person or group	<u>Fine:</u> Fine: KHR 10,0000 – 10 million
307	Public insult of a person or group	<u>Fine:</u> Fine: KHR 10,0000 – 10 million

494	Public incitement to commit a felony or disturb public order	(where the incitement was ineffective) <u>Imprisonment</u> : 6–24 months <u>Fine</u> : KHR 1–4 million
495	Direct incitement to commit a felony or disturb public order	(where the incitement was ineffective) <u>Imprisonment</u> : 6–24 months <u>Fine</u> : KHR 1–4 million
496	Incitement to discriminate against or commit violence against a person or group on protected grounds	(where the incitement was ineffective) <u>Imprisonment</u> : 1–3 years <u>Fine</u> : KHR 2–6 million
508	Unauthorized wearing of Buddhist robes	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 6 days – 3 months <u>Fine</u> : KHR 100,000 – 500,000
509	Theft of Buddhist sacred objects	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 2–5 years <u>Fine</u> : KHR 4–10 million
510	Damage to Buddhist religious premises or sacred objects	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 2–5 years <u>Fine</u> : KHR 4–10 million
511 ¹²	Attempt to commit any of articles 508–510	(same punishment as the crimes in 508–510)
513	Intentional violence against Buddhist monks, nuns or laymen	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 2–5 years <u>Fine</u> : KHR 4–10 million
514	Enhanced penalties where violence causes mutilation or disability	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 7–15 years
515	Enhanced penalties where violence results in the victim's death	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 10–20 years
516	Insult of Buddhist monks, nuns and laymen	<u>Imprisonment</u> : 1–6 days <u>Fine</u> : KHR 1,000–100,000 million

Taken together, although the Criminal Code contains important safeguards against religious discrimination, these safeguards are qualified by the continued prioritisation of provisions protecting Buddhism. While Buddhism's privileged status is broadly embedded within Cambodia's religious and national identity, this does not necessarily imply hostility towards other religious communities ([Evans et al., 2023](#)). Nevertheless, the preferential legal protection afforded to Buddhism points to equal protection under international FoRB standards ([Human Rights Committee, 2011](#); [Human Rights Committee, 1993](#)). Moreover, the vague and broadly worded nature of some provisions allows for discretionary application, creating the potential for these provisions to be applied unevenly and, in some cases, to the detriment of religious minorities. Consequently, the Code has contributed to an uneven legal framework in which the state religion receives greater protection than other faiths, raising concerns regarding equality, neutrality and the consistent protection of FoRB.

2.1.3. FoRB in Land Laws

Cambodia's legal framework also includes a number of laws governing land administration that have significant implications for FoRB. Although these laws pursue non-religious objectives, such as urban

¹² Under Article 512, offences under Articles 508–511 may also be subject to additional penalties, including the permanent or temporary loss of certain rights, prohibition from practising a related profession or possessing weapons, explosives or ammunition and publication or broadcasting of the sentencing decision for specified periods.

planning and environmental protection, their implementation has, in practice, created barriers for religious minorities. This section examines two sets of laws: those regarding places of worship and those relevant to Indigenous lands.

First, the overarching law affecting the construction and management of places of worship is the Law on Land (2001). Articles 20–22 establish a specialised legal regime governing Buddhist monastery property. Article 20 provides that all land and structures within a monastery constitute a perpetual patrimony of the Buddhist religion. Article 21 protects and regulates monastery property by restricting its transfer, limiting its use and requiring that any income derived from it be used solely for religious purposes under the supervision of a Pagoda Committee.¹³ Finally, Article 22 provides that the protections afforded under Articles 20 and 21 do not apply to other religions.

Taken together, these provisions both protect and regulate Buddhism. They secure monastery property by permanently dedicating it to religious use, protecting it from sale or loss and ensuring that any income supports religious activities (*Ibid.*). At the same time, they limit institutional autonomy by regulating how such property may be managed and by placing its administration within a state-supervised framework (*Ibid.*). In contrast, although Article 22 recognises the right of minority religious communities to own and manage religious property through legally recognised associations, it excludes them from the enhanced legal protections afforded to Buddhist monasteries under Articles 20 and 21.¹⁴ Consequently, the legal framework establishes a differentiated system of protection that privileges Buddhism over other religious communities (*Ibid.*).

Second, Cambodia's land-related legal framework also impacts IPs' sacred sites. The Law on Land (2001) contains important provisions relating to Indigenous communal land rights. Article 25 defines communal land to include cultivated land as well as reserve land required for shifting cultivation. Article 26 recognises communal ownership of these lands as collective property of Indigenous communities, affording it the same legal protections as private property, while Article 28 prevents external actors from acquiring rights over Indigenous immovable property (*Ibid.*). Collectively, these provisions provide the much-needed recognition of Indigenous land. However, these safeguards are limited in practice; and despite these legal safeguards, during the application for communal land titles, Indigenous communities risk receiving no protection against land encroachment by private companies (OpenDevelopment Cambodia, 2024).

For one, by implementing regulation for Articles 23–28 of the Law on Land, Sub-Decree No. 83 (2009a) formally recognises the right of Indigenous communities to obtain communal land titles through a multi-stage registration process involving several government ministries.¹⁵ However, the registration process has often been lengthy and places significant discretionary authority in the hands of the relevant authorities. This discretion has, at times, been used to delay or impede Indigenous land claims, particularly where the land is rich in natural resources (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.1). The Cambodian government has started drafting a new Land Law, which, at the time of writing in September 2026, has not been adopted yet. CSOs have monitored the draft framework to advocate for community and Indigenous land rights, noting how many of their recommendations regarding collective rights were left unaddressed (OpenDevelopment Cambodia, 2024).

¹³ Pagoda Committees are managed within each monastery, but are supervised by the Sangha and, therefore, MOCR. See Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.

¹⁴ In practice, there are more restrictions imposed on non-Buddhist places of worship. See Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.

¹⁵ The administrative process consists of three phases: (1) formal recognition as an ethnic minority group by the Ministry of Rural Development; (2) legal entity registration as a recognised community with the Ministry of Interior; (3) land registration and title issuance through the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction (OHCHR Cambodia, 2021).

The Code on Environment and Natural Resources (Ministry of Environment, 2024) also poses a similar risk to FoRB, as references to IPs and their rights have been significantly minimised, and in many instances removed altogether. The Code fully incorporates the Law on Environmental and Natural Resources Management (1996), the Forestry Law (2002) and the Protected Area Law (2008a), which established the framework for the management and conservation of ecologically significant areas. The Code's adoption in 2023 effectively reduced the distinct legal status afforded to IPs by using the broad term "local communities" rather than "Indigenous peoples". This vague terminology weakens recognition of their customary rights over ancestral lands and sacred sites, diminishing their role in the governance and management of protected areas, as well as undermining their spiritual and cultural practices that are intrinsically linked to these lands (ClientEarth, 2024; Bun, 2025). Furthermore, Free, Prior and Informed Consent with IPs is not required as mandatory before the establishment (Art. 358.1) or modification (Art. 360.1) of a protected area. This omission risks broadening access to Indigenous customary lands, allowing non-Indigenous entities that have encroached on these lands to claim access under Art. 369 (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.3).

These land-related laws are not fully consistent with Cambodia's obligations under Article 18 of ICCPR, which guarantees not only the freedom to hold or adopt a religion or belief, but also the freedom to manifest religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. By privileging Buddhist institutions, weakening the legal recognition of Indigenous customary land rights and permitting administrative and commercial practices that threaten access to sacred sites and ancestral lands, the legal framework fails to provide equal and effective protection for religious communities in the country. Consequently, the exercise of FoRB by minority religions and IPs remains lopsided to Buddhism despite the formal legal guarantees provided under the Constitution.

2.2. The Bureaucratisation of Religion



This section examines how, apart from formal legislation, religious affairs are increasingly managed by executive power. Using bureaucratic policies and regulations, the administrative management of religion creates several structural barriers and institutional practices that disproportionately impact on religious minorities. This section, first, traces how religion is placed within the broader national policies and second, it reviews the role of the Ministry of Cults and Religion (MoCR).

Bureaucratisation

Bureaucratisation refers to the process through which the state establishes and empowers administrative institutions and bureaucratic structures to regulate, manage and implement policies. This process involves the formalisation of administrative authority, decision-making procedures and hierarchical responsibilities. Applied to religion, bureaucratisation enables state officials to intervene directly in religious affairs and can provide administrative structures through which the state shapes religious authority, institutions and practices (Larsson, 2018; Künkler, 2018).

2.2.1. National Development Strategies

Cambodia's national development strategies provide the overarching policy direction for government ministries and agencies. They establish national priorities that shape budget allocations, policy implementation, and the administrative direction of state institutions, including those responsible for religious affairs. Cambodia's approach to religion is principally reflected in three successive policy frameworks: the National Strategic Development Plans (NSDPs) (2014–2018 and 2019–2023) and the Pentagonal Strategy – Phase I (2023–2028).

NSDPs are Cambodia's five-year national development framework, integrating sectoral policies to guide economic growth, governance, social development and public administration. NSDP (2014–2018) demonstrates a dual approach to religion which had been the government's official position on religious management. On the one hand, the NSDP has demonstrated a commitment to religious diversity. For example, Section 6.3 highlights a directive by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training instructing factory and company owners to allow Muslim workers to wear traditional Islamic clothing during working hours. This initiative supports freedom of religious expression and identity as enshrined in the Constitution and promotes a more inclusive work environment for Muslim workers (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2014). On the other hand, it promotes Buddhist values as the central, national value. MoCR, for example, has a "Buddhism and Society" programme which involves religious scholars delivering sermons on Buddhist holy days to promote Buddhist values, raise awareness of mortality, and discourage social issues such as drug use, domestic violence, pornography, sexual trafficking and youth violence (Ibid.). While the NSDP recognises the religious practices of minority communities, it does not identify equivalent state-supported programmes for promoting Islamic, Indigenous, Christian, or other religious teachings as part of the national social and moral framework. Compared to state-supported initiatives for Buddhism, the language shifts to broader and generic terms when addressing other religions, encouraging them to provide "morality education through their own religious services" (Ibid. Section 4.33).

The NSDP 2019–2023 placed even greater emphasis on strengthening Buddhist institutions. The strategy highlights the MoCR's achievements in strengthening Buddhist educational services and, under Section 4.34, identifies the further expansion of Buddhist education as a government priority. Although this is consistent with Cambodia's constitutional recognition of Buddhism as the state religion, the limited attention given to the educational needs of minority religious communities raises concerns regarding equality of treatment under FoRB principles. By prioritising Buddhist institutions without comparable recognition of other faiths, the strategy risks reinforcing Buddhism's privileged position within Cambodia's religious landscape (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2019a).

The Pentagonal Strategy – Phase I (2023–2028) contains similar provisions. Pentagon 1 "Strengthening the Quality of Citizenship of a Highly Civilised Society with Morality, Equity and Inclusiveness" commits

the government to formulating a roadmap to cultivate morality, virtues, ethics and respect for the law through the incorporation of Buddhist education. The strategy further knowledge of Buddhism and its role towards that goal. It therefore continues to frame Buddhism as the principal source of civic and moral values without providing comparable recognition of minority religions or outlining measures to promote FoRB. Consequently, although the Pentagonal Strategy places less explicit emphasis on religious affairs than earlier development plans, it nevertheless reinforces Buddhism's privileged position within Cambodia's national development agenda.

Taken together, these frameworks demonstrate an evolving policy approach to religion. Earlier strategies sought to integrate religion into national development by promoting Buddhist moral values while making limited accommodations for religious diversity. More recent policy frameworks, however, increasingly prioritise the development of Buddhist institutions while reducing explicit recognition of religious diversity and FoRB. As observed by a Buddhist monk informant (KII 2), rather than promoting religious practice *per se*, the government perceives the advancement of religious freedom as "just their job, a duty they must perform for a salary or for prestige". The tendency to allocate resources in ways that further elevate Buddhism suggests a broader intention by the government to position itself as a defender of the state-religion and, by extension, of the Buddhist Khmer nation itself. While it is rarely discussed in such terms, control over the Buddhist national structures also acts as a country-wide grassroots network that can be mobilised for political purposes. Hence, the lack of visibility of minority religions in national development plans and strategies is a consequence of a clear set of government priorities, directed at increasing the prestige of Buddhism while making use of its influence to extend control across society, which the minority religions cannot offer.

