



**NGO: EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR LAW AND JUSTICE (ECLJ)**

**UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW  
49<sup>TH</sup> SESSION**

**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC  
FOR THE 49<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE  
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

*www.ECLJ.org*  
*4, quai Koch*  
*67000 Strasbourg, France*  
*Phone: +33 (0)3.88.24.94.40*

## Status of Human Rights in Laos for the 49<sup>th</sup> Session of the Universal Periodic Review

### Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos) for the 49th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

### Background

2. Laos is a country located in Southeast Asia and has a population of approximately 7.6 million people.<sup>1</sup> The population is predominantly Buddhist, with 64.7% of the population identifying as Buddhist, 31.4% belonging to no religion, 1.7% identifying as Christian, and 2.1% belonging to other religions.<sup>2</sup> In its 2024 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Laos as the 21st worst country for Christians.<sup>3</sup>

3. Laos’ last review was held on January 21, 2020.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the review, Laos received 226 recommendations, 160 of which it supported.<sup>5</sup> It was recommended by the Solomon Islands, and supported by Laos, that the government “[r]eview and amend Decree No. 315 to ensure that administrative procedures for religious groups are not arbitrary, vague and discriminatory, and to eliminate the wide latitude local officials have to discriminate against and persecute religious minorities.”<sup>6</sup> It was also recommended by Mexico, and supported by Laos, that the government:

Take the necessary measures to prevent and combat discrimination and persecution against ethnic and religious minorities, and to guarantee their right to freedom of expression and conscience, as well as their access to health care, education and an adequate standard of living.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Milton Edgeworth Osborne & Josef Silberstein, *Laos*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Laos> (Oct. 8, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Chara Scroope, *Lao Culture*, CULTURAL ATLAS (2018), <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/lao-culture/lao-culture-religion>.

<sup>3</sup> *Laos*, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/laos/> (last visited Oct. 9, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> *Universal Periodic Review – Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/la-index> (last visited Oct. 9, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> *Infographic – Lao DPR*, OHCHR, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session35/LA/lao-pdr\\_51340696.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session35/LA/lao-pdr_51340696.pdf) (last visited Oct. 9, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> OHCHR, UPR of Lao People’s Democratic Republic (3rd Cycle – 35th Session), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session35/LA/Thematic-List-Recommendations.docx> (last visited Oct. 9, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

## Legal Framework

4. Under Article 9 of the Constitution of Laos:

The State respects and protects all lawful activities of Buddhists and of followers of other religions, [and] mobilizes and encourages Buddhist monks and novices as well as the priests of other religions to participate in activities that are beneficial to the country and people. All acts creating division between religions and classes of people are prohibited.<sup>8</sup>

5. Article 43 of the Laos Constitution states, “[l]ao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions which are not contrary to the laws.”<sup>9</sup>

6. In 2016, the government passed a new religion bill, Decree 315, which severely curtailed religious freedom, particularly for religious minorities.<sup>10</sup> This new law grants power to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) to prohibit religious activities that are contrary to “policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations” or that are viewed as “threatening national stability, peace, and social order . . . or affecting national solidarity or unity between tribes and religions.”<sup>11</sup> Further, this law requires that all religious groups register with MOHA and own 5,000 square meters of land to construct a place of worship.<sup>12</sup> This law also prohibits individuals from gathering together to carry out religious activity outside of a registered place of worship, effectively banning house churches.<sup>13</sup>

7. Moreover, under Article 118 of the Penal Code of Laos:

Any person dividing or causing resentment between ethnic groups, social strata and religion with the intention of undermining national solidarity shall be punished by one year to five years of imprisonment and shall be fined from 5.000,000 kip to 20,000.000 kip.<sup>14</sup>

8. Additionally, Laos is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).<sup>15</sup> Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in

---

<sup>8</sup> CONSTITUTION OF LAOS 1991 (rev. 2015) art. 9, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Laos\\_2015](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Laos_2015).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* art. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Communist Laos Makes Evangelism Difficult*, INT’L CHRISTIAN CONCERN (Dec. 10, 2019), <https://www.persecution.org/2019/12/10/communist-laos-makes-evangelism-difficult/>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Where the Laws Don’t Apply: Rural Christian Communities in Laos and Mexico Face Similar Challenges*, FORB IN FULL (July 23, 2024), <https://forbinfull.org/2024/07/23/where-the-laws-dont-apply-rural-christian-communities-in-laos-and-mexico-face-similar-challenges/> [hereinafter *Where the Laws Don’t Apply*].

