

Chronicle

Cambodia Recognises the Christian Church

As in Eastern Europe, where the fading of Marxism-Leninism has brought greater freedom to religious groups, Cambodia is allowing Buddhist, Muslim and Christian communities more independence in their activities. But unlike Eastern Europe change is being forced by fear, if not panic in the face of civil war and the prospect of the return of the Khmer Rouge. The Cambodian government is fighting for its life — both militarily and diplomatically — and is abandoning Marxism to try to gain the middle ground.

The latest group to benefit from this retreat from hardline policies are the country's tiny Christian churches. In January of this year the Cambodian government officially recognised nine Protestant congregations in the capital Phnom Penh. The Protestants were able to receive Christian literature from abroad. In April they were permitted to hold an evangelistic meeting, with two visiting Cambodian-American pastors.

Recognition for the Catholics followed soon after. Eight Catholics wrote to the Cambodian president in March requesting permission to hold a service to mark Cambodian new year on 14 April. On 7 April the government declared: 'The ministers of the Politburo fully authorise the opening of the Christian church in the State of Cambodia . . . and issue

the decree to open the church and the church administration in Cambodia.' On 14 April, Holy Saturday, 1,500 Catholics gathered in a Phnom Penh theatre for the first 'official' Mass, celebrated by Fr Emile Destombes, a priest of the Paris-based Missions Étrangères. Priests from the mission had been active in Cambodia before being expelled after the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975. State television — which has recently begun broadcasting some Buddhist ceremonies — showed excerpts from the Mass. Fr Destombes was later allowed to visit Battambang to celebrate Mass for 1,000 Catholics in a building belonging to the National Solidarity Front. With no surviving churches, a site has been acquired in the capital for a new church to be built.

There were about 5,000 Catholics and 3,000 Protestants in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975. The new regime immediately closed all the churches, demolished the Catholic cathedrals in Phnom Penh and Battambang, executed bishops and priests, and expelled all foreign missionaries. Eleven of the twelve Protestant pastors perished. Since the Vietnamese-backed regime was installed in 1979 the number of Catholics — most of them Vietnamese settlers — is estimated to have risen to 60,000 by 1987. The

number of Protestants is put at several thousand.

Recognition of both Catholic and Protestant Churches comes a year after Cambodia adopted a new constitution which adopted Buddhism as the state religion.* The prime minister Hun Sen apologised to Buddhist monks in January 1989 for 'mistakes' his government had made towards religion. Restrictions were lifted on Buddhist activity and religion was restored to public life. For a while too the government has been adopting a favourable attitude to the Muslim minority, prominently allowing mosques and Koranic schools to reopen.

The embattled government's image both among its own people and abroad seems to have dictated these concessions to religious groups. The overwhelming majority of Cambodians are Buddhist and before the attacks of the Khmer Rouge era Cambodian life was permeated with Buddhist ritual. The present regime, which took power in 1979 on the back of the Vietnamese invasion, initially retained close control and restriction over the hesitantly re-emerging Buddhist life. But in their bid to gain much-needed popularity among the people these restrictions were gradually lifted.

The small communities of Christians are insignificant in a population of some eight million. But internationally the new freedom for Christian churches to operate legally will

have a propaganda effect. The Cambodian regime recognises the useful role foreign religious charities can play — to make up for the continuing western aid blockade — in helping improve the devastated economy. The 14 April Mass in Phnom Penh was said by the official representative in Cambodia of the Catholic charity Caritas Internationalis, which has only just been given permission to work in the country. Foreign Protestant charities have also been keen to help: a consortium of Christian ministries and relief groups set up Cambodia Christian Services at the 1989 Manila Conference on World Evangelisation to coordinate their work. The Cambodian regime doubtless hopes that aid from western charities, including Christian relief organisations, will lead to the lifting of the western governments' aid blockade. These charities would hardly have been keen to help in Cambodia while the Christian churches remained in a state of illegality.

Gaining international respectability and foreign economic support now seems the main aim of the Hun Sen government. The restoration to legality of first the Buddhists, then the Muslims and now the Christians seems directed to that end. But it may have come too late. Government officials have ordered western agencies to work only in the capital because of the security situation. The resistance, led by the Khmer Rouge, has made great inroads into the territory controlled by the government.

*See 'Buddhism Becomes the Cambodian State Religion', *RCL* Vol. 17 No. 4, 1989, pp. 337-9.