2.2.2. The Ministry of Cults and Religion

The Ministry of Cults and Religion is the principal government body responsible for regulating religious affairs in Cambodia. While many of its functions are consistent with the legitimate administration of religious affairs, the breadth of its regulatory authority has raised concerns regarding state involvement in religious institutions and practices (see below).

The Ministry's current organisational structure and regulatory responsibilities are established by Sub-decree No. 67 on the Organisation and Implementation of the Ministry of Cults and Religion (2026). The Sub-decree provides the Ministry with the following functions: oversee and regulate religious affairs in Cambodia by implementing policies and laws, supervising religious organisations and activities, safeguarding FoRB and promoting harmony among religious communities (*Ibid.*). The Ministry also holds specific responsibility for administering and promoting Buddhism as the state religion, including coordinating Buddhist affairs with the Sangha and the Supreme Patriarchs, supporting Buddhist institutions and promoting the role of Buddhism in moral education and national development. The Ministry is also tasked with preserving religious heritage, including religious sites, monuments, sacred objects, traditional architecture and the beliefs of indigenous communities, while supporting the development of religious education and human resources (*Ibid.*).

While several of these functions are consistent with the legitimate administration of religious affairs under the ICCPR, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the Department of State have raised concerns regarding the extent of state reach in religious affairs in Cambodia (Mufford, 2017; US Department of State, 2023). The MoCR's involvement in the direct administration of religion is a clear example of such overreach because it compromises the independence of the religious institutions and increases the risk of political interference in religious affairs. One of the key duties of the MoCR is to appoint Buddhist monk leaders, ensuring centralised control over the leadership of the Buddhist community. Although senior monks propose candidates, the final decision is made by a council closely linked to the government, giving political leaders strong influence over the appointment (Kent, 2024).

Buddhist monks responding to Asia Centre queries confirmed that the appointment of monks has to be approved by the government and that it influences the monks' political alignment (KII 3, KII 5, KII 13). KII 3 in particular emphasised that:

"We already know the reality of our current societal context: the Ministry of Cults and Religion operates as a routine bureaucracy serving specific political interests rather than genuinely protecting religious freedom". (KII 3)

This contrasts with the appointment of leaders within non-Buddhist religious communities, which select their own leaders but are required to notify the MoCR of such appointments. This ensures that the MoCR is informed of leadership changes across all recognised religious groups in Cambodia ([US Department of State, 2023](#)).

The significance of state influence over Buddhist leadership is heightened by the rigid structure of the Sangha. This hierarchy serves as a top-down administrative apparatus where the Supreme Patriarchs, in consultation with the MoCR, appoint the provincial chief monks, who then oversee local abbots and discipline their subordinates. One Buddhist monk interviewed for this report explained that the Sangha operates through a formal hierarchy extending from local monk officials to the Supreme Patriarch:

"On the side of the ordained or the religious hierarchy, it's not just ordinary monks. It ranges from monk officials to the Supreme Patriarch—basically, there's a whole hierarchy. Buddhism is the state religion, a major religion in Cambodia, so there are titles, ranks, roles, and so on; everything is organised." (KII 2)

This hierarchy within the monastic order is significant because it limits the ability of lower-ranking monks to challenge or scrutinise decisions made at higher levels. As lower monks are monitored by the pagoda heads and routinely reminded of their obligations by higher administrators, they can hardly stray from their assigned ranks, roles and expectations ([Whithaker, 2026](#); KII3). Consequently, the hierarchical structure of the Sangha provides established channels through which authority can be exercised over individual monks. If the state wants to silence lower-level or novice monks, instead of using state police the ruling party can leverage its connection with the religious hierarchy, framing the matter as an issue internal to the religious order.

The Ministry's broader role in regulating and promoting religious affairs similarly creates opportunities for state influence to extend beyond the formal administration of religion. While its mandate includes promoting religious harmony and interfaith dialogue, in 2023 the US Department of State raised concerns regarding the extent to which these functions are implemented in a manner that reflects Buddhism's privileged institutional position ([U.S. Department of State, 2023](#)). These issues, including the implications for religious minorities, are examined in greater detail in Chapter 3, Sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3, discussing the lack of religious diversity in education and societal discrimination against religious minorities.

In addition, the Ministry also oversees a range of religious policy and regulates religious activities that are themselves inconsistent with the principles and protections enshrined in the ICCPR. A notable example is the Directive on Controlling External Religion (APHR, 2022). Although a directive does not have the status of legislation, it has been used by the Ministry to establish regulatory requirements for minority religious communities, illustrating the broad and somewhat undefined scope of its administrative powers (The Cambodia Daily, 2003). The Directive requires religious groups to obtain Ministry approval before constructing places of worship, establishing religious schools or conducting religious activities, and to register with the Ministry by providing detailed information on their religious purposes and planned activities. The Directive has included a minimum distance requirement of approximately 2km between religious sites, along with additional conditions relating to local approval (Ibid.). Another Directive in 2007 explicitly banned door-to-door proselytising by religious groups due to security concerns across society. Although the prohibition formally applied to all religions, Ministry officials stated that it was primarily directed at Christian groups, particularly evangelical organisations, amid concerns that some groups were using material assistance to encourage conversion (Lodish, 2007b; U.S Department of State, 2007). The restrictions were particularly relevant to foreign missionary organisations operating in Cambodia which maintain an active missionary presence in the country. The Directive also restricted the distribution of religious literature outside religious institutions, citing concerns that proselytising disrupted daily life and could affect social security (Ibid.).

While these measures are presented as mechanisms to maintain religious harmony, they create administrative barriers that disproportionately affect minority religious communities. However, their impact is not uniform. The Church of Latter-day Saints, for example, had adapted its missionary practices to comply with Cambodia's requirements, allowing it to continue operating without significant disruption (Lodish, 2007b). This suggests that well-established religious organisations may be better positioned to navigate the Ministry's administrative requirements. The Directive nevertheless illustrates the uncertain legal basis of the Ministry's administrative powers, as significant restrictions on religious practice are imposed through an administrative instrument rather than legislation.

The impact of these administrative powers is further shaped by the relative autonomy of the provincial departments of the MoCR, which serve as the primary point of contact between religious communities and state authorities. While the central Ministry establishes the overall legal and administrative framework governing religious affairs, provincial authorities are often responsible for engaging directly with religious communities, processing administrative requests, monitoring religious activities, and facilitating communication between local communities and the national government (Women Peace Makers, 2024). This decentralised structure provides provincial departments with significant discretion in interpreting and applying regulatory requirements, particularly in relation to the registration of religious organisations, approval of religious activities and construction of religious facilities (Ibid.). Although local implementation can allow authorities to respond to community-specific circumstances, the broad discretion afforded to provincial departments also creates risks of inconsistent or arbitrary administrative oversight. The implications of this decentralised system of religious administration for the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief are discussed further in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1.

The Draft Law on Religion

In January 2020, Radio France Internationale Khmer first reported that the MoCR was drafting a Law on the Management of Religion (also known as the Law on Religion) (RFI, 2020). Although the draft was never officially published, extracts of different versions were subsequently reported by media outlets including *The Phnom Penh Post* (The Phnom Penh Post, 2021) and *Voice of*

Democracy (Dara, 2022) between 2020 and 2022. These reports raised concerns that the proposed legislation would substantially expand government oversight of religious institutions and the conduct of religious figures (RFI, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Among the most widely reported provisions are Articles 35 and 39. Article 35 provides that Buddhist monks who intentionally participate in political protests, strikes, riots or activities directed against any political party may be sentenced to between seven and fifteen years' imprisonment, in addition to penalties under the Criminal Code (KII03; *The Phnom Penh Post*, 2021). Article 39 further provides that Buddhist monks who act contrary to the decisions of the competent authorities may be imprisoned for up to five years (Dara, 2022). If enacted, the implementation of the Law would likely be under the supervision of MoCR.

As of September 2026, the draft Law on the Management of Religion has not been introduced before the National Assembly and remains unpublished in its official form. No further information has been released regarding its legislative status, and it is unclear whether the draft remains under consideration, has been substantially revised or has been set aside. The significance of this law will be discussed further in Chapter 3, Section 3.1.4.

Overall, the MoCR plays an important role in administering religious affairs and promoting social cohesion among Cambodia's diverse religious communities. However, the breadth of its administrative authority creates significant opportunities for state involvement in religious institutions and practices, raising concerns regarding institutional autonomy and the equal protection of minority religious communities under FoRB principles. These concerns are particularly evident where administrative oversight extends beyond administration into the internal governance, activities and expression of religious communities.

Chapter 2 has demonstrated that the mere existence of legal protections does not, in itself, guarantee the effective enjoyment of FoRB in Cambodia. Although the Constitution and national legislation formally recognise FoRB and prohibit religious discrimination, these protections are qualified by constitutional preferences for Buddhism, broad and ambiguously drafted legal provisions that can be subject to interpretation. Meanwhile national policies prioritise Buddhism, with the MoCR playing a central role in its administration, overseeing religious organisations and activities and giving the state significant influence over how religious rights are implemented in practice. Together, these features create a legal and bureaucratic framework that affords the state considerable influence over religious affairs while providing uneven protection across religious communities. As a result, while Buddhism lies at the threshold of institutional privileges and structural control, minority religious communities and IPs face greater legal and administrative barriers to the full exercise of their rights.

3. Violations of FoRB in Cambodia

This chapter identifies the four main FoRB violations that are under-discussed in Cambodia. They include: 1) the exercise of political control over the Buddhist order; 2) the unequal experiences of Muslim, Christian and Indigenous religious minorities; 3) the destruction of IPs' sacred sites; and 4) the weaponisation of religious institutions during the Cambodian-Thai border conflict. These issues represent the important gaps around FoRB in the Kingdom not captured by global indices on religious freedom.

3.1. Political Control over the Buddhist Order



The close relationship between the CPP, state authorities and senior leaders of the Buddhist Sangha has enabled political alignment between the monastic community and government interests. This creates particular pressures for rank-and-file monks who advocate for government accountability, engage in social activism or seek to distance themselves from the CPP and members of the government. These pressures operate through four main mechanisms: first, efforts to strictly align the Sangha with the CPP's political agenda; second, restrictions on monks' broader political participation; third, attempts to influence monks' voting behaviour; and fourth, the announcement of the Draft Law on Religion as a potential legal mechanism for disciplining and controlling monastic conduct.

3.1.1. Securing Political Alignment of the Sangha

This section examines how the CPP and its leaders in government have sought to secure the political alignment of the Sangha through a combination of political messaging, hierarchical control, disciplinary measures and legal pressure.

In November 2025, during the 33rd Congress of Buddhist Monks, Hun Sen, then serving as President of both the Senate and CPP, argued that cooperation between the state and religion strengthens governance, reduces violence and promotes moral conduct among citizens (Vibol, 2025a). In addition, he claimed that Buddhism is a tool for preserving social and political stability, fostering a morally grounded society, preventing extremism and supporting effective governance (Ibid.). In 2025, the MoCR announced the development of a programme to strengthen the integration of Buddhism into society and standardise religious leadership, primarily through training courses (Vibol, 2025b). At the meeting where the programme was announced, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, Hang Chuon Naron, stressed that monks are expected to serve as role models, contribute to national development, and foster solidarity with religious authorities and the laity (Ibid.). Together, these examples demonstrate how the CPP-led state continues to define a politically and socially compliant role for the Sangha, establishing

expectations that underpin the mechanisms through which political alignment is subsequently enforced.

When monks engage in activities perceived by the government as political – such as calling for government accountability or discussing constitutional rights and social issues, they risk being labelled “political monks” and subjected to adverse consequences (Lawrence, 2022a). Key informants interviewed by Asia Centre similarly reported that monks are subject to monitoring and are cautioned against engaging in political activities or expressing political opinions, particularly on social media (KII 1, KII 3, KII 5; KII 13). Two informants commented on the restrictions to their political expression:

“In the pagoda, there are internal rules imposed by the head monk that prohibit monks from participating in any social activities or demonstrations. Monk leaders might face pressure from outside authorities and impose restrictions if monks attend any matter related to politics or social issues. [...] We see that as a form of restriction of monks’ religious freedom”. (KII 5)

“You cannot criticise the government. You cannot criticise the political system. You cannot criticise politicians openly, but you have to be smart enough if you want to say something. The administrative system of the monks is very aligned with the government administration. So that’s why we are not allowed to express whatever we want”. (KII 13)

In practice, this label appears to be applied selectively, with monks facing greater scrutiny when their advocacy challenges the ruling CPP rather than when it aligns with the government interests (*Ibid.*).¹⁶ This distinction reflects broader expectations of political alignment, whereby monks are expected to refrain from activities that challenge the ruling party while remaining within the political and social role promoted by the state. This selective application is reinforced through the involvement of senior Sangha authorities, who provide an institutional channel through which political expectations can be transmitted to lower-ranking monks and enforced through existing disciplinary mechanisms (*Ibid.*).