<sup>13</sup> *Partner With Local Missionaries in Laos*, CHRISTIAN AID MISSION, <https://www.christianaid.org/laos> (last visited Oct. 9, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> PENAL CODE OF LAOS art. 118, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/lao208931.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ratification Status for Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, OHCHR, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=94&Lang=EN](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=94&Lang=EN) (last visited Oct. 9, 2024).

public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.<sup>16</sup>

9. However, Laos has a reservation to this Article:

The Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic declares that Article 18 of the Covenant shall not be construed as authorizing or encouraging any activities, including economic means, by anyone which directly or indirectly, coerce or compel an individual to believe or not to believe in a religion or to convert his or her religion or belief. The Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic considers that all acts creating division and discrimination among ethnic groups and among religions are incompatible with Article 18 of the Covenant.<sup>17</sup>

10. Moreover, Article 27 of the ICCPR enshrines protections for religious minorities. Under Article 27 of the ICCPR:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.<sup>18</sup>

## Religious Persecution

11. In recent years, there has been an increase in violence perpetrated against Christians in Laos.<sup>19</sup> Christians have been kicked out of their communities and have had their homes destroyed.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, authorities monitor religious activities and have closed down churches that are not legally registered.<sup>21</sup> Further, Christians have been arbitrarily arrested for peacefully practicing their faith over accusations of “dividing or causing resentment between ethnic groups.”<sup>22</sup> This is especially true in rural regions of Laos where village leaders oppose the sharing of Christian faith. As one official explained:

We do not forbid them to believe Christianity, but some of Christian believers use Christianity in the wrong way against the rules and regulations of villages [...] For example, when they convert to Christianity, they do not participate in

---

<sup>16</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

<sup>17</sup> *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, OHCHR, [https://treaties.un.org/PAGES/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=\\_en&mtdsg\\_no=IV-4&src=TREATY#EndDec](https://treaties.un.org/PAGES/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=_en&mtdsg_no=IV-4&src=TREATY#EndDec) (Sept. 10, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> ICCPR art. 27, *supra* note 16.

<sup>19</sup> Laos, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/laos/>.

<sup>20</sup> OPEN DOORS, LAOS: FULL COUNTRY DOSSIER 36 (2024), [https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Laos-Full\\_Country\\_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf](https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Laos-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 24.

<sup>22</sup> PENAL CODE OF LAOS art. 118, *supra* note 14.

ethnic festivals or ceremonies and they spread Christianity to other communities.<sup>23</sup>

12. Laos' laws require that all churches register with the MOHA to operate legally.<sup>24</sup> However, the MOHA is often slow to respond to registration requests, and it can arbitrarily approve and revoke registration status.<sup>25</sup> Further, the MOHA requires religious organizations to own at least 5,000 square meters of land in order to build a place of worship.<sup>26</sup> This is an enormous burden for religious minorities, especially in more rural areas where the sizes of congregations are small. As a result of this, an estimated 75% of all registered Lao Evangelical Church congregations are forced to gather in house churches since religious activity is only permitted in approved religious buildings.<sup>27</sup>

13. Christians in more rural regions of Laos face extreme persecution and have their rights diminished because of local MOHA offices who have the power to oversee religious activity.<sup>28</sup> These local offices have the authority to stop religious activity that is contrary to the particular region's customs, traditions, and norms.<sup>29</sup> The authorities in these regions are quick to stop any perceived "spread of Christianity." In these remote regions, poor government infrastructure also leads to village leaders targeting Christians with impunity.<sup>30</sup> One Christian shared that, "[a]t the district and provincial levels, our party and government allow us to believe or not to believe in any religion. But at the village level, it is the opposite."<sup>31</sup>

14. Below, we have highlighted just a fraction of the stories of Christians being arrested, harassed, attacked, and kicked out of their villages.

15. In July 2024, a Christian pastor was shot and killed in his home by two masked men.<sup>32</sup> The pastor was active in participating in church activities in Oudomxay province.<sup>33</sup>

16. On June 22, 2024, authorities arrested six Christians who were participating in a prayer gathering at a pastor's house in Tahae Village, Khammouane Province.<sup>34</sup> The Christians were arrested as part of the village chief's efforts to stop the "spread of Christianity" in his village.<sup>35</sup>

17. On February 4, 2024, village authorities and residents in Kaleum Vangke village in Savannakhet Province's Xonboury District destroyed a house where Christians had been

---

<sup>23</sup> *Christian Families in Laos Driven from Their Village*, RADIO FREE ASIA (Feb. 10, 2023), <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/christians-02102023141433.html>.

