

# [Religious freedom in the kingdom of thailand history essay](https://assignbuster.com/religious-freedom-in-the-kingdom-of-thailand-history-essay/)

(1) The Kingdom of Thailand has a history of internal ethnic tension. Recently, Thailand has experienced political instability and an ongoing ethnic separatist movement in its south. However, despite these problems Thailand has maintained religious freedom throughout. Its government allows unregistered religious groups and missionaries to operate freely – even beyond the limits that the constitution places on them. The primary source of religious discrimination complaints is the ethnic Malay separatist movement in the south, in which a largely-Muslim Malaysian community has been engaged in a violent struggle against security forces for an extended period of time.

## THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. THE INSTITUTE works globally to promote fundamental rights, and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics non-governmental organizations and others. THE INSTITUTE encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

## Religious Demographics

(3) Thailand’s population of 67 million is largely (95%) Buddhist with a Muslim minority (4. 6%) and a small Christian population at less than 1%. The people are predominantly Thai (75%) with a large Sino-Thai (14%) population as well as a plurality of small ethnic minorities, including the Khemer, Mon, Vietnamese, Hmong, Mein, Karen, and a number of tribal groups. These smaller ethnic groups account for roughly 11% of the population.

(4) The large Buddhist majority of Thailand is of the Theravada school, which arrived in Thailand around the sixth century AD. The largest religious minority of Thailand, Islam, is predominantly found there in the form of the Sunni sect. The Muslim population is mostly found in Thailand’s southern areas and is practiced predominantly by ethnic Thai and Malayans who have inherited this religious tradition from the region’s previous occupation by a Muslim Malay kingdom known as the Pattani Kingdom. Both the Buddhist and Islamic traditions of the Thai have been greatly influenced by the animistic and Hindu-Brahmic historical religions of the Thai people; these practices and beliefs often overshadow those of a people’s stated religious affiliation.

## Historical Background

(5) Archeological findings point to a well-developed society producing bronze metal work and cultivated rice as early as 4000 BC. This society was likely a conglomeration of the current ethnic and tribal minorities of Thailand, as the Tai descendants of the modern-day Thai immigrated from central china around the 6th century AD.

(6) The official founding of Thailand is said to have occurred in 1238 AD when Thai tribes overpowered a Khemer-run society and established a Thai kingdom in the south. The remaining ethnic Tai, the original Chinese immigrants to Thailand, founded the Kingdom of Lanna in the 14th century. Also during that time the Thai kingdom established Theravada Buddhism as the official religion of the Thai people, and adopted a written set of laws reflecting Hindu, Buddhist, and traditional Thai teachings. These early legal statutes were called the Dharmashastra and remained in force until the late 1800s.

(7) In 1767 the Burmese invasion brought down the Thai kingdom and utterly destroyed the capital. By 1782 the Chakri dynasty, the current ruling dynasty in Thailand, founded the capital in Bangkok.

(8) The 19th century saw the Chakri sign commercial treaties with the United Kingdom and establish diplomatic relations with the United States. These agreements in combination with keen diplomacy prevented Siam (Thailand) from being colonized – the only country in Southeast Asia not to be.

(9) In 1932 Thailand experienced a coup d’état which transferred authority from the king to the people – forming a constitutional monarchy. However this led to the formation of an autocracy led by a strong military and civil bureaucracy. In 1940 Thailand was set to engage France in open warfare over territory in French Indo-China claimed by the Thai when Paris surrendered to German forces and the Japanese peacefully annexed the eastern parts of French Indo-China. This led the Thai to invade with full force, and their armies encountered substantial but inconsequential resistance. After 5 months of fighting the French conceded the disputed territory to Thailand in a peace treaty in Tokyo.

(10) A year later, in 1941, the Japanese invaded southern Thailand on their way to Burma and Malaya. The Thai leadership signed an armistice with the Japanese within hours, effectively allowing the Japanese to move freely through Thailand. However, before the invasion the Thai representatives in London and Washington, DC sought protection from the Allied western powers – their requests for support in fighting the Japanese were thwarted by the United States.

(11) The 1970s and 80s saw a series of coups and quasi-democratic governance. The turn of the 1990s saw a brief, but violent, military regime take power. The bloodshed led to elections and 15 years of corrupt democracy led by Prime Minister Thaksin before a non-violent military-led coup d’état in 2006-2007 established a new constitution and multi-party elections.

(12) In 2007 a pro-Thaksin political party, the PPP, won power but was disbanded in 2008 by the Constitutional Court and its leaders removed from power. The following elections saw the Democratic Party take control, and a group of radical anti-government demonstrators known as the Yellow-Shirts began street protests against political efforts to allow Thaksin to run for office. The protests broke out into violence and the demonstrators eventually occupied government buildings. A year later Red-Shirt anti-Democratic Party demonstrators began street protests and disrupted a major summit of Asian leaders. Red-Shirt demonstrations continued through 2010 after a ruling by the Supreme Court to seize nearly $1. 5 Billion from Thaksin. The 2010 Red-Shirt protests turned violent as government offices and public places were torched. At the end of the violence over 90 people had been killed and nearly a thousand wounded during the chaos.

## Introduction to Legal Status

(13) The Thai constitution allows for religious freedom and the government has generally lived up to its obligations. Islam, Brahmin-Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Sikhism are officially recognized religions and all religious groups seeking government recognition must register themselves being part of one of these religions. The constitution calls for the registration of religious groups with government authorities, however many unregistered religious groups operate freely throughout Thailand. Furthermore, the law calls for a limit on the number of foreign missionaries in the country, but this law is rarely enforced.

(14) Theravada Buddhism receives government support, but is not an official religion. Furthermore, the constitution requires that the monarch be Buddhist. The government offers monetary support to Buddhist and Muslim organizations, and other religious groups can apply for funds to renovate or repair infrastructure.

## Specific Instances of Religious Persecution

(15) Female Thai civil servants are instructed not to wear headscarves while dressed for official business, however many offices allow the practice and disobeying the ban rarely results in penalties.

(16) Ongoing ethnic tensions and Malay separatist movements in the south have led to accusations of religious discrimination against Muslims in that area: Muslim missionaries are occasionally subjected to enforcement of the law requiring missionaries to register with the government and are often scrutinized more heavily by security officers.

(17) Accusations have recently arisen that the Thai military along the border with Burma are coordinating with Burmese military and para-military forces to profit from the illicit drug trade. These accusations included the Thai military allowing Burmese forces to cross the border in order to kill and kidnap Christian religious refugees living in Thailand. The accusations are unconfirmed and are not supported by reports of specific occurrences.

(18) In 2009 a Mosque in southern Thailand was assaulted by armed gunmen during evening prayers. Twelve people were killed and at least eleven wounded. The police attributed the massacre to the ongoing Malay separatist movement in southern Thailand; however the local population, largely Muslim, places blame on the Buddhist Thai security forces.

## U. S. Foreign Policy towards the Kingdom of Thailand

(19) In 1954 the United States and the Kingdom of Thailand formed an alliance through the Manila Pact, and furthered their economic relationship through the 1966 Treaty of Amity and Economic Relations.

(20) US security obligations in Thailand are outlined through both the Manila Pact and the Thanat-Rusk communiqué. More Thai troops have been educated through the International Military Education and Training program than troops from any other country. Furthermore, the United States works closely with Thailand to fight international narcotics and human trafficking.

## Conclusion

(21) Thailand’s ongoing political instability has not led to any degradation of religious freedoms in that country. Missionaries and unregistered religious groups operate freely, and without any signs of systemic or cultural discrimination. Furthermore, Thailand’s relationship with the United States remains strong, both militarily and economically.