By maintaining a close, institutionalised alignment with the ruling party, internal Sangha structures can function as mechanisms of political discipline, allowing pressure originating from state or senior religious authorities to be transmitted to lower-ranking monks. This creates a powerful incentive for monks to self-censor and refrain from expressing views perceived as politically contentious, linking political disengagement to their Buddhist standing.

¹⁶ After former PM Hun Sen launched a verbal campaign against exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy in 2022, he explicitly called on monks and laymen to stand against Rainsy and any affiliated political party (Sony, 2022). Venerable Bour Kry, Supreme Patriarch of the Dhammayuttika Nikaya, and the Sangha Council of Maha Nikaya issued official letters echoing Hun Sen’s condemnations. After a few months, Hun Sen raised USD 2 million to fund a Buddhist university overseen by Bour Kry (The Phnom Penh Post, 2023). More recently, Prime Minister Hun Manet issued official directives for the MoCR, publicly mandating tighter cooperation between the Buddhist monastic orders and the MoCR (FreshNews, 2025). Compounded with CCP’s patronage system (BTI, 2026; Pall, 2023), and under the premise of ensuring religious harmony, as well as national unity and solidarity, monks who fulfill their “duties according to legal and ethical standards” are facilitated in their monastic career advancement. For further evidence of the monastic order’s alignment with the government, see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2.

3.1.2. Influencing the Voting Behaviour of Monks

The second means of exerting control over the conduct of the Buddhist order is to exclude Buddhist monks from voting, reinforcing their formal separation from secular politics (Lawrence, 2022a). Following the unsuccessful attempt to introduce a voting ban on monks in 2005 (see Chapter 1, Section 1.3), efforts at political influencing increasingly shifted from restricting monks' formal voting rights to issuing a moral guideline on how those rights can be exercised. In this regard, Sangha's hierarchical structure enables senior Buddhist leaders aligned with the CPP to transmit political expectations to lower-ranking monks in supporting (and therefore voting for) the ruling CPP while framing such guidance as politically neutral (Lawrence, 2022a).

This use of hierarchical authority is evident in a series of interventions by senior Buddhist leaders during national elections in 2018 and 2023, and the leadership transition from Hun Sen to his son Hun Manet. At a national Buddhist gathering in 2017, Tep Vong recollected the party's contribution for the monastic order and urged monks to vote for the CPP in the 2018 national election, claiming that the outcome had already been determined and, by doing so, further legitimising the party's rule (The Phnom Penh Post, 2017). His remarks followed the Supreme Court's ruling the previous month to dissolve the CNRP and effectively clearing the path for CPP's undisputed victory at the national elections (The Phnom Penh Post, 2016). This pattern continued in 2021, when Bour Kry, the Supreme Patriarch of the Thammayut Nikaya, issued a statement on behalf of the order's secretary council expressing support for the planned succession of Prime Minister Hun Sen's son, Hun Manet (Dara and Thai, 2021; Dara, 2022).

Similarly, both in 2022 and in the lead-up to the 2023 national elections, the Maha Nikaya and Dhammayuttika Nikaya Sanghas encouraged monks and the public to support Hun Sen's long-standing leadership and his successor Hun Manet as beneficial for the country (Vibol, 2022; Punreay, 2023). Although they emphasised that the election would be conducted according to principles of "universal, free, fair and equitable...multi-party liberal democracy", they simultaneously stated:

"The Cambodian People's Party has worked hard and made achievements a reality. We cannot forget this fact, so we must take care to protect what we have received to this day and not destroy it".

Although monks are legally entitled to vote, such efforts to encourage support for the CPP raise questions about the extent to which monks are able to exercise this right independently. This pressure can blur the distinction between religious authority and political influence (Lawrence, 2022a). Where senior Buddhist authorities encourage support for the CPP, monks often face pressure to reconcile their voting choices with the expectations of their religious superiors and the broader political environment in which their pagodas operate (KII 3, KII 5). The ability of political and religious authorities to influence monks' electoral choices is particularly pronounced at smaller pagodas and in rural areas, where monks are more susceptible to pressure from local administrative authorities as they rely on their networks for support (Heng, 2008). As a result, monks may formally retain the right to vote while facing social and institutional pressures that restrict how that right is exercised in practice (Lawrence, 2022a).

While approximately 70,000 monks in Cambodia do not represent a large voting bloc numerically, their political influence extends far beyond their individual ballots (Khmer Times, 2022b). As monks are traditionally highly respected moral educators and community leaders in Cambodian society, by pushing them to endorse the CPP, high monastic figures leverage the moral legitimacy and social

influence that the monks command over the lay population. In doing so, they are able to indirectly drive a broader voting base to the polls, increasing the voter turnout and legitimising an election's outcome. These dynamics are likely to remain relevant in the lead-up to the 2027 commune elections, where political actors are likely to continue seeking support from Buddhist leaders and communities.

3.1.3. Enforcing Conformity Through Sanctions and Prosecution

The third, and more restrictive method is the use of sanctions to criminally prosecute monks who challenge the political expectations placed on the Sangha. These measures operate at different levels: defrocking and expulsion from pagodas can strip monks of the institutional and material benefits of monastic life, while criminal charges and arrest expose them to direct state coercion. Together, these mechanisms increase the costs of political dissent and create strong incentives for monks to self-censor and avoid politically sensitive activities.

There have been several recent examples of these forms of control. In 2019, Venerable Bor Bet fled Cambodia amid concerns that he would be arrested and forcibly defrocked following his involvement in protests concerning political prisoners and his criticism of CPP ([Sun, 2020c](#)). In March 2023, Venerable Soy Sat was defrocked after participating in a national march advocating for social justice, during which he called for greater protections for monks engaged in social activism and the release of imprisoned activists ([LICADHO, 2023](#)). Similarly, another monk from Battambang was expelled from his pagoda in July 2024 after joining a peaceful march commemorating the death of political commentator Kem Ley ([RFA Khmer, 2024](#)). Later that year, Thou Vakhim left the monkhood at Wat Than following pressure from religious and state authorities related to his social activism, including demands that he cease his advocacy ([UCA News, 2025](#)).

According to key informants interviewed by Asia Centre, these sanctions can have consequences extending beyond the loss of religious status. One key informant (KII 1) described the range of consequences that monks could face for participating in the Dhamma Yatra, a Buddhist peace walk involving monks and lay participants, including the loss of accommodation, educational opportunities, and monastic status:

“Look, if they go, they aren't even given a place to stay, and their place of study is completely cut off, and they'll even defrock them—it's brutal. [...] They're not allowed to participate in social protection either. Even some who went out there were ultimately expelled from the pagoda entirely.” (KII 1)

The key informant explained that approximately 30 monks wanted to participate in the Dhamma Yatra but were deterred by these potential consequences. These accounts suggest that the potential loss of institutional and material support may create pressures for monks to avoid political participation or engagement perceived as challenging state expectations.

In some cases, monks' political activities have resulted in criminal prosecution and arrest. Thou Vakhim, for example, was arrested and charged with incitement under Articles 494 and 495 of the Cambodian Criminal Code following his involvement with the New Generation Party and Facebook posts criticising Hun Sen and Hun Manet ([UCA News, 2025](#)). Most recently, a young monk and citizen journalist, Venerable Chea Vuthy, was defrocked and convicted under the same charges as Thou Vakhim, after

discussing in a private Messenger group chat about internally displaced persons and border issues (LICADHO, 2026a; Hong, 2026).

The possibility of arrest and criminal prosecution can therefore reinforce the deterrent effect of Sangha sanctions, further narrowing the space for monks to engage in political or social activities that challenge the ruling party.

3.1.4. Threat of the Draft Law on Religion

While the previous sections examined existing mechanisms through which the government restricts and influences monastic political engagement, this section examines the potential political function of the draft Law on Religion and its use as a source of pressure against Buddhist monks. The draft law, discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.2, is significant not only for the restrictions it would impose if enacted, but also for the political signal it conveyed while under consideration.

In understanding the role that the Draft Law on Religion plays in the current political landscape, it is important to interpret its development within the broader political context. The draft law emerged following increased political engagement during the mid-2010s, particularly around the 2013 general election when monks were amongst the many social groups that mobilised to call for greater electoral integrity (Dara, 2022). Activist monks, including Phorn Sipheang, warned that the draft law's broad and vague provisions would enable authorities to restrict and penalise monks engaged in social and political issues, thereby discouraging activism within the Buddhist community (ibid.; *The Phnom Penh Post*, 2021). The draft therefore did not emerge in isolation, but amid growing state concern over the political engagement of monks. If enacted, the draft law could therefore provide a formal legal basis for punitive measures against monks perceived as politically disruptive, while creating greater scope for authorities to distinguish between forms of religious activity considered compatible with state interests and those perceived as threatening them (RFI, 2021; Dara, 2022).

Beyond its potential function as a formal regulatory instrument, however, many key informants also pointed out that the draft law may already have served a broader political purpose even without being officially enacted. One key informant, a Buddhist monk (KII 3), suggested that the draft law was less significant as proposed legislation than as a political signal intended to test the response of the Buddhist monastic community. In the key informant's view, the MoCR introduced the draft during a period of heightened political mobilisation among monks and civil society to assess whether the Sangha would resist further state regulation:

"I think [the draft law] will not be released. We have discussed it, and we believe the Ministry initiated it during a time when monks were very active in politics and when the CNRP and NGOs were strong. The MoCR seemed to be testing the monks' strength on the Buddhist side, to see how they would react or protest against this draft law." (KII 3)

According to the same key informant (KII 3), the failure of the Sangha to mount a unified response subsequently allowed the state to shift from formal legislative restriction toward greater internal control:

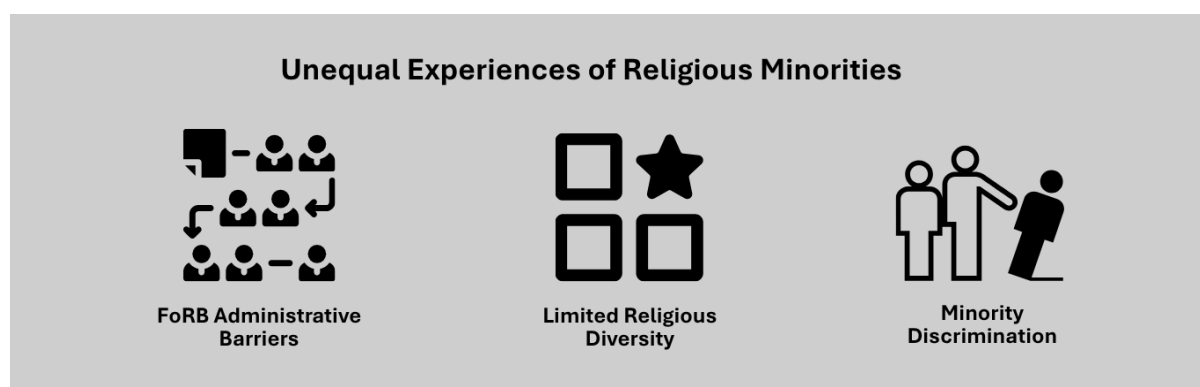
“Now, they seem to think that since the monks did not protest, the draft law will likely not be issued. Instead, they shifted their strategy to an internal co-optation method. They now use chief monks, pagoda heads, and local secular officials to micro-manage lower-level monks. This internal system is highly effective for them, which is why the formal draft law has stalled.” (KII 3)

“The first stage is the head of monks, who will pressure the lower ranking monks because they also get pressure from the local authority and police. This is an indirect threat, they don't say it out but indirectly” (KII 5).

In this interpretation, the prospect of additional legal oversight would likely place pressure on senior monks to demonstrate compliance with state expectations by regulating the conduct of monks under their authority. The draft law could therefore operate indirectly: rather than requiring state authorities to discipline individual monks themselves, the prospect of legal enforcement would likely encourage senior Buddhist authorities to impose greater restrictions on lower-ranking monks.