<sup>24</sup> *Where the Laws Don't Apply*, *supra* note 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Laos*, *supra* note 3.

<sup>28</sup> OPEN DOORS, LAOS: FULL COUNTRY DOSSIER 40 (2024), *supra* note 20.

<sup>29</sup> PENAL CODE OF LAOS art. 118, *supra* note 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Where the Laws Don't Apply*, *supra* note 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Bible Burning, Church Destruction Dismay Lao Christians*, UCA NEWS (Feb. 7, 2024), <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bible-burning-church-destruction-dismay-lao-christians/104082>.

<sup>32</sup> *Lao Christian Pastor Shot Dead in Home by Masked Men*, RADIO FREE ASIA (July 25, 2024), <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/christian-pastor-shot-dead-home-masked-men-07252024174052.html>.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Six Lao Christians Arrested at Prayer Meeting*, INT'L CHRISTIAN CONCERN (July 1, 2024), <https://www.persecution.org/2024/07/01/six-lao-christians-arrested-at-prayer-meeting/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

gathering to pray on Sundays.<sup>36</sup> According to one Christian, this was done “because they did not want us to worship God.”<sup>37</sup>

18. On October 1, 2023, the village deputy chief and local security officials in Savannakhet Province’s Khampou Village, Assaphone District, disrupted a Sunday church service and ordered the service to be stopped.<sup>38</sup> The authorities threatened to arrest and fine the Christians if they did not stop holding church services.<sup>39</sup>

19. In 2023, three Christians were arrested for constructing a church.<sup>40</sup> For several months, the Christians were detained, and authorities did not provide any information to their family or friends.<sup>41</sup>

20. In September 2023, local authorities across three different villages in Saravan Province’s Samoey District destroyed ten homes belonging to Christian families.<sup>42</sup> In one of the villages, authorities gave the Christians land to rebuild their homes, but the land was separated from the village.<sup>43</sup> Even then, the Christians received threats from the villagers and were harassed.<sup>44</sup> One Christian shared, “[t]hey don’t want us to live with them.”<sup>45</sup>

21. In February 2023, villagers in northwestern Laos drove out fifteen Christian families because they were Christian.<sup>46</sup> The village contained many members of the Ahka minority, who practice their own spiritual beliefs.<sup>47</sup> When they learned that these families had converted to Christianity, they joined together to drive them out of the village.<sup>48</sup>

22. On January 29, 2023, a mob of angry villagers in the south-central region of Laos damaged the homes of Christians because they refused to renounce their faith.<sup>49</sup>

23. On February 9, 2023, a Christian family’s home was burned down.<sup>50</sup> The villagers attacked the Christian family because they were angry that they followed a “foreign religion.”<sup>51</sup>

24. As demonstrated by the examples shared above, Laos is failing to protect religious freedom for all its citizens. During its last UPR, Laos supported a recommendation to “combat discrimination and persecution against ethnic and religious minorities, and to guarantee their right to freedom of expression and conscience.” Clearly, Laos has taken no steps to ensure that its Christian citizens’ lives and freedom of religion are protected.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Lao House Church Reopens After Being Attacked*, RADIO FREE ASIA (Feb. 29, 2024), <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/church-02292024160116.html>.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Local Officials in Laos Stop Worship, Expel Christians*, MORNING STAR NEWS (Oct. 3, 2023), <https://morningstarnews.org/2023/10/local-officials-in-laos-stop-worship-expel-christians/>.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Tribal Christians Imprisoned for Building Church*, THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS (Apr. 18, 2024), <https://www.persecution.com/stories/tribal-christians-imprisoned-for-building-church/>.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Christian Families’ Homes Destroyed in Southern Laos*, RADIO FREE ASIA (Nov. 30, 2023), <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/christian-homes-destroyed-11302023151856.html>.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Christian Families in Laos Driven from Their Village*, *supra* note 23.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> LAOS: FULL COUNTRY DOSSIER 7 (2024), *supra* note 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

## **Recommendations**

25. Laos must immediately reform its laws and practices that target Christians and prevent them from being able to peacefully practice their religion according to the tenets of their faith. It must also focus on educating village authorities on religious liberty issues and make sure the villages are complying with the laws and protecting this fundamental human right. Laos must remove its reservation to Article 18 of the ICCPR, which enshrines that everyone has the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” and that this includes the right for everyone to “individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.” Laos must ensure that no one is arrested, attacked, or forced from his home because of his faith.