

Chams keep Wahabism at arm's length

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By Jon Bugge

On October 10, a new mosque opened in Pong Ros village near the provincial capital of Kampong Cham. The opening of the Masjid Abubakarassiddiq Swaithin, funded with \$40,000 in Malaysian donations, drew more than 10,000 members of Cham communities from all over the country, organizers say.

The worshipers arrived wrapped in vibrantly colored clothes and set up an open-air market outside the new hall. Women wore loose-fitting tunics and brightly colored headscarves, while the men wore the skullcap called for by Islamic tradition.

The scene was like many others to play out across the country in recent years.

The number of religious centers has nearly doubled since 1970, says Bjorn Blengsli, a Norwegian anthropologist who has studied religious change among the Chams. At that time, the country had just 122 mosques and 300 Koranic schools offering both an Islamic and secular education.

Today, Blengsli estimates at least 268 mosques and 300 Koranic schools exist (compared to around 4,200 pagodas and 1000 Christian congregations).

But the exact number of Chams living in Cambodia remains unclear. In "informal" statistics compiled by the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR) in 1996, the figure was estimated to be about 500,000. A US State Department report from 2002 puts the figure closer to 700,000. Government officials say more accurate statistics are being compiled.

The discovery of links between Khmer Islamic schools and the notorious Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other Islamic extremists has put the government on the offensive toward possible inroads of extremism among the country's Chams. Recent crackdowns have pushed the question to the forefront.

Cambodian authorities shut down one school in May and arrested three teachers suspected of being linked to Islamic extremists. Later, Hambali, a top JI operative and a suspected member of al-Qaida, was traced to Cambodia. A few of the foreign-backed mosques have also been implicated in spreading violent, fundamentalist beliefs.

But Ahmad Yahya, a former Funcinpec official at the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation, who is a Cham, denied there are any extremists in Cambodia.

"There are [only] those that follow the old ways," he says. "They are traditionalists rather than extremists."

But the rising flow of foreign donations into Cambodia may have elevated concern among some government officials.

Muslim countries now donate tens of thousands of dollars annually in aid for Cambodian Islamic communities, says Ismael Osman, undersecretary of state for MCR. The majority of donors funnel money into education because state schools in most Cham communities are inadequate, says Osman. He says the biggest challenge is for Islamic parents to give their children a Muslim education.

But there is secrecy surrounding the size and source of the donations. The Malaysian Embassy in Phnom Penh would not provide figures for Islamic aid without permission from the ambassador.

"We never give out the figures," says an embassy representative.

Brunei is another active donor in the Islamic community. The Brunei Embassy says there are no immediate plans for direct government aid to Chams living in Cambodia.

"The generous people of Brunei donate money individually," says an assistant of the ambassador. He says no figures were available.

But that sum could exceed hundreds of thousands of dollars considering the number, and size, of the projects in Cambodia. One of the most prominent construction projects, the International Mosque in Phnom Penh, was built with funding from Saudi Arabia in 1994 at a cost of \$350,000.

Cham leaders have been strident in voicing their distance from Islamic clerics who preach an extremist form of Islam abroad. They adhere to what is considered a more moderate form of Islam. The majority of Cambodian Chams practice a syncretistic form of Islam melding the precepts of Buddhism and magic with traditional Islamic beliefs.

Still, the reflexive response by the government has been to crack down on hints of extremism, even as political leaders try to avoid alienating Cambodia's largest religious minority and a key source of votes.

On October 2, 2001, the Ministry of Cults and Religions issued a circular about "maintaining order in the Islamic religion in the Kingdom of Cambodia." It placed restrictions upon mosques and especially in dealings with foreign Muslims. However, three days later, Prime Minister Hun Sen nullified the document, claiming it impinged upon the freedom of religion for Muslims.

The government has also recently restricted the access of citizens from countries with sizeable Muslim populations. Visitors from countries including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran are not given visas on arrival to Phnom Penh without a round-trip plane ticket, says an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFA).

If planning to work in the country, applicants must receive permission from an appropriate ministry. The MCR estimates at least 4,300 foreign Muslims now reside in Cambodia.

The scale of law enforcement efforts has also escalated over the last year. The Post reported in May that several Arab nationals in Phnom Penh had their passports confiscated and copied, allegedly by the Ministry of Interior.

But the strongest crackdown came in a police operation this May that closed down the Om Al Qura Institute. Its 28 foreign staff were expelled and three teachers were arrested.

One Cambodian national, Sman Esma El, 23, was arrested on June 11 for his suspected involvement with JI and the investigating judge in the case says there are probably more Cambodian members of the extremist group.

But following the arrests, Hun Sen reassured Cham communities, saying they would not be

targeted and says "only the foreigners who come to hide in our country" were involved with JI.

Hun Sen's statement highlights the close nature of the relationship between some Cham leaders and the ruling party.

At the opening of the election campaigning this June, about 10,000 party faithful assembled at CPP headquarters in Phnom Penh. Among them was a group of Cham who were given front-row honours.

The highest religious leader in the Islamic community, the Mufti, also keeps close ties to the CPP.

Traditionally, the Mufti is selected through an election. However, Oknha Sos Kamry, the current Mufti, completed his four-year mandate in 2000. Rather than stand down, he negotiated with Hun Sen to receive a permanent position, says an MCR official in the Funcinpec party.

The political rivalries have divided some in the Cham community. Yahya, the former Ministry of Public Works and Transportation official who recently defected from Funcinpec to the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), says the Mufti does not represent the Cham community.

"He is not working for the religion, he is working for the CPP," says Yahya. "I do not recognise him."

Osman says about 20 Chams held positions in the pre-election government at both the local and national level. However, he says Chams belong to every party. He estimates they vote almost equally for the CPP, SRP and Funcinpec.

Although political divisions may be growing, the group has maintained its religious unity. About 90 percent of Chams belong to the same Sunni sect, the Malay-influenced Shafi branch of Islam.

They describe themselves as a peaceful majority who fear condemnation for the crimes of the minority as fears about extremist Islamic groups grows.

Blengsli wrote that "increased polarization of Cham community has the potential to undermine Khmer Cham relations". He says the Wahabi sect, already the largest minority branch of Islam in Cambodia, may be gaining influence within the country.

The Saudi-influenced Wahabi branch accounts for between 6 and 10 percent of Cambodian Muslims, according to government and NGO sources. The sect has followers among the former Taliban regime of Afghanistan and in the royal family of Saudi Arabia.

However, Osman does not predict the extreme views will find much support in Cambodia.

"[Islamic extremism] will not happen for the Islamic people of Cambodia," he says. He feels that their syncretistic form of religion, and the fact that they have lived peaceably for hundreds of years, will prevent such sects from gaining a foothold.

Many of the Cham community shun extremist proselytising and firmly preserve their traditions. They don't wish to become, as some have described it, Cambodia's "Muslim factor".

Sep Zakara, a representative of a local NGO, the Cambodian Islamic Development Committee (CIDC), that has worked with Cham communities since the 1980s, says there has been little change in attitudes toward Cham people since the September 11 attacks on the US.

Cham leaders say if the region's leaders are worried about the increase of Islamic extremism in Southeast Asia, they must address the causes of the problem, not just its symptoms.

Zakara, a Cham, from CIDC, sees terrorism as the result of the corruption of Islamic doctrine by individuals.

"It's a problem of people, not the religion," he says.

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