These accounts suggest that the draft Law on Religion may have functioned not only as a proposed legal reform but also as a source of indirect political pressure. By signalling the possibility of increased state regulation, the draft encourages senior monks to discipline lower-ranking monks in anticipation of potential legal consequences.

3.2. Unequal Experiences of Religious Minorities



This section highlights the unequal lived experiences faced by Muslim and Christian minorities compared to the Buddhist majority in Cambodia, when attempting to fully exercise their religious beliefs. It layouts how restrictions occur in practice as it relates to freedom to worship, access to education, and discrimination fuelled by stereotypes. Such unequal experiences not only limit their rights in the public space but also contribute to broader concerns around the erosion of religious freedom.

3.2.1. Administrative Barriers to Minority Religions

A significant challenge facing minority religious communities in Cambodia is the inconsistent and ambiguous implementation of the FoRB administrative framework resulting in barriers and restrictions. This inconsistency is often attributed to local officials' limited understanding of their administrative responsibilities and lack of clear, standardised knowledge of the bureaucratic procedures (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Discrepancies at the provincial, district, and communal level may affect all religious communities; however, they are likely to place a disproportionate burden on minority groups, which rely more heavily on local authorities for approvals, recognition, and permission to establish or expand religious activities.

A prime example is the implementation of the 2003 Directive on Controlling External Religions, which mandates that all religious groups must register their place of worship with the MoCR and need to respect at least two-kilometer distance limit for new religious buildings (The Cambodia Daily, 2003; U.S. Department of State, 2005). While some religious communities report being able to operate freely, several informants have raised concerns over experienced restrictions and delays in the application processes for the registration or renewal of churches and mosques.

First, while Buddhist pagodas are treated as permanent, state-backed institutions, minority groups have reported differential treatment when it comes to their places of worship (KII 6, KII 9, KII 11; KII 14; Women Peace Makers, 2024). Not only mosques and churches need to be registered and approved to host believers' gatherings and religious activities, but their registration is subjected to a renewal process every 10 (mosques) and 2 (churches) years respectively (*ibid.*). Moreover, because Cambodia does not have a dedicated religious worker or missionary visa category, foreign missionaries need to enter the country with a business visa or register their stay under humanitarian work with a NGO which is subject to a 3-year renewal (OMF International, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023; ICNL, 2025). A Christian missionary in Cambodia (KII 14) informed Asia Centre how this categorisation has adverse consequences for the registration of foreign Christian groups:

"They thought that as NGOs we bring a lot of money helping them. They don't see us as a religious figure. [...] When we need to apply for the renewal of the registration, they require a certain number of signatures and thumbprints of local Christians. [In the worst case], Christian communities get closed or need to merge because they don't reach the required number of people." (KII 14)

Second, the registration process for new places of worship is regarded as complicated, requiring approval from multiple offices, and fairly long, with believers waiting several months before receiving a response (KII 9, KII 11; KII 14; Women Peace Makers, 2024). The absence of transparent administrative procedures and the adoption of a double standard create opportunities for local officials to exercise significant discretion when approving religious activities and constructing places of worship. A representative of a CSO working with religious minorities informed that provincial authorities occasionally do not give their permission to build or register a place of worship because of security considerations or difficulties accessing the right documentation (KII 9). This raises concerns about the structural flaws of the administrative process, exposing an environment of entrenched bureaucratic resistance and patronage networks. The heavy reliance on arbitrary administrative discretion means that institutional approvals often hinge on informal, personal exchanges rather than objective

administrative guidelines. As another key informant (KII 11) explained, navigating the bureaucracy is frequently reduced to individual connections:

“Rather than the law, I think a lot depends on the relationship you build with the governor. If it’s good, the law will never be a stumbling block for you. But if you don’t have a good relationship there might be some kind of restriction.” (KII 11)

As a consequence, some religious leaders have no other choice but to rely on informal, interpersonal connections with higher governmental figures and the elite to ensure that the projects and applications they initiate or support get approved by state authorities (Pall, 2023). At the same time, these dynamics are also present at lower levels. A key informant (KII 14) has indicated that he and other missionaries need to be friendly with the local police when they visit them to check their work and status of foreigners:

“When the police come to our community to check on the visa as NGO we are not exactly scared because they are usually lenient, but we need to be friendly with them. Of course sometimes we need to tell a bit of white lies, because strictly speaking we shouldn’t be allowed to preach or lead religious service activities. So we know that they know, but they are also the ones teaching how to do things and help us.” (KII 14)

Restrictions on minority religious communities are not limited to the establishment of places of worship, but also extend to the public manifestation of religious beliefs. The overlooking of specific standards and arbitrary requirements may limit religious expression and reinforce existing inequalities in the ability of minority communities to publicly manifest and hold on to their religious identity. For example, although the Council of Ministers issued a formal directive in 2015 officially allowing Muslim women to wear hijabs and Muslim men to wear traditional caps in photographs for passports, national identity cards, and other official documents (Naren, 2015), these provisions have not always been accompanied by effective measures to spread awareness among local administrators and prevent discriminatory behaviours. An interviewee of Asia Centre (KII 9) shared her experience and struggles as a Muslim woman wearing hijab:

“Some Muslims find it difficult to access public services. Especially when women who wear hijab request their ID card or certificate of education, some authorities ask them to take it off, making them uncomfortable. [...] I had to ask my university three times to use my picture for the certificate and almost gave up before they allowed it. Because some Muslims don’t know about the law and their rights, they follow the instructions of these officers and get documents without wearing hijab. [...] Even if my university friends told me they wanted to keep it on, they said it would be easier to apply for a job and get hired without it.” (KII 9)

Ultimately, the pressure to conform to these informal, discriminatory practices forces many minority group members to actively suppress their heritage in public spaces just to survive economically and socially. The forced eviction of Cham Muslim communities, often driven by state-sponsored urban beautification, infrastructure development, and the desire to protect a modernised, clean image to international investors and tourists (Kijewski, 2019; Zak and Dara, 2022), is frequently experienced as an erasure of their identity. The sheer struggle for economic survival forces cultural and religious preservation into the background, leading some Cham Muslim to filter the way they eat, dress and speak to avoid intense stigma when navigating public and social contexts (Asia Media Centre, 2022; Zak and Srey, 2025).

“When we go out of our community we don’t speak Cham and try to hide our identity, saying we are Khmer people, that we are Khmer Islam. [...] A lot of people try to show only a good image as Khmers, they compromise their religion and their identity because it becomes easier to access public spaces.” (KII 9)

Despite being considered a distinct ethnic and religious group, and because they were not classified as Indigenous peoples within the 2001 Land Law (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1.3), Cham communities cannot apply for communal land titles over the villages and riverbanks where they live. Hence, the government can take advantage of legal loopholes and systemic enforcement failures to press on immediate administrative eviction. The implicit message is that Cham living spaces are incompatible with the idealised external impression of a modern Khmer nation, breeding deep-seated feelings of marginalisation and disrespect across the social fabric, leading to an indirect erosion of intra-communal relationships and the preservation of specific customs connected to their livelihood and identity as Cham Muslims.

These examples demonstrate that the practical exercise of FoRB is shaped not only by the existence of formal legal protections, but also by the ways in which religious regulations are interpreted, implemented, and administered in practice. Consequently, unclear guidelines, inconsistent enforcement, and administrative discretion on the public manifestation of religion can create barriers

for minority religious communities despite the presence of a legal framework intended to prevent discrimination on grounds of FoRB.

3.2.2. Limited Religious Diversity in Public Education

The intersection between education and religion is crucial for assessing the state of religious freedom in Cambodia. Article 66 of the Constitution (2008) guarantees the freedom to operate educational institutions and equal access to comprehensive and standardised schooling. However, obstructions persist, preventing faith communities from fully preserving and exercising their religious practices. This section focuses on two key challenges: the underrepresentation of minority religions in the public school curriculum, and the limited availability of bilingual education for ethno-religious minorities, which is essential for preserving their culture, identity, and religious traditions.

First, the scope of religious education in public schools is formally limited. Article 33 of the Law on Education (2007) provides that religious studies in education programmes are permitted only “for general knowledge”, while specifically requiring the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to take Buddhism into consideration as the state religion. This suggests that although religious diversity is acknowledged within the curriculum, students receive relatively limited substantive instruction on non-Buddhist religions and the principles underlying religious freedom and interreligious harmony. This distinction was confirmed from the information gathered through several KIs conducted by Asia Centre. The KIs noted that the public school curriculum integrates supplemental lessons on Buddhism and Buddhist morality that everyone is encouraged to attend, whereas equivalent instruction on minority religions and beliefs is generally surface-level or not available within Cambodia’s public school (KI 8, KI 9, KI 11).

While non-Buddhist students may choose not to participate in Buddhist-centred lessons “they are asked to join for attendance and scoring [benefits]” (KI 9). As a result, the curricular imbalance reinforces the privileged position of Buddhism while limiting opportunities for students from non-Buddhist backgrounds to receive comprehensive instruction about their own faith traditions (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This creates a separate educational burden for minority religious communities, which must rely on private religious schools and community-based institutions to provide instruction that is not available within the public-school system (Garuna Ministries, n.d.; Kosim et al., 2025).

Christian education in Cambodia includes both full-day and half-day activities. International schools operate entirely independent of state integration, substituting the public curriculum with internationally funded private programmes in Khmer and English (Asian Hope, 2025; Khmer Times, 2026a). Some Christian institutes offer also specialised programmes designed to train students at the post-secondary level to become preachers in their respective villages (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2025a; CCM, n.d.a). For those who attend public school, faith organisations and local NGOs supplement secular teachings through Bible stories, Sunday schools and meals, and other everyday activities, including reinforced Khmer language programmes, serving as a primary entry point for evangelism (EMM, n.d.; Garuna Ministries, n.d.; Younglife, n.d.). Similarly, other NGOs operate faith-based orphanages and residential care facilities to house and educate vulnerable children (CCM, n.d.b).

Islamic education in minority communities has superseded the structure of the public schooling system, with Muslim children studying the Quran and basic Islamic values at local religious institutions outside of regular public school hours (Kosim et al., 2025). Parallel to the dual-schooling system, community leaders are increasingly developing integrated private schools. However, both the provision of informal teachings and the alternative integrated curricula are heavily reliant on foreign aid, local initiatives and donations (ibid.; Sman et al., 2026). Islamic religious education systems often lack a

centralised teaching framework, accurate translation to the Cambodian sociocultural context, and quality assurance mechanisms by the MoEYS. Similar accounts have emphasised significant gaps in teacher training and inadequate facilities for learning, especially in rural areas and for disadvantaged students (*ibid.*; *Aminas et al., 2025*)¹⁷.

Second, the breadth of the public curriculum has important implications for ethno-religious and Indigenous groups, as the predominance of Khmer in the public school system can narrow the opportunities for those students to continue developing and preserving their original language and cultural-religious traditions (*Seberry and Sobhan, 2023*). This gap is particularly challenging for Indigenous communities whose religious practices rely on oral traditions, rituals, and ceremonies conducted in their native languages. Therefore, limited access to sustained bilingual education programmes can weaken the preservation and transmission of Indigenous traditional belief, knowledge, and cultural practices.

In January 2026, the MoEYS announced the inclusion of Jarai language into Indigenous children's school curricula (*Ousa, 2026*), as part of broader initiatives to improve educational access for Indigenous communities. The Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028 (*MoEYS, 2024*), alongside an Action Plan on Multilingual Education (MLE), outlined several provisions for schools located in provinces with most ethno-minority residents,¹⁸ including bilingual education, community schools, scholarships in remote provinces and hard-to-reach areas, and the incorporation of Indigenous teachers into the state education system. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, the implementation of MLE programmes remains limited and requires further strengthening.

Out of a total of at least 19 languages spoken across 22 to 27 Indigenous communities (*Thorth, 2024*), through the MLE Action Plan 2024–2028 (*MoEYS, 2025a*) the government intends to administer dedicated bilingual programmes for nine Indigenous languages.¹⁹ Furthermore, in line with the concerns raised by civil society Indigenous organisations at the end of the MLE Action Plan 2019–2023 cycle, provision of bilingual programmes are available only until the fourth year of primary school, leaving the majority of IPs without adequate support for language preservation (*CIPA, 2024; MoEYS, 2025a; KII 8*). At the same time, weak institutional capacity, uneven programme distribution, and dependency on external funding are also threatening the role of CSOs at the community level, which are crucial for implementing MLE programmes, teacher-trainings, and discouraging school dropouts (*Dip, 2025; GPE, 2025; NEP, 2026*).

