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Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia

In Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, Buddhists see strong links between their religion and country, as do Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia

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How we did this

For this report, we surveyed 13,122 adults across six countries in Asia, using nationally representative methods. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. They were conducted on mobile phones in Malaysia and Singapore. Local interviewers administered the survey from June to September 2022, in eight languages.

This survey is part of the [Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project](#), a broader effort by Pew Research Center to study religious change and its impact on societies around the world. The Center previously has conducted religion-focused surveys across [sub-Saharan Africa](#); the [Middle East-North Africa region](#) and many countries with [large Muslim populations](#); [Latin America](#); [Israel](#); [Central and Eastern Europe](#); [Western Europe](#); [India](#); and the [United States](#).

This survey includes three countries in which Buddhists make up a majority of the population (Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand); two countries with Muslim majorities (Malaysia and Indonesia); and one country that is religiously diverse, with no single group forming a majority (Singapore). We also are surveying five additional countries and territories in Asia, to be covered in a future report.

To improve respondent comprehension of survey questions and to ensure all questions were culturally appropriate, Pew Research Center followed a multiphase questionnaire development process that included consultations with academic experts, as well as focus groups and in-depth interviews across several Asian countries. In addition, a pretest was conducted in each country before the national survey was fielded. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into seven languages. Professional linguists with native proficiency independently checked the translations.

Respondents were selected using a probability-based sample design. In Thailand, this included additional interviews in the country's Southern region, which has larger shares who are Muslim. Data was weighted to account for different probabilities of selection among respondents and to align with demographic benchmarks for each country's adult population.

For more information, refer to [the report's Methodology section](#) or [the full survey questionnaire](#).

How we chose the countries in this study

Previous Pew Research Center surveys on religion around the world have focused on [well-defined geographic regions](#), [individual countries](#) or [particular religious groups](#). The collection of six countries in this survey – three with Buddhist majorities, two with Muslim majorities and one that is religiously mixed – may seem like a less natural grouping. While the countries are fairly close to each other geographically, not all six are in *Southeast Asia* (Sri Lanka is typically grouped with South Asia), and several other Southeast Asian countries are not included in the study.

However, a key goal of the survey is to explore religion in Southeast Asia, and Buddhism in particular. This survey includes three of the world’s seven Buddhist-majority nations – Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Buddhists in these countries predominantly follow [the Theravada tradition](#), a key reason for including Sri Lanka, which also has [longstanding cultural and religious ties](#) to some [Southeast Asian countries](#).

Laos and Myanmar (also called Burma) also are Southeast Asian, Buddhist-majority countries in the Theravada tradition, but political realities and security concerns in those countries did not allow for reliable, independent surveys to be conducted on sensitive topics at this time.

Countries included in this survey



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This survey also includes the Muslim-majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia as well as [the religiously diverse country of Singapore](#) to offer comparative perspectives on the intersection of religion and national identity in Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgments

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This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/religion.

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The Center is grateful to a panel of expert advisers who provided guidance at all stages of this report: Thomas Borchert, professor of religion at the University of Vermont; Erik Davis, professor of religious studies at Macalester College; Chiara Formichi, professor of Asian studies at Cornell University; Alexandra Kent, researcher in social anthropology affiliated with the Department of Sociology and Work Science at the University of Gothenburg; Neena Mahadev, assistant professor of anthropology at Yale-NUS College; Anna Sun, associate professor of religious studies and sociology at Duke University; Alicia Turner, associate professor of humanities and religious studies at York University (Toronto); and Erick White, independent scholar.

Fieldwork for the survey was conducted under the direction of Langer Research Associates.

While the analysis for this report was guided by our consultations with the advisers, Pew Research Center is solely responsible for the interpretation and reporting of the data.

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Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia

In Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, Buddhists see strong links between their religion and country, as do Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia

As some practices and philosophies related to Buddhism have become more commonplace in the United States and other Western countries, many Americans may associate Buddhism with mindfulness or meditation. In other parts of the world, however, Buddhism is not just a philosophy about mind and body – it is a central part of national identity.

In Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand – countries where at least 70% of adults are Buddhist – upward of nine-in-ten Buddhists say being Buddhist is important to being truly part of their nation, according to a 2022 Pew Research Center survey of six countries in South and Southeast Asia.

