



# Foreign & Commonwealth Office

## Research Analysts paper

### Southeast Asia – Freedom of Religion and Belief

#### KEY POINTS

- **Southeast Asia has marked religious diversity.** Respect for freedom of religion and belief varies considerably across the region and whilst there are long traditions of plural societies there are also signs of increased intolerance.
- **Research suggests over half of Southeast Asia's population face restrictions on their freedom of religion or belief,** notably in the more populous **Burma and Indonesia.** The situation is most positive in Cambodia, Timor-Leste and the Philippines.
- Underlying **historical grievances** sometimes exacerbate ethnic/religious tensions and the region's emphasis on **social order and minorities' conforming to the norms of the majority** can help drive intolerance. This is compounded by weak legal frameworks and law enforcement; as well as international and local power struggles.
- Whilst Christians and other minorities face real challenges in Indonesia and Malaysia **those most at risk of violent persecution are often non-Sunni Muslim groups** (particularly Shi'a and Ahmadiyah). **This trend looks set to continue** in the absence of concerted government and societal efforts to tackle it.
- **Muslims in Burma are also likely to face continued discrimination and** this carries some risk of fuelling wider Buddhist/Muslim tensions in the region and beyond.

#### DETAIL

1. Southeast Asia is characterised by marked religious diversity. It contains: the world's largest Muslim country (Indonesia); major centres of Theravada Buddhism (Thailand & Burma); predominantly Catholic Timor-Leste and the Philippines; countries with significant minorities of many of the major faith groups, as well as those with traditional beliefs. Respect for freedom of religion and belief varies widely across the region and whilst there are long traditions of plural societies there are also signs of increased intolerance.
2. The significant diversity is a product of the region's location, straddling major historical trading routes. Successive waves of Indian, Arab, and Chinese traders created dynamic

coastal towns where different religions intermingled and co-existed. The colonial period saw a marked uptick in migration into the region; most strikingly by millions of Chinese labourers, but also South Asians from British India who moved into Burma as well as going to work in Malaya's copper mines and rubber plantations.

3. Sweeping powers under colonial era legislation kept a lid on any simmering resentment between local communities and the migrants but race relations have continued to pre-occupy a number of independent governments; most notably Malaysia and Singapore.

### **Southeast Asia on the global scale**

4. 2013 Pew Research<sup>1</sup> analysis points very clearly to the Middle East as having the highest average levels of government restrictions<sup>2</sup> and social hostilities<sup>3</sup> involving religion. Asia Pacific is notable for higher levels of government restrictions than the global average but social hostilities were relatively lower, tracking close to European levels.
5. But the picture in Southeast Asia is less positive. In 2007 the median score on the government restrictions ranking was 4.8, higher even than in the Middle East-North Africa. By 2013 this had deteriorated to 5.3, although it had been overtaken by the Middle East-North Africa on 6.0. On the social hostility rankings Southeast Asia was also significantly worse than the Asia Pacific average; scoring 2.9 in 2007 and rising to 3.6 in 2013. This mirrors the global picture of tightening restrictions on freedom of religion and belief but Southeast Asia stands out clearly in the Asia Pacific region for having relatively poor scores.
6. Pew Research<sup>4</sup> looking at the world's 25 most populous countries (which contain 75% of the world's population) identified **Burma**, Egypt, **Indonesia**, Pakistan and Russia as having the greatest restrictions on religion when both government restrictions and social hostilities were taken into account. This research suggests that over half the population of Southeast Asia (>300 million people) are living with marked restrictions on their freedom of religion or belief. More positively Cambodia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste have stronger track records in this regard.

### **The individual stories**

7. Southeast Asia includes countries with globally high levels of religious diversity; such as Vietnam and Singapore; others have some of the lowest rates, including Timor-Leste. In general the mainland north of the region is predominantly Buddhist (but with animist/traditional beliefs also prevalent in the upland/inland areas) and the maritime south mostly Muslim or Christian, but it is a complex picture.
8. Many religious minorities in Southeast Asian countries face restrictions on their freedom of religion or belief. These problems are often exacerbated where religious and ethnic identities overlap.
9. **Laos and Vietnam** recognise the right to freedom of religion but they also seek to define and regulate what constitutes 'normal' religious practice. Ethnic minorities, particularly

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

<sup>2</sup> **GRI** = Government Restrictions Index; based on 20 indicators of ways that national and local governments restrict religion, including through coercion and force.

<sup>3</sup> **SRI** = Social Hostilities Index; based on 13 indicators of ways in which private individuals and social groups infringe on religious beliefs and practices, including religiously biased crimes, mob violence and efforts to stop particular religious groups from growing or operating.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/restrictions-and-hostilities-in-the-most-populous-countries-2013/>

Christian groups continue to face discrimination and government restrictions remain high, relative to social hostility. But the general picture is of slow improvements.