In the case of Cham Muslims, because Cham language is not included in the general curriculum in areas where these minority communities mostly reside, and since religious textbooks at Islamic schools are mainly translated directly to Khmer, the majority of Cham youth lose their language (*Thim, 2019*). Compounding this issue, the shortage of Cham Muslims educators forces many children to rely on their families' knowledge and competencies, often leading to fragmented and inadequate learning (*Rahmi et al., 2025*). As one respondent voiced their worries:

¹⁷ On the other hand, Buddhist educational institutions have been able to consistently operate within the formal education system by combining secular curriculum requirements and technical capabilities with religious teachings, successfully preparing students with necessary competencies for higher education (*Lawrence, 2022a; Loeung and Nara, 2025*).

¹⁸ Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, and Preah Vihear Provinces.

¹⁹ The languages mentioned in the MLE Action Plan 2024–2028 are provided to the following Indigenous communities: Bunong, Tampuan, Kavet, Kreung, Brao, Jarai, Kmuoy, Kachok, and Kraol. However, the ESP 2024–2028 only mentions six of them, leaving unclear the coordination between the two plans.

“I am concerned that we might lose our identity as Cham. We have our own culture, our own language, our own writing system, but a lot of the people in our community don’t even know about the letters [of the alphabet]. They can currently only speak, and in some provinces young people are not really even able to speak Cham. [...] It’s hard for us, not only for our identity as an ethnic minority, but also as an ethno-religious group.” (KII 9)

The insufficiency of appropriate learning environments, complicated by a lack of stable funding for inclusive curricula and the challenges examined in Section 3.2.1, highlights a broader systemic neglect of comprehensive religious literacy, particularly for ethno-religious and Indigenous minorities (Rahmi et al., 2025). This reinforces the expectation placed on them to learn the national language and assimilate to Khmer culture, which disregards the development and preservation of their knowledge and traditions (CIPA, 2024). The overall limited coverage underscores the need for sustained efforts and enhanced commitment from the government to ensure that more Indigenous communities can safeguard their linguistic, cultural and religious heritage through pathways for comprehensive religious literacy development.

3.2.3. Social Discrimination of Minorities

Despite having protections guaranteed in the constitution and a series of anti-discrimination provisions in the Criminal Code (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1), religious minorities in Cambodia continue to face everyday societal discrimination and hate speech. By providing an overview of the sort of discrimination that religious minority groups have faced at the societal level, this subsection points to the inadequate measures put in place by the Cambodian government to address social prejudice.

Muslim communities have historically been among the groups most affected by religious prejudice. KII 6, a Muslim informant interviewed by Asia Centre, explained that members of his community were once viewed with suspicion by neighbouring communities, who believed Muslims practised black magic, creating an unwritten social barrier between religious groups (KII 6).

“In the old days, before these organisations came down to facilitate communication, there was a massive wall of fear and deep suspicion between communities. Specifically, non-Muslim groups harbored intense fear toward the Islamic community. They believed that Islam was a secretive religion associated with dark magic and sorcery.” (KII 6)

Christian communities likewise described a history of social separation and mutual suspicion between Christians and the Buddhist majority. A Buddhist monk observed that, while foreign Christians often engage openly with the Buddhist clergy, many Khmer converted to Christianity remain hesitant to do so, feeling that interacting with a monk is uncomfortable or inappropriate because they are not part of Buddhism anymore (KII3). A similar perception was echoed by a Christian informant, who recalled that

during his youth he did not dare to speak with Buddhist monks or lay religious leaders due to fears of feeding prejudices and social conflict (KII4).

Some informants have emphasised that participation in interfaith dialogues, specifically at the local level, can dismantle many of these misconceptions, enabling members of different religions to interact openly and respectfully in ways that had not previously been possible (KII 4, KII 6, KII 11, KII 14). At the same time, most interreligious events among Buddhism, Islam and Christianity in Cambodia are highly centralised and orchestrated by the state to project an international image of the country as a model for ethnic and religious harmony (Vibol, 2025a; Vibol, 2025b). Under the premise of spreading messages of religious tolerance and inclusivity, top-down interfaith initiatives are leveraged as opportunities to foster tourism and economic cooperation (Whitaker, 2025a). Furthermore, major meetings, like the Islam-Buddhism Summit 2025 and the Eighth Buddhist-Christian Colloquium, primarily involve senior ministers, foreign diplomats, and high-ranking clerics, lacking a translation into sustained programmes as “they gather once or twice a year, but it’s just a formal meeting and then they go back on their own way” (KII 11).

This is especially true for marginalised communities in rural areas and urban suburbs, where the majority of the Muslim and Cham communities reside (Minority Rights Group, 2018; U.S. Department of State, 2023). While grassroots activists and NGOs strive to navigate the local sociocultural context, some members of Muslim communities have voiced their anxiety over attending certain initiatives, including entering Buddhist temples or participating in joint educational camps, as they may conflict with orthodox Islamic practices (Pall, 2023). An informant interviewed by Asia Centre noted that the root of this anxiety may stem from misunderstandings, with some Muslims being “afraid to make friends with people from other religions [...] because they feel like they would be persuaded to convert” (KII 9). Nevertheless, concerns around interfaith understanding and tolerance are often hardly addressed, signalling a general sense of institutional gap and limited local capacity to consult trusted Islamic authorities for such matters (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, as evidenced during periods of social crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, prejudices can quickly re-emerge and spread animosity at the societal level. Several Muslim business owners reported experiencing religion-based discrimination after infections were linked to Cambodians returning from a religious gathering in Malaysia (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Keeton-Olsen and Meta, 2020). The Ministry of Health's decision to publicly identify those infected as “Khmer Islam” encouraged the public to associate the virus with the Muslim community rather than the location of transmission, contributing to declining patronage of Muslim-owned businesses and broader social stigma. Widespread hate speech was recorded in online social media posts reporting on the identity of the positive cases, with most comments blaming the Cham Muslim communities (Aun and Baliga, 2020). Although public statements were issued to stop the social blaming, failure from the government to apologise for contributing to incitement and sceptical behaviours directed against religious minorities demonstrated how discrimination is handled in the Kingdom. Moreover, compared to earlier accounts when the government arrested individuals for spreading “fake news” or criticising the state’s management of the virus (Louis, 2020), there were no legal consequences for users spreading religiously framed hate speech online.

Attempts to promote dialogue and reduce suspicion against Muslim and Christian minorities have appeared to be inadequate in addressing the drivers of marginalisation and negative stereotypes within the broader social fabric. Khmer Buddhists who embrace Muslim or Christian values and embark on the path to conversion are still ostracised and isolated by those around them:

“Some of my friends want to convert to Islam, but then their family discriminates and physically beats them. They said [that their families] are afraid that Islam will become a dominant [religion] in Cambodia. [Because of this] they are forced to detach from Islamic beliefs.” (KII 9)

“They [Buddhists] see us as the ones who have forsaken and disrespected our old traditions and culture. They feel like I am a betrayer of Khmer Buddhism. [...] When I became Christian I tended to distance myself from them, but today I feel like I need to create closer relationships with them, even though they may look at me in a negative way.” (KII 11)

These accounts evidence how religious identity is still deeply intertwined with national and ethnic belonging. As Buddhists in Cambodia view their religion not merely as a personal belief, but as an “ethnicity one is born into” and a mandatory family tradition, converting to a minority faith often triggers severe familial and societal backlash (Evans et al., 2023). Disruption of traditional religious norms and communal life often further leads to profound social ostracisation and marginalisation from their neighbours and family. Refusing to perform religious-specific rituals during events that are imperative in the life of a Khmer Buddhist, such as the *Pchum Ben* (Ancestors’ Day) festival or Cambodian New Year, may be interpreted as a disrespect for their community, fueling societal stigma and exacerbating the emotional rift with their loved ones (Coggan, 2016; KII 11).

3.3. Indigenous Lands Rights and Sacred Sites



This section explores the intersectionality of land rights, livelihoods, and traditional spirituality, highlighting how economic land concessions, environmental governance, and inadequate communal land protections threaten Indigenous sacred forest sites. Beyond their material value, these ancestral lands are vital for Indigenous worship, cultural preservation, and spiritual connection. Consequently, their degradation undermines both Indigenous livelihoods and the ability of communities to practice their traditions and FoRB.

3.3.1. The Inadequate Protection of Communal Land Rights

IPs in Cambodia face systemic erosion of their culture, spiritual beliefs, and sacred connection with their lands. This is done by placing barriers to protecting their communal land rights, despite legal

frameworks that ostensibly recognise their collective ownership. Overlapping conservation zones, bureaucratic and administrative hurdles, and the absence of effective remedies have left communities vulnerable to dispossession and forced displacement, which effectively infringes on their rights to FoRB.

Collective Land Titles constitute the formal recognition of Indigenous ownership of their residential homes, farmland, culturally and spiritually significant forests for the use of future generations ([Koem, 2022](#); [IWGIA, 2026](#)). While ancestral ceremonies, spiritual beliefs, seasonal rituals and prayers are integral part of Indigenous cultural identity and set of beliefs, sacred forests are where these practices are tangibly performed and preserved through generations ([The Phnom Penh Post, 2026](#)). As remarked by an Indigenous key informant:

“My community’s faith centers on traditional animist beliefs and ancestral spirit rituals. Our customs are inseparable from our land, physical forests, and natural ecosystems. Our entire spiritual life and everyday practices rely on the preservation of land and nature, ensuring peaceful coexistence and food security.” (KII 7)

Although measures such as the Sub-Decree No 83 (2009) provide a pathway for Indigenous communities to obtain Collective Land Titles (CLTs), implementation has been limited. As of late 2025, only 48 out of 488 Indigenous communities had received CLTs ([IWGIA, 2026](#)). The application process is widely described as complex, lengthy, and costly, requiring navigation through multiple provincial and central administrative offices which often shift the responsibility to one another ([OHCHR Cambodia, 2021](#); [CCHR, 2024](#); KII 12).

A critical obstacle is the overlap between Indigenous lands and state-designed protected areas. As of 2024, at least 12 natural resource conservation areas and 12 national parks – out of a total of 73 protected areas – overlap with Indigenous lands ([CIPA, 2024](#)). Since the Ministry of Environment assumed control of all protected areas in 2016 ([OpenDevelopment Cambodia, 2020](#)), it has actively blocked CLT registration within these zones, asserting that communal ownership cannot be granted in national parks, wildlife sanctuaries or REDD+ project areas ([Camps, 2024](#)). In one notable case, the MoE established the 3,348-hectare Sre Preah Community Protected Area in 2019, overlapping with 128 hectares of land that had been recognised by the provincial government for registration as CLTs for the Pu Kong communities, who had started their application in 2008 ([Brook, 2024b](#)). Compounding this issue, there is no mechanism for Indigenous communities to contest these decisions, leaving them powerless against administrative overrides. This loss has significant implications for IPs’ right to freedom of belief, as stressed by a member of an Indigenous community interviewed by Asia Centre:

“We do spirit offerings and show respect to forest and mountain areas, where there are locations that the elders respect and believe in. [...] When those areas are lost, it leaves them [Indigenous peoples] without a sacred space to worship their religion. Forest loss is also a loss of religion.” (KII 8)

While the analysis of a CLT application might take decades and still not be accepted, the MoE has the authority to subsume the land under review for titling to private corporations and other well-connected individuals (KII 7, KII 12). Bunong family members in Monduliri Province were arrested after they refused to cede their ancestral burial site to private individuals who had obtained titles document over the land in question (Sovann and Runn, 2023). Even when formal land titles are secured, forest authorities can be swayed into covertly clearing protected spaces for private property. This allows single individuals from other provinces to hold rights to communal lands and deny access to Indigenous peoples and their families as the original owners (Manning and Keo, 2025). An Indigenous key informant also explained his case:²⁰

“In one of the provinces, a high-ranking individual has claimed ownership of an ancestral indigenous burial forest and registered it for a land title, despite it being public state land. This has led to disputes over the area. Most distressingly, members of the Indigenous community have found human bones and skulls scattered on the site after it was cleared. This has caused deep emotional pain within the community.” (KII 7)

Such disregard for Indigenous intersectional rights underscores both the significance of formal land registration and demarcation, and the opaque regime of land ownership guarantees. On one hand, CLTs safeguard Indigenous identity, conserve natural resources and prevent land encroachment, ultimately ensuring IPs are able to carry out the traditions connected to nature and their spiritual beliefs. At the same time, local farmers and villagers from Indigenous communities are often pressured into renouncing their land titles by government and province officials, who restrict their access to and cultivation of the land (Brook, 2024b). Deprived of their traditional livelihood and exacerbating their food insecurity, many IPs are left with no alternative but to use their land as collateral for individual loans, trapping them in cycles of over-indebtedness that ultimately result in coerced land sales (*ibid.*; Human Rights Watch, 2026). As many rituals are intrinsically tied to no longer accessible lands, this has not only disrupted Indigenous livelihoods but also eroded their spiritual and cultural practices, ultimately constituting a violation of their right to FoRB.

3.3.2. Economic Land Concessions

Another way in which IPs are prevented from performing their rituals and preserving their ancestral practices is through the exploitation of their lands for economic purposes and desecration of their sacred spaces. Until 2025, the Cambodian government had granted to local and international companies between 290 and 330 Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) covering over 2.25 million hectares, many of which included territories traditionally inhabited by IPs (Soeung, 2022, OpenDevelopment Cambodia, 2025). These concessions have been primarily allocated for activities such as hydropower construction, mining, and logging, which have contributed to severe deforestation and environmental degradation (Pauly et al., 2022), often disproportionately benefitting companies with connections to powerful elites within the government (Amnesty International, 2022). This dislocation stems from the lack of formal land titles, a legacy of the Khmer Rouge, which primarily benefited large

²⁰ The name of the province has been omitted.

corporations due to low government oversight, leaving control to the companies under generous Build-Operate-Transfer contracts (Friel, 2025). IPs are particularly vulnerable to land encroachment – lands that are rich natural resources found on their ancestral lands, which are highly sought after by extractive industries.

Since 2000, ELCs have caused the displacement of more than 770,000 people, primarily Indigenous communities, losing access to spiritual forests, lakes, streams, temples, and culturally relevant sites (RFA, 2020). Additionally, several sacred grounds have been completely or mostly deforested and entire communities in the southwest and northeast have been dispossessed of their Indigenous spiritual areas due to ELC investments, trading, and government-facilitated projects (CIPA, 2024). By clearing and limiting access to their ancestral lands, private companies are restricting IPs from performing their communal rituals or burying their dead, disrupting their spiritual life and leading to isolation and detachment from their traditions (Amnesty International, 2022; Ball et al., 2026; Sovann, 2026).

“Historically speaking, our people have practiced their animist traditions for generations without ever requesting permission from any external entity. Why should we ask for a permit to pray? It is a fundamental right. We enter the forests to make offerings to the spirits; it [should] require no state permission. [However,] in areas controlled by corporations or corrupt environment departments, the villagers are terrified. They now feel forced to ask for permission or notify guards before conducting any ritual.” (KII7)

One example involves the Kuy Indigenous people in Preah Vihear Province. In 2016, sugarcane companies cleared parts of their farmland and spiritual forests (Sun, 2020a). Despite their claims of living on the land since 1980 (Morm, 2019), it is estimated that only 25% of the approximately 2,000 affected families held official land titles. Some residents were compensated only after their land was encircled by sugarcane plantations, receiving as little as \$250 per hectare, while many dispossessed individuals have yet to receive any compensation (Ibid). Ancestral forests, which are home to Indigenous communities and their spiritual practices, have been the theatre of illegal logging by private businesses. Since the 2020 crackdown on environmental defenders protecting the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary (Amnesty International, 2021), the Cambodian Ministry of Environment has been denying activists and grassroots Indigenous groups from accessing protected forests, where they traditionally pay respect to ancestral spirits, perform ceremonies and engage in conservation activities (Amnesty International, 2022). Similar cases have been reported in 2025, where the Kuy Indigenous Community of Pramer Village discovered 334 cases of state-facilitated illegal logging in the Preah Roka Wildlife Sanctuary (Keo, 2025). Those who seek to protest and take action against illegal forest clearing for economic purposes and to the detriment of Indigenous practices are met with threats from the offenders or persuaded to refrain from complaining from the local authorities (LICADHO, 2026b). An Indigenous informant and representative of an organisation working with IPs noted an example from Preah Vihear and Kampong Thom provinces:

“[T]he Indigenous Kuy community is facing conflicts with companies that have received land concessions from the government. These concessions have restricted their ability to practise their beliefs and sustain their livelihoods. Although the Indigenous people own farms, they are prohibited from accessing or cultivating them because of the influence of private companies. Those who attempt to enter the land face threats and intimidation. Armed soldiers are stationed at the farms, creating a constant risk of violence against Indigenous farmers. [...] The rightful landowners are turned into servants on their own soil, while the corporations strip them of their means of livelihood.” (KII7)

3.3.3. Environmental Governance

Significant overlap exists between Indigenous Peoples’ sacred sites and designated protected areas, frequently resulting in the denial of Indigenous communities’ ownership and right to their land (CIPA, 2024). The introduction of the National REDD+ Strategy (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, 2017-2026), which aims to mitigate global climate change through improved natural resources and forest management, has exacerbated this issue. Under this strategy, restrictions on land and forest use within protected zones prevent IPs from cultivating or settling in these areas, hindering their ability to register and claim their land, carry out their communal rituals and, therefore, conserve the practice of their faiths (Brook, 2024a; Camps, 2024). Concurrently, the adoption of the Code on Environment and Natural Resources by the Ministry of Environment (2024) has broadened the premises under which expanding protected areas and national parks is possible (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1.3). In the case of the Virachey National Park, which is home to many Indigenous groups, several residents living in the proposed areas of expansion have been arrested, intimidated, faced lawsuits and branded as criminals after conducting rotational farming, customary land tenure and other traditional practices (IWGIA, 2026, Seoung and Tang, 2024). As remarked by a legal officer interviewed by Asia Centre:

“They try to use the code to silence people. [...] Even after the community submits a letter of concern to the local authority and the ministry, the police and commune authority come and say they want to verify the thumbprints to see if they are fake. [...] When this happens the members become afraid and ask me: Teacher, am I doing something wrong? We are just meeting and raising our concerns.” (KII 12)

By questioning IPs’ efforts to defend their forests and observe their traditional customs, the government, as well as the implementing authorities, fail to understand the intersectional nature of Indigenous set of beliefs. Because their faith is not limited to time-set prayers, but rather encompasses every aspect of their daily lives and, more broadly, their connection with nature, forcing and intimidating IPs to refrain from defending their forests suggests a general negligence of their land and religious rights.

As part of the ongoing Southern Cardamom REDD+ carbon offsetting project, the Ministry of Environment and a conservation NGO have forcibly evicted, harassed and pressed criminal charges against the Indigenous Chong people after they foraged, farmed and attempted to access their traditional territories and sacred sites within the newly protected zones ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)). The project encompasses half a million hectares of rainforest, absorbing the land of 29 villages, 11 of which are home to Indigenous communities. While the responsible NGO asserted the benefits of their project to local groups, including the building of wells, toilets, roads and schools, their activities operated for years without the free, prior, and informed consent of the affected communities. By bypassing formal consultation with IPs, the project managers effectively dismissed their actual needs, their ways of living and of professing their spiritual beliefs (*ibid.*).

The absence of IPs' free, prior and informed consent is a common feature of these and other environmental projects and initiatives, complicated by a lack of transparency and of clear standards of implementation:

“A representative from the company travelled to the province and did a presentation to the local authority, including district and commune. But after that, the information was not disseminated to the local community. [...] When I went there and asked the community if they knew about the project they looked like the information was not clear, so they cannot even raise informed concerns to the ministry.” (KII 12)

Since 2024, the Indigenous Bunong community in Mondulakiri province has raised concerns about the encroachment on their rights under the pretense of environmental and energy sustainability ([Keeton-Olsen, 2025](#); [Out, 2026](#)). Following the approval of several wind energy projects, Indigenous lands have been subjected to deforestation and destruction, with disrupting effects on their means of livelihood and other culturally significant sites, including spirit forests and burial grounds ([Sovann and Coby, 2026](#)). Compensation is often determined unilaterally by the responsible company and issued without notice of the interventions on their spiritual land. In another case, between 5,000 and 10,000 IPs and their families were forcibly displaced in line with the implementation of the Lower Sesan II hydroelectric project in Stung Treng Province ([Friel, 2025](#)). Their lands were flooded and compensation was later refused by state authorities ([Khuon, 2025](#)), ultimately leaving the affected communities without any means for their sustenance and disregarding their traditional ecological knowledge and cultural practices ([Manalansan, 2024](#), [Manning and Keo, 2025](#)). A similar project, the Lower Srepok III Dam in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri Provinces, risks producing the same outcomes, with local communities and Indigenous groups fearing forced displacement, unjust resettlement, and loss of their connection to the land ([Coby and Khuon, 2025](#)).

These accounts have highlighted the interconnected nature of FoRB with the land rights and the right to free, prior and informed consent of IPs. As ancestral rituals and activities related to the land are a crucial expression of the cultural and spiritual life of Indigenous People, failing to recognise the consequences of the loss of sacred sites and the erosion of cultural transmission constitutes a violation of their right to freedom of belief. Administrative hurdles and private patronage-client relationships keep Indigenous individuals and families from accessing their lands and obtaining formal recognition of their ownership. Under the guise of economic growth and environmental conservation, several projects have had severe negative consequences, leading to the destruction of Indigenous sacred grounds ([Soeung, 2022](#)). In all

these cases, the authorities have failed to effectively enforce domestic legal frameworks and protect IPs' homes and forests, disregarding their ways of worship and compromising the physical connection to their beliefs.

3.4. FoRB and the 2025 Cambodian-Thai Border Conflict



This section examines transgressions related to FoRB during the 2025 Cambodian-Thai border conflict through three interconnected dimensions. First, the attacks on religious sites, symbols and communities by both parties to the conflict. Second, the manipulation and weaponisation of Buddhism by the Cambodian government and other actors to legitimise and support the war effort. Third, the instrumentalisation of Buddhism to promote anti-Thai hate speech. Altogether the 2025 Cambodian-Thai border conflict, through the use of social media and AI, has transformed religion into a tool of political mobilisation, propaganda and societal polarisation.²¹

Cambodian-Thai Border Dispute

The Cambodian-Thai border dispute dates back decades and centres on a poorly demarcated boundary inherited from French colonial rule, which has fuelled competing territorial claims. A defining feature of the dispute is that several contested areas contain ancient temples from the Khmer Empire, including sites that remain important places of Buddhist worship and national heritage. As a result, competing claims to sovereignty have extended to the control, access, and protection of religious sites, transforming a territorial dispute into one deeply connected to religious identity and cultural heritage. (*Le Monde*, 2025). These temples have consequently become powerful symbols of national legitimacy for both Cambodia and Thailand, further intensifying tensions. Following rising tensions, troop mobilisations, and incidents involving landmines, armed clashes broke out in May 2025, resulting in around fifty deaths and the displacement of approximately 300,000 people (*Wongcha-um*, 2025). A ceasefire was brokered following international mediation in October 2025; however, hostilities resumed in late November 2025, with further escalation in December 2025. A second ceasefire was signed on 27 December 2025 and, at the time of writing in September 2026, remains in place (*Agence France-Presse*, 2025).

²¹ While it is not in the scope of this report, it is important to note that Thailand has also been implicated in FoRB violations (*Deutsche Welle*, 2025; *UNESCO*, 2025).

3.4.1. Religious Sites and Military Intervention

The conflict has generated allegations of military actions by both Cambodian and Thai forces that raise concerns regarding FoRB. For example, Thai media reported that a Cambodian military official carrying a firearm was allegedly disguised as a Buddhist monk while patrolling near the border in January 2025 (ThairathTV, 2025). There are also other reports in Thai media that Cambodian forces used ancient religious and cultural sites along the border for military purposes, including for observation and defence during the conflict (Khaosod English, 2026; The Nation, 2026). Similarly, Cambodian media have reported that Thailand had conducted attacks on the Preah Vihear Temple's area using heavy artillery and aerial strikes (Ky, 2025). On 11 September 2026, Khmer Times reported that Cambodian authorities invited an ASEAN Observer Team to Preah Vihear Temple to assess the range of damages caused by the Thai military (Khmer Times, 2026b). While not explicitly framed along FoRB terms, allegations about each party's "transgressions" have been reported in each country's media prompting the need to approach such reports with caution. Nevertheless, any such conduct that instrumentalises religion for strategic military purposes, if verified, constitutes a violation of FoRB.

However, the debate around FoRB and military action remains unresolved. In December 2025, before the announcement of the ceasefire, Cambodian officials also condemned the Thai army for demolishing a Vishnu statue in a border contested area and replacing it with a Buddha statue (The Straits Times, 2025). The Thai counterpart replied that the action was carried out within the framework of FoRB and to boost the morale among residents and soldiers in the area (Khaosod English, 2026). However, reports by Human Rights Watch and UNESCO have indicated that religious and cultural sites were allegedly used for military purposes during the conflict, demonstrating that state actions undertaken in the name of national security could themselves place religious heritage and sites of worship at risk (Human Rights Watch, 2025; UNESCO, 2025).

Third-party reporting indicates that ancient temples in the disputed border region have historically been used as military positions by both Thai and Cambodian personnel, reflecting their strategic locations for observation and defense (Deutsche Welle, 2025). The militarisation of such sites exposes places of worship and cultural heritage to potential damage during armed conflict and raises concerns about their protected status (UNESCO, 2025). Where religious and cultural heritage sites are used for strategic surveillance or military operations, such use may also conflict with obligations under the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954), risking the undermining of the Convention's protections and exposing places of worship to damage or desecration in the course of military operations (UNESCO, 2025).

The mere presence of soldiers or weapons does not automatically strip a cultural site of its protected status, as Art. 4, para. 2 of the Convention allows exceptions in case of imperative military necessity (Khaosod English, 2026; Long, 2026). Because religious sites, including the Preah Vihear Temple and Ta Moan Thom Temple, are situated directly along the contested border, the rationale of national defense – stationing soldiers to protect territorial sovereignty from foreign encroachment – has been invoked to justify military presence. Reflecting on this, a Cambodian Buddhist monk has informed Asia Centre that:

"[T]he sacredness resides within the temple itself. It can't be destroyed by any kinds of actions, even for the military or other purposes. [...] I criticise the destruction, but when it comes to war I understand you have to use some tactics to defend it. [...] If they [the soldiers] use the temple purely for military purposes it's wrong, but if they just use it to stay and protect it I say it's okay". (KII 13)

The military targeting as well as the use of a sacred place as military cover constitute a violation of international law. At the same time, the use of religious sites by soldiers from both countries has effectively shifted the perceived boundary of what is considered acceptable in times of conflict. The temple as an institution no longer serves primarily as a symbol of spirituality and peace, but rather it becomes a political and military tool to legitimise the regime's power and justify its nationalist agenda (Rattanasengchanh, 2017; In, 2025). The principle of FoRB is therefore directly undermined both by militarisation efforts and strategic framings by authorities, signalling how the respect for religious practices, symbols and sites can be compromised in times of military conflict.

3.4.2. Mobilisation of Buddhist Institutions for Wartime Narratives

The mobilisation of Buddhism during the conflict also illustrates how religious institutions and symbols can be utilised by both sides to reinforce political legitimacy and advance broader wartime objectives. In Cambodia, the government has portrayed itself as a protector of Buddhism and religious communities while also drawing on religious institutions and symbols in support of its political and military objectives. Similar dynamics have been observed in Thailand, indicating that the use of Buddhism in the conflict is not solely a Cambodian phenomenon. In April 2026, Thailand held a highly publicised Buddhist ceremony at the ruins of an ancient temple in disputed territory with Cambodia, using the presence of chanting monks, as well as Thai soldiers and ministry representatives, to project sovereign ownership and solidify its nationalist narrative (The Star, 2026).

In 2025 in Cambodia, during the 33rd Congress of Buddhist Monks in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian-Thai border conflict was presented as evidence that a weakened state would leave Buddhist communities and other religious groups vulnerable to harm (Vibol, 2025a). This framing reinforced the idea that state authority was indispensable for protecting religious institutions and preserving Cambodia's religious identity (Ibid.). While state protection of religious communities is compatible with FoRB obligations, portraying religious security as dependent on state strength risks legitimising increased government control over religious institutions and limiting their autonomy.

Beyond this ideological relationship between Buddhism and state authority, both Cambodia and Thailand have used Buddhist institutions to reinforce political and national narratives during the conflict. In Cambodia, this further illustrates the close relationship between Buddhism, state authority, and national identity during periods of conflict. A clear example occurred on August 14 2025 in Phnom Penh (Sotheary, 2025), when more than two thousand Buddhist monks participated in a march mourning soldiers killed in the border clashes with Thailand and honouring their sacrifice as a noble defense of the nation, ultimately appealing to the other side to seek peaceful coexistence. The political dimension of the event was evident, as participants stopped at the US Embassy to thank the US president for mediating the ceasefire and expressed support for his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Prime Minister Hun Manet (Reuters, 2025; Whitaker, 2025b). Reflecting on the significance of these demonstrations and on the role of Buddhist monks, two informants interviewed by Asia Centre noted the following:

"I think it's also in some way involved with nationalism. They call an end to the conflict for both sides, but even though religion is neutral both sides have their audiences to encourage and make their citizens as part of a national community. [...] They [religious leaders] haven't done much in terms of reaching out to their Thai counterparts, because it might appear getting close to the other side, so it might raise scepticism or raise anger among the people." KII 10

“This [march for peace] is what we can do to heal our people – otherwise in times of war they forget about everything, I mean their hearts become full with the nation. So as monks we try to balance between Buddhism and nationalism. [...] The purpose is to show the world that this is what we [as monks] can do to bring peace to Cambodia. And because we are living under this political power, sometimes we have to show off that this is what we can do to support the government”. (KII 13)

Traditionally, monks faced restrictions and disciplinary measures for engaging in political activities or expressing views perceived as critical of the government (U.S. Department of State, 2023; see Chapter 3, Section 3.1.3). However, when religious authorities who are aligned with the state’s position make explicitly political statements of support during the conflict, they face no consequences (Chuong, 2025). By strategically leveraging the Sangha’s support and molding the boundaries of Buddhist political expression, the government was able to leverage public support, divert attention from criticism of Cambodia’s own military conduct, and reinforce the portrayal of itself as the defender of Buddhism, national sovereignty, and the Cambodian population. Against this backdrop, one informant opined that the monastic order should be made independent from political interference, so that monks could participate in conflict resolution by extending their hand in a credible and non-partisan way (KII 5).

In Cambodia, the words and actions of monks are not the expression of an independent, neutral, third-party power who could effectively stand as a mediator of the conflict, but rather they represent the consequences of decades of political alignment with the state apparatus. Compounding this, the rigid hierarchical structure of the monastic order makes it exceptionally difficult for lower monks to question authority or strongly criticise the one-sided discourse trickling down from above without serious risks for their livelihood. A similar picture can be drawn for the Thai counterpart, where centralised and strictly hierarchical networks ensure control and promotion of state-sanctioned values (Kulabkaew, 2019; Bangkok Post, 2026). As a result, this prevents the development of a genuine, sustained, monk-led alternative of peace dialogue where the two countries’ monastic orders could position themselves as a unified mediating voice and create a solid base for longstanding cooperation and social bases free of vitriol.

3.4.3. Use of Religiously-Framed Hate Speech

Thirdly, both governments have failed to take adequate measures to prevent the proliferation of reciprocal anti-Thai and anti-Cambodian hate speech increasingly framed through religious and nationalist narratives.

In Cambodia, the absence of effective government counter-messaging against hate speech has allowed nationalist factions, state-aligned media, and some radical monks to weaponise Buddhist concepts, contributing to delegitimising Thai identity, and invoking divine punishment (Chutintaranond and Yurayong, 2026). This inaction against hate speech reflects the government’s failure to fulfill its FoRB obligations under Articles 43 and 31 of the Constitution (1993). In Thailand, online discourses promote a sense of national superiority by demeaning Cambodians, their culture and their identity (Ratcliffe and Siradapuvadol, 2025; Kitbamrung, 2026). Yet again, there is no concerted action on the part of the Thai government to address this issue. Both countries, fueled by a surge in Buddhist-nationalistic sentiment, have systematically exposed their societies to hate speech amplified through online media platforms

(Tonsakulrungruang, 2021; Bangkok Post, 2026). This has ultimately reduced social cohesion between both countries, spiralling into waves of hostility that go beyond the border conflict (Nop, 2025; *ibid.*).

In Cambodia specifically, the most severe instance of religiously framed hostility during the conflict occurred in July 2025, when Cambodian spiritualists and shamans shared a video depicting an elaborate ritual that included chants calling for the death of Thai General Boonsin and the burning of his photograph (Tangprasert, 2025). Although the Cambodian government has historically sought to regulate and restrict certain forms of shamanic and spiritual practice (U.S. Department of State, 2023), its failure to prevent or condemn this incident raises concerns regarding the selective enforcement of religious regulation and the tolerance of religious narratives when they serve nationalist objectives. The video targeting Gen. Boonsin raises significant concerns regarding incitement to violence when assessed against the framework of the Rabat Plan of Action, a UN framework for evaluating incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence (OHCHR, 2013a). Disseminated by religious actors during an active armed conflict, the video explicitly called for the death of a named individual, reached a broad online audience, and contributed to the spread of false rumours about his death.

More broadly, political actors and online communities have occasionally co-opted shared religious concepts to frame geopolitical grievances in moral terms. For example, amplified by Cambodian information operations (IO), in January 2026 netizens invoked the concept of karma when commenting on a Thai train accident (Cambodianess, 2026). By portraying the tragedy as a form of divine retribution, they claimed that Thai citizens deserve their misfortune due to the country's foreign policy. This contemporary rhetoric taps into established political precedents. During a 2010 visit to the Ta Muen Thom Temple, former prime minister Hun Sen directed a similar karmic curse at Thai leadership, accusing their invasion of Cambodian territory and disregard for their religious commitment as a Buddhist nation (Rattanasengchanh, 2017). These historical appeals highlight deep-seated sentiments that primed the public to view their neighbours as inherent adversaries even before the border clashes flared up in 2025 (Sotheary, 2026). Today, this pre-existing animosity provides fertile ground for misinformation, allowing online networks and social media platforms to quickly amplify nationalism under the guise of religious and cultural righteousness. Such narratives expose the weaponisation of religious beliefs to belittle the counterpart, legitimise hostility, and intensify nationalist sentiment, thereby reinforcing patterns of religious intolerance and undermining the principles of FoRB.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the conflict has not only produced direct violations of FoRB through attacks on religious sites and the militarisation of cultural heritage but also enabled the political instrumentalisation of Buddhism and the proliferation of religiously framed hate speech. At societal level, online platforms have become echo chambers that amplify hostile rhetoric and calcify unilateral beliefs on national hierarchy, significantly broadening the number of areas of contention to delegitimise the counterpart's identity. Rather than serving as a source of protection and reconciliation, religion has become a mechanism for legitimising state action, mobilising public support, and deepening hostility between the Cambodian and Thai populations.

4. Recommendations

Building upon the legal and administrative gaps, and political and social challenges identified in the preceding chapters, this section outlines targeted recommendations to bridge the divide between Cambodia's formal human rights commitments and the lived realities of its diverse religious communities. It offers a practical framework for the United Nations, government agencies, international NGOs, CSOs, independent media and faith-based organisations to address systemic inequities and advance a more inclusive environment for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).



The United Nations should:

- **Mainstream FoRB Intersectionality:** Make explicit the intersection of FoRB issues with other human rights abuses in UN monitoring processes. Ensure that broader categories of land, ethnic, or civic space violations are documented recognising the intersectionality with their impacts on religious freedom.
- **Prioritise FoRB in Review Cycles:** Prioritise the inclusion of targeted questions on FoRB during future Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycles and treaty body reviews (e.g., ICCPR, ICERD) to move beyond official government narratives of “harmony” and address systemic discrimination.
- **Strengthen Local Stakeholder Engagement:** Strengthen direct engagement with diverse local stakeholders, including religious minorities, Indigenous communities, and independent civil society, to gain evidence-based insights into the practical challenges facing religious freedom.
- **Monitor Legislative and Policy Alignment:** Actively monitor and review any policy, draft law or bureaucratic directives, advocating for alignment with international human rights standards to prevent its use as an instrument for state control over the autonomy of religious institutions.

The Government should:

- **Guarantee Institutional Autonomy:** Guarantee the autonomy of the Sangha and other religious institutions by depoliticising religious leadership appointments and ending the integration of senior religious leaders into state-aligned political structures.
- **Equalise Legal Protections:** Extend statutory property safeguards to non-Buddhist religious property and amend the Criminal Code to ensure even and equitable application across all religions, rather than reserving specialised criminal protections primarily for Buddhism.

- **Revise Draft Religious Legislation:** Before enactment, revise the draft Law on Religion to remove provisions that restrict the political and civic agency of religious actors, ensuring any new legislation strictly complies with international human rights standards, specifically Article 18 of the ICCPR.
- **Standardise Administrative Procedures:** Standardise registration and permit procedures for religious organisations and places of worship to remove the bureaucratic hurdles and discriminatory practices currently faced by minority communities.
- **Promote Inclusive Education:** Update the national educational curriculum to be representative of Cambodia's diverse ethno-religious landscape, incorporating accurate and comprehensive information on minority religious and Indigenous spiritual traditions to foster inter-religious understanding. Strengthen the implementation of multilingual education programmes by actively funding specialised courses and teachers' capacity building.
- **Secure Indigenous Land Rights:** Accelerate the communal land titling process for Indigenous Peoples and explicitly include protections for sacred sites and ancestral forests within national environmental and land development regulations to prevent their destruction by economic concessions.
- **Monitor Hate Speech:** Establish clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms to prevent the use of religiously-framed hate speech by political actors and state officials, particularly during periods of geopolitical tension or conflict.
- **Protect Expression of Religious Groups:** Uphold constitutional and international guarantees of religious freedom by maintaining state neutrality in religious affairs, ensuring a safe environment free from interference, where faith-based groups can exercise their beliefs without fear or being compelled to align with ruling party interests.
- **Ensure Inclusive Spaces of Dialogue:** Re-orient state convening of highly centralised, state-orchestrated interreligious events to actionable interfaith consultations at the local level that go beyond a symbolic exercise of religious harmony to meaningfully address practical rights-based concerns of religious minorities.

INGOs and Development Partners should:

- **Support Localised Documentation:** Provide resources and technical support for local civil society organisations to systematically document FoRB violations, specifically focusing on administrative and bureaucratic barriers that remain under-reported in international indices.
- **Implement Rigorous Impact Assessments:** Ensure that all supported development projects, particularly those involving land concessions or infrastructure development, include rigorous human rights impact assessments that specifically evaluate potential harm to religious sites and Indigenous sacred areas.
- **Integrate FoRB into Broader Advocacy:** Integrate FoRB into broader human rights, land rights, and civic space initiatives to address the specific vulnerabilities of religious minorities and Indigenous Peoples, acknowledging that religious freedom is often obscured by other rights issues.

- **Advocate for Administrative Reform:** Utilise development partnerships to advocate for transparent, non-discriminatory registration procedures for all religious institutions and the removal of discriminatory administrative barriers in national law.
- **Facilitate Inclusive Dialogue:** Facilitate platforms for dialogue that bring together religious leaders from diverse communities, civil society, and policymakers to discuss FoRB-related grievances and promote inclusive governance

CSOs should:

- **Integrate FoRB into Intersectional Advocacy:** Expand advocacy networks to bridge the divide between human rights, environmental, and land-rights organisations. Ensure that FoRB is explicitly highlighted in reports concerning Indigenous land rights, civic space restrictions, and citizenship documentation.
- **Strengthen Engagement with International Mechanisms:** Move beyond general monitoring by producing dedicated “shadow reports” for UN treaty bodies and Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycles that specifically analyse the intersectionality of FoRB with broader human rights violations.
- **Strategic Legal and Policy Engagement:** Actively monitor and provide expert consultation on any proposed “Law on Religion”. CSOs should collaborate to advocate for transparency in the drafting process and ensure the final text aligns with international human rights standards, pushing back against vague terminology that allows for discretionary enforcement.
- **Community-Led Documentation of Administrative Barriers:** Develop protocols for minority communities to systematically document and report discriminatory permit procedures, unequal access to public education, and obstacles to religious registration. This evidence can be used to challenge the government’s narrative that “no cases of religious discrimination” exist.
- **Counter-Narrative and Media Literacy Initiatives:** Collaborate with independent media to promote pluralism and combat religiously-framed hate speech. Develop training for journalists on how to report ethically on religious discrimination without inflaming sectarian or nationalist tensions.
- **Support for Monastic Autonomy:** Develop specific outreach and support networks for rank-and-file monks and monastic communities seeking to maintain their role as independent moral authorities, including providing legal and logistical support to protect them from intimidation and politically motivated charges.
- **Protect Indigenous Sacred Sites:** Shift from general awareness to specific legal support for Indigenous communities to secure Communal Land Titles (CLTs). Frame the protection of ancestral forests and sacred sites as a fundamental FoRB issue—rather than solely an environmental or development concern.

Independent Media should:

- **Enhance Journalistic Capacity:** Support capacity-building programs for journalists to enhance their ability to critically report on FoRB issues, enabling them to move beyond superficial narratives and investigate structural or bureaucratic discrimination, as well as religiously framed commentaries and narratives online.

- **Establish Independent Monitoring Platforms:** Establish an independent platform for monitoring and documenting FoRB violations, allowing media and civil society to safely share evidence of under-reported cases.
- **Advocate for Media Safety:** Advocate for the safety and protection of media workers covering sensitive issues where religious rights intersect with land disputes and political marginalisation.
- **Foster Collaborative Investigative Reporting:** Encourage collaborative, cross-border, and inter-media investigative reporting to raise international awareness of Cambodia's FoRB challenges and counter the prevailing state-centric narrative of "religious harmony".
- **Engage Tech Companies:** Strengthen journalists' training on the propagation of algorithm-facilitated hate speech online by engaging with tech companies and platforms to monitor, address and avoid the amplification of trends of digital harassment against vulnerable groups.

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) should:

- **Foster Inter-religious Solidarity:** Proactively establish local inter-faith networks that include Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Indigenous spiritual leaders and others. These networks should move beyond ceremonial dialogue to collaboratively monitor and challenge discriminatory administrative policies and advocate for collective human rights protection.
- **Establish Mechanisms for Institutional Autonomy:** Develop and implement internal charters and governance frameworks that safeguard religious institutions from political co-option. This includes clear guidelines for leadership on maintaining independence from political parties, especially when faced with state pressure to mobilise religious platforms for government narratives or wartime objectives.
- **Advocate for Indigenous Land Rights:** Recognise that the protection of ancestral forests and sacred sites is a fundamental component of religious freedom. FBOs should provide explicit public and legal support for Indigenous communities to secure Communal Land Titles and resist the destruction of sites by economic land concessions.
- **Counter Religiously-Framed Hate Speech:** Take public and collective stances against the weaponisation of religious narratives. FBOs should develop training for their own communities on media literacy and conflict sensitivity, ensuring that religious rhetoric is not used to dehumanise others during political or border tensions.
- **Strengthen Accountability and Transparency:** Implement transparent internal governance and financial reporting mechanisms. Increased accountability is essential to ensuring religious institutions serve their congregations rather than operating as opaque extensions of the state.
- **Expand Humanitarian Advocacy:** Transition from providing solely humanitarian or charitable services to incorporating human rights advocacy. FBOs are uniquely positioned to highlight the intersection of FoRB with broader civic space issues, such as the right to assembly and freedom of expression, on behalf of their communities.

5. Conclusion

Freedom to worship is guaranteed under Cambodia's Constitution, and there is evidence of protections against some forms of religious discrimination in national laws. These domestic provisions are further complemented by the country's responsibilities under key international human rights treaties. However, this report has gone beyond the legal aspects and obligations to unpack the complexity of FoRB issues as experienced on the ground.

Four main observations are relevant in the Cambodian case.

First, the reliance on international rankings as a testament for religious freedom in Cambodia has cultivated a flawed narrative of harmony. Observers frequently mistake the absence of overt, violent religious hostilities for genuine equity, assuming that the mere existence of anti-discrimination laws fulfills the state's obligations to its diverse faith communities. Surface-level interpretations highlight a profound absence of critical fluency and willingness in discussing FoRB issues. True assessments on religious pluralism must embrace all dimensions of the human experience connected to specific political, cultural and social contexts. Analysis cannot be carried out by disregarding the absence of autonomy surrounding religious institutions, the exercise of state "persuasion" to align faith with politics, and the structural inequality and mistreatment experienced by religious minorities. By reducing the status of religious freedom in Cambodia to the absence of overt-conflict, both domestic and international actors fail to scrutinise the legal, bureaucratic, political, and social mechanisms that quietly suppress religious agency.

Second, beneath this facade of institutional harmony lies a pervasive culture of silence, reluctance and fear. This atmosphere is not accidental, it is actively shaped by a broader, rights-limiting environment that fundamentally constrains how FoRB is exercised or even discussed on a daily basis. The chilling effect is perhaps most visible within the Buddhist Sangha: monks who might otherwise act as moral advocates for social justice are acutely aware of the material and institutional risks of dissenting from state expectations and oversight. This dynamic allows the government to leverage the moral authority and administrative structures of religion to manufacture its political legitimacy and neutralise dissent. Within this sophisticated architecture of control, religious identity is heavily regulated and strategically mobilised by political elites, especially during periods of crisis as evidenced by the renewed Cambodian-Thai border tensions in 2025. Spiritual authority is conditionally tolerated, provided it does not challenge the political status quo. This leaves Buddhism with no real autonomy in the country.

Third, systemic oppression is obscured by the fragmented nature of international human rights reporting. When rights abuses are brought before global mechanisms, submissions tend to remain fundamentally incomplete because they fail to capture the interconnectedness of FoRB with other pressing human rights violations. The systemic discrimination against minority groups, the deliberate erosion of civic space, and the rampant violations of land rights are routinely documented in isolation. Yet, when an economic concession erases an Indigenous community's sacred ancestral forest, it is not simply an environmental or economic dispute, but a profound assault on their right to FoRB. By decoupling these issues, the international community inadvertently sanitises the full spectrum of religious repression, failing to hold the state accountable for the interconnected ways it undermines the spiritual and cultural survival of its people.

Fourth, because there is a systemic lack at the domestic level of literacy on religious freedom and critical fluency regarding what actually constitutes a FoRB violation, these complex issues are prevalently put into a blind spot. Without the conceptual tools to link land dispossession, bureaucratic discrimination, minority intolerance, and monastic suppression back to the fundamental right of

religious freedom, civil society and independent media struggle to bring these discourses to the fore. These actors are traditional amplifiers of marginalised voices; however, their impact is blunted when they lack appropriate frameworks to recognise FoRB in its everyday manifestations. As a consequence, FoRB remains chronically under-discussed, overshadowed by official, symbolic ceremonies and conventional civil and political rights debates, and suppressed by fear.

Rectifying this imbalance is essential for bringing genuine clarity to the state of religious freedom in Cambodia. The deterioration of FoRB may not yet be reflected in overt incidents or large-scale violence; however, the growing normalisation of exclusionary practices and subtle forms of discrimination should be recognised as revealing signs. Acknowledging Cambodia's current FoRB environment demands a critical shift that recognises how political oversight, administrative discrepancies, silence and fear, and intersectional discrimination systematically erode religious wellbeing. With reference to the recommendations outlined in Chapter 4, by improving comprehensive reporting and cultivating deeper understanding of these complex dynamics, civil society, media, and international observers can begin to hold power to actively challenge superficial readings of harmony to demand a landscape where religious freedom is genuinely, structurally, and unequivocally realised.

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Annexe

Interview code.	Background	Date of Interview
KII 1	Member of an IP community and representative of a CSO working with IPs	16 December 2024
KII 2	Buddhist monk	16 December 2024
KII 3	Buddhist monk	16 December 2024
KII 4	Leader from a Christian community	17 December 2024
KII 5	Buddhist monk	17 December 2024
KII 6	Leader from a Muslim community	18 December 2024
KII 7	Member of an IP community and representative of a CSO working with IPs	19 December 2024
KII 8	Human rights lawyer	25 December 2024
KII 9	Muslim representative of a CSO working with IPs and religious minorities	8 September 2026
KII 10	Buddhist media representative	9 September 2026
KII 11	Representative of a CSO working with Christian groups and pastors	10 September 2026
KII 12	Legal representative of a CSO working with IPs	14 September 2026
KII 13	Buddhist monk	14 September 2026
KII 14	Leader from a Christian community	21 September 2026



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