For instance, 95% of Sri Lankan Buddhists say being Buddhist is important to be truly Sri Lankan – including 87% who say Buddhism is *very* important to be a true Sri Lankan.

Religion and national identity tied together in Buddhist-majority countries

% of **Buddhists** who say being Buddhist is important to being truly ____ (e.g., truly Cambodian)



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

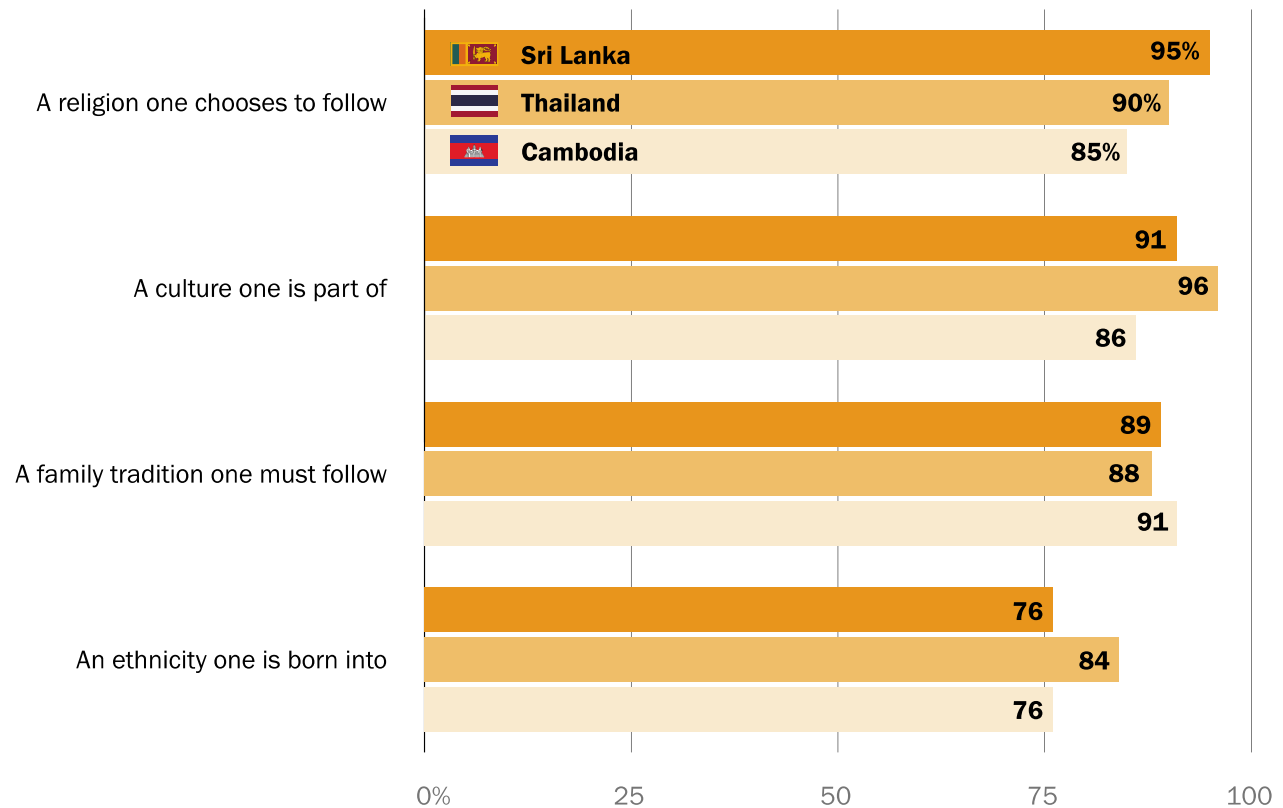
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Although most people in these countries identify as Buddhist religiously, there is widespread agreement that Buddhism is more than a religion.¹ The vast majority of Buddhists in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand not only describe Buddhism as “a religion one chooses to follow” but also say Buddhism is “a culture one is part of” and “a family tradition one must follow.”

Most Buddhists in these countries additionally see Buddhism as “an ethnicity one is born into” – 76% of Cambodian Buddhists hold this view, for example.

Many Thai Buddhists see Buddhism as an ethnicity

% of **Buddhists** who say Buddhism can be described as ____, by country



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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¹ Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand are three of the world’s seven countries with a Buddhist majority. The other four (Bhutan; Laos; Myanmar, also known as Burma; and Mongolia) were not surveyed due to political and/or logistical challenges.

Buddhism and national law in Buddhist-majority countries

The importance of Buddhism in national identity is reflected in the prominence that all three countries' laws give to Buddhism. Under [Cambodia's constitution](#), Buddhism is the national religion and the state is required to support Buddhist schools. [Sri Lanka's current constitution](#) guarantees Buddhism "the foremost place" and assigns the government responsibility "to protect and foster" it. And a succession of Thai constitutions over the last century have increased [the official preeminence of Buddhism](#), with the country's [most recent constitution](#) requiring the state to "have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined in any form."

According to the survey, most Buddhists in all three countries favor basing their national laws on Buddhist dharma – [a wide-ranging concept](#) that includes the knowledge, doctrines and practices stemming from Buddha's teachings. This perspective is nearly unanimous among Cambodian Buddhists (96%), while smaller majorities of Buddhists in Sri Lanka (80%) and Thailand (56%) support basing national laws on Buddhist teachings and practices.

Cambodian Buddhists overwhelmingly favor basing national law on dharma

*% of **Buddhists** who favor basing the law on Buddhist dharma in their country*



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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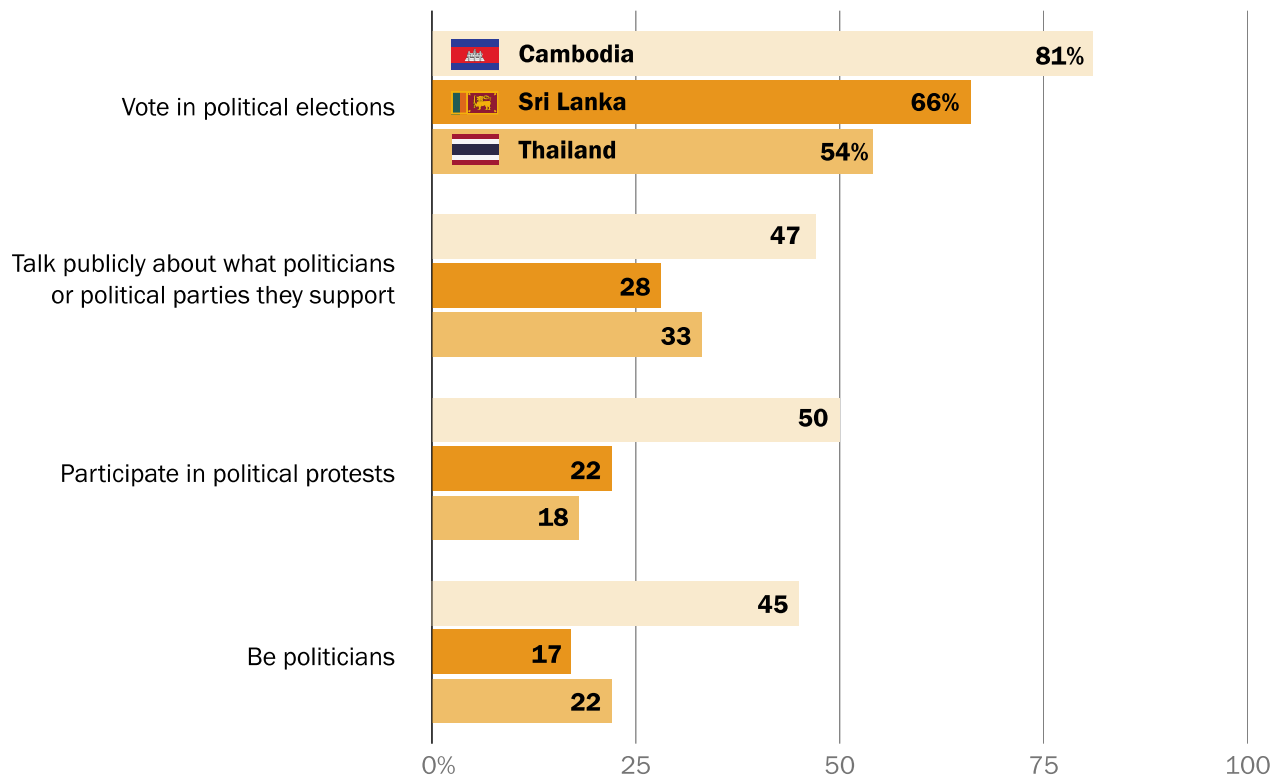
Religious leaders' role in politics