10. In **Brunei** the official religion is the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. Whilst the constitution states that other religions may be practiced, in reality restrictions limit their activities and some groups considered to be 'deviant' are banned. The introduction of a sharia penal code, in phases from 1 May 2014, has further curtailed freedom of religion and belief in Brunei.
11. **Indonesia and Malaysia** are often held up as examples of modern and moderate majority Muslim states with long traditions of tolerance and diversity. But there are signs that a more rigid interpretation of Islamic orthodoxy is exerting greater influence, particularly in Malaysia.
12. Pew Research<sup>5</sup> analysis suggests **Indonesia** now has the highest levels of government restrictions and social hostility of all in Southeast Asia, with government restrictions tightening further since 2007. This impacts on 40% of the population of Southeast Asia (>250,000 people). Whilst the constitution remains secular there are only six officially recognised religions, blasphemy is illegal and atheism is considered a criminal offence. The last decade has seen erosions of freedom of religion and belief with new legislation and restrictions on minorities creating the space for, sometimes violent, discrimination. Attacks on Shi'a and other non-Sunni Muslims have increased. Some Christian groups also face discrimination. The government, which came to power in 2014, has committed to enact new legislation to protect religious freedom.
13. In **Malaysia** the constitution protects freedom of religion but defines ethnic Malays (around 50% of the population) as (Sunni) Muslim, the official national religion. Government policies promote Sunni Islam and other forms of Islam, such as Shi'a and Ahmadiyah, are considered 'deviant'. Their followers face restrictions on religious assembly and worship and in 2014 over 100 people were arrested for allegedly celebrating a Shi'a festival in Perak. Government restrictions and social hostility rose markedly in Malaysia between 2007 and 2013<sup>6</sup>.
14. **Thailand** also saw a marked deterioration in freedom of religion or belief between 2007 and 2013<sup>7</sup>, particularly in relation to social hostility. The interim constitution which is currently in use does not provide a guarantee in relation to freedom of religion or belief. The most serious violations are concentrated in the southernmost border provinces where Islam is the dominant religion and there is a long-running conflict.
15. **Burma** regularly features in lists of countries with poor records on freedom of religion or belief although Pew Research<sup>8</sup> ranked it slightly better than Indonesia in 2013. In general religious minorities (Muslim, Christian and Hindu) are subject to marked restrictions on their religious practice. All Muslims in Burma face high levels of discrimination with the Rohingya particularly adversely affected. New legislation limits interfaith marriage and religious conversion.
16. Whilst the **Philippines** stands out in the region for its relatively strong track record on freedom of religion or belief, Muslim communities have been badly affected by violence related to the conflict in Mindanao and the southern Philippines for many years. Whilst there are many drivers of this conflict, tensions between the majority Christian and minority Muslim populations are an additional stress factor.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

17. **Singapore** has very low levels of social hostility but government restrictions are significant and rose, according to Pew Research<sup>9</sup>, between 2007 and 2013. The constitution provides for religious freedom, subject to limits broadly related to promoting social harmony and public order. Religious groups (with 10 or more members) must be registered with the government. The government maintains a decades-long ban on Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church and reportedly restricts the actions of adherents of the Falun Gong movement.

### **Why is Freedom of Religion/Belief a challenge in Southeast Asia?**

18. **Historical factors** seem to have contributed to religious and ethnic conflict in the region. There were significant levels of Chinese and South Asian in-migration during the colonial period. Colonial powers often reinforced categorisations based on social strata, religion and race. In Indonesia the Dutch introduced *Wijkenstelsel*, which segregated housing for minority Chinese and Arab communities in the name of promoting social order. The ethnic Chinese were often limited to trading occupations and their subsequent economic success has compounded resentment.
19. Although there is great religious diversity across Southeast Asia; within individual countries there is usually a single very dominant faith group, with the notable exceptions of Singapore and Vietnam. Southeast Asian societies generally stress the need for minorities to conform to the cultural and social norms of the majority; including on religious matters. Sometimes described as 'collectivist' societies, order and unity and the needs of the family, the community and the nation are accorded more importance than individual rights. The ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights states that 'The enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms must be balanced with the performance of corresponding duties as every person has responsibilities to all other individuals, the community and the society where one lives.'
20. Whilst all Southeast Asian nations have some form of constitutional protection for religious freedom (apart from Thailand under the interim constitution) the ambiguity introduced by emphasising respect for the 'needs of society' undoubtedly contributes to the often weak implementation of religious freedom in practice. Law enforcement agencies often lack clear guidance on enforcing freedom of religion and how to regulate hate speech. Lack of trust in the rule of law also puts pressure on minorities to conform, particularly if violence is threatened.
21. At times of political crisis in Southeast Asia minority groups have often become the targets of politically motivated **nationalist sentiment**; be it the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia or Malaysia or Muslim groups in Burma. In a region where religious practice is generally closely linked to ethnic identity tensions can quickly escalate.

### **Future trends/risks**

22. One interesting trend is the **rapid growth (although from a low base) in the independent Pentecostal movement in Southeast Asia** in recent decades. The numbers in Asia have grown from 10 to 135 million between 1970 and 2000. Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia and Malaysia are said to have the fastest-growing communities; with perhaps 7.3 million in Indonesia; 2.2 million in the Philippines; 200,000 in Malaysia; and 150,000 in Singapore. This movement is largely driven by upwardly mobile, middle-class ethnic Chinese and has become an important space for social networking and business contacts. Middle class appeal suggests the movement will continue to grow and it is also attracting the working class in urban centres like Manila. The appearance of Pentecostal

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

mega-churches points to efficient mobilisation of financial capital and strong marketing strategies. The autonomy of the Pentecostal churches means that individual charismatic leaders often hold great sway over their followers.

23. The most likely trajectory, absent concerted efforts by Southeast Asian countries to tackle religious intolerance, is of **continued challenges for religious minorities**, particularly in **Indonesia, Burma and Malaysia**. Southeast Asia is not experiencing significant rates of migration or much divergence in the birth rates between religious groups and the general pattern of religious groupings is unlikely to change much over the coming decades.
24. Attacks on **minority Muslim communities**, not aligned with the dominant school of Sunni Islam, are likely to continue. This is impacting on a number of groups but the targeting of Shi'a Muslims in particular appears to be intensifying in Indonesia and Malaysia, where they are portrayed as threatening the social order.
25. Anger over the treatment of **Muslims in Burma** risks stoking tensions across the region. In May 2013 an attempt to bomb the Burmese Embassy in Jakarta was disrupted and Indonesian militants have threatened jihad against Burma.