When asked about the role of religious leaders in public life, Cambodian Buddhists again stand out as the most likely to favor an intersection between religion and government. For instance, 81% of Cambodian Buddhists say religious leaders should vote in political elections, a position taken by smaller proportions of Buddhists in Sri Lanka (66%) and Thailand (54%). ([The Thai constitution bans](#) Buddhist monks, novices, ascetics and priests from voting.)

But even in Cambodia, with its near-unanimous support for basing the law on Buddhist dharma, no more than half of Buddhists say religious leaders should participate in political protests (50%), talk publicly about the politicians they support (47%) or be politicians themselves (45%).

Cambodian Buddhists express comparatively high levels of support for engagement by religious leaders in politics

% of Buddhists who say religious leaders should ____, by country



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

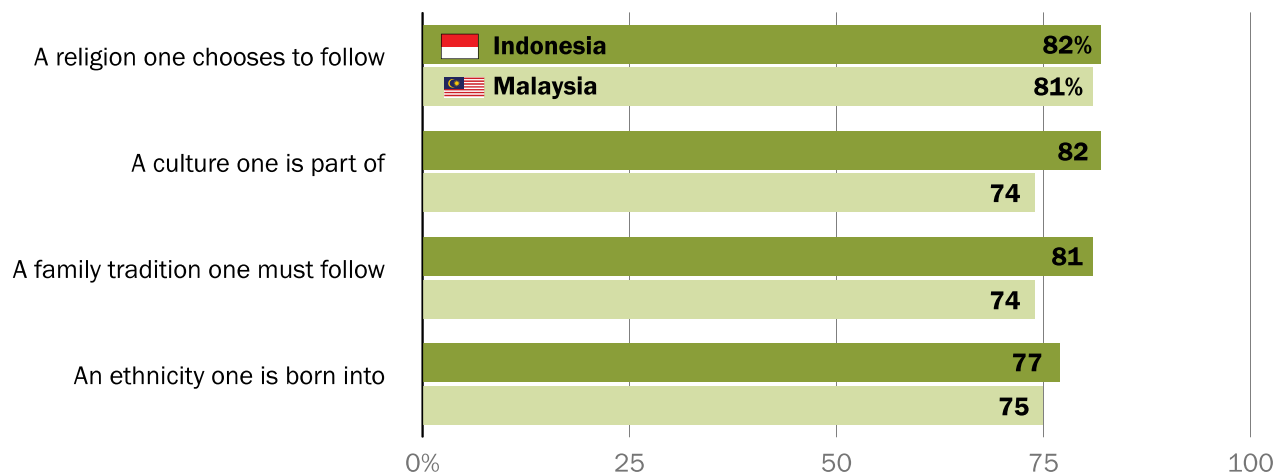
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Islam's role in Indonesia and Malaysia

In some ways, Buddhism's links to national identity in these countries parallel the role of Islam in the neighboring Muslim-majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia. Nearly all Muslims in both countries say being Muslim is important to be truly Indonesian or Malaysian. And Muslims in both countries commonly describe Islam as a culture, family tradition or ethnicity – not just “a religion one chooses to follow.” For instance, three-quarters of Malaysian Muslims say Islam is “an ethnicity one is born into.”

Most Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims describe Islam as more than a religion

% of **Muslims** who say Islam can be described as ____, by country



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Since emerging from colonial rule in the 20th century, these two countries have followed divergent paths for the role of religion in government, but most Muslims in both nations favor making sharia the official law of the land. Muslims in Malaysia, where Islam [is the official religion](#), overwhelmingly support using sharia as the national law (86%). Most Malaysian Muslims also favored making Islamic law the official law of the land a decade earlier, in [a 2011-2012 Pew Research Center survey](#) of countries with large Muslim populations.²

Support for sharia is somewhat lower among Muslims in Indonesia, where the drafters of [the 1945 constitution](#) ultimately [rejected proposed language](#) that would have explicitly favored Islam but included language saying the state is “based upon the belief in the One and Only God.” The

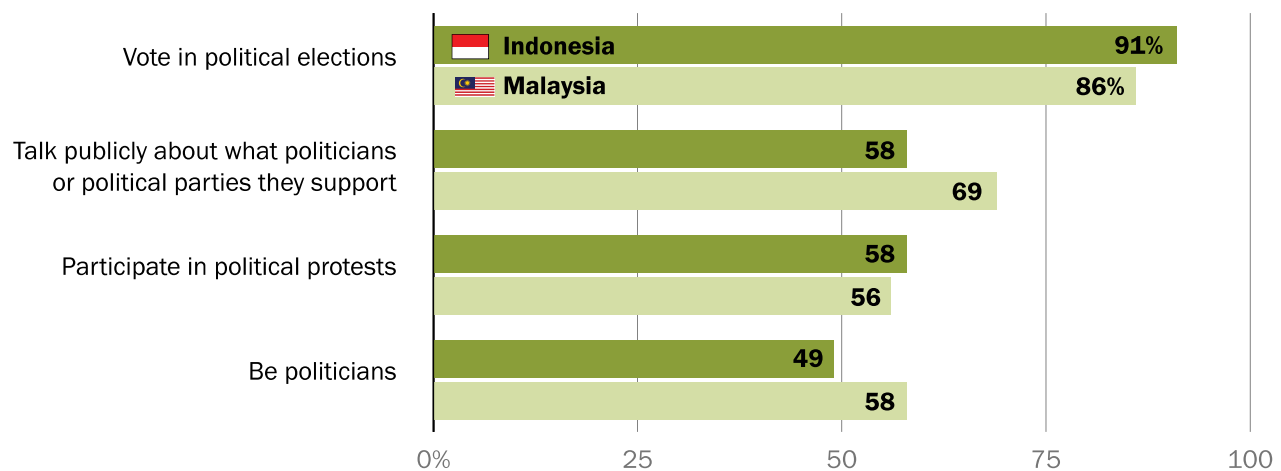
² While the 2022 Malaysia survey was conducted by telephone, the 2011-2012 Malaysia survey was conducted face-to-face.

resulting compromise is sometimes classified as “mild secularism” with “relative (not absolute) separation between state and religion.” Today, 64% of Indonesian Muslims nevertheless say sharia should be used as the law of the land. A majority of Muslims in the country likewise supported making Islamic law the official national law when asked in 2011-2012.

Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia are more likely than Buddhists surveyed in neighboring countries to favor high-profile roles for religious leaders in politics. For example, most Muslims in Indonesia (58%) and Malaysia (69%) say religious leaders should talk publicly about the politicians and political parties they support, while roughly half or fewer of Buddhists in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand favor this level of religious interaction in politics.

Most Malaysian Muslims say religious leaders should be politicians as well as talk about their politics

% of Muslims who say religious leaders should ____, by country



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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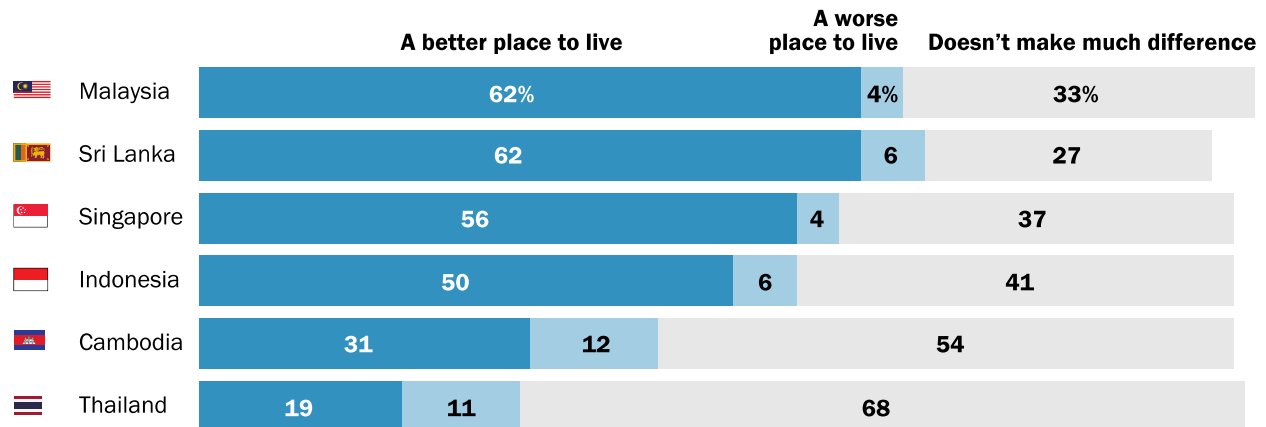
Attitudes toward other religions

Alongside these three Buddhist-majority and two Muslim-majority countries, the survey also included Singapore, which has no religious majority and by some measures is the [world's most religiously diverse society](#). According to [the most recent census](#), 31% of Singaporean adults identify as Buddhist, 20% are religiously unaffiliated (i.e., they say they have no religion), 19% are Christian and 15% are Muslim. The remaining 15% of the population includes Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists and people who follow Chinese traditional religions, among others. (For more on Singapore's religious composition and how it has changed over time, read "[Singapore's changing religious identity](#).")

Most Singaporeans (56%) say that having people of many different religions, ethnic groups and cultures makes their country a better place to live, while few Singaporeans (4%) say it makes their country a worse place to live. (Most other respondents, 37%, say such diversity doesn't make much difference.) And on several measures of religious tolerance, Singaporeans express broadly accepting views toward other groups. For example, nearly nine-in-ten adults in Singapore say

Few express negative sentiments about diversity in their country

% who say that having people of many different religions, ethnic groups and cultures makes their country ...



Note: Other/Both/Neither/Depends/Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read [Methodology](#) for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Chinese traditional religions are all compatible with Singapore’s culture and values.³

While Singapore sometimes stands out for the high levels of tolerance its residents express, adults in Malaysia and Sri Lanka (both 62%) are even more likely than those in Singapore (56%) to say that religious, ethnic and cultural diversity benefits their country. In general, tolerance for other religions is widely espoused in all six countries. Across all major religious groups, most people say they would be willing to accept members of different religious communities as neighbors. For instance, 81% of Sri Lankan Buddhists say they would be willing to have Hindu neighbors, and a similar share of Sri Lankan Hindus (85%) say the same about Buddhists.

And, overall, people in most of the countries surveyed tend to see other religions as compatible with their national culture and values. In Muslim-majority Malaysia, 67% say Buddhism is compatible with Malaysian culture and values. And even in Sri Lanka, where a civil war concluded a little more than a decade before the survey, 68% of the population says Christianity and Hinduism are compatible with Sri Lankan culture and values – including 60% of the country’s Buddhists (the majority community).

Singaporeans most likely to view various religions as compatible with their society

% who say ___ is/are compatible with their country’s culture and values, by country

	Buddhism	Islam	Christianity	Hinduism	Chinese traditional religions	Local beliefs/Indigenous religions
Cambodia	--	43%	44%	29%	64%	78%
Indonesia	58%	--	60	60	48	56
Malaysia	67	--	65	65	67	67
Singapore	--	88	89	87	89	85
Sri Lanka	--	50	68	68	--	--
Thailand	--	67	73	58	70	84

Note: Darker shades represent higher values. “Buddhism” was asked only in Indonesia and Malaysia. “Islam” was asked only in Cambodia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. “Chinese traditional religions” and “Local beliefs/Indigenous religions” were not asked in Sri Lanka. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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³ While Pew Research Center was able to survey freely in Singapore, readers should keep in mind throughout this report that [freedom of expression](#) and [of the press](#) are limited in Singapore. [Scholars have noted](#) that, in Singapore, “people often refrain from expressing their views when they believe that the government disagrees with their opinions.” The Singaporean government has placed [great emphasis on maintaining religious harmony](#), so questions about other religious communities may be impacted by this tendency. However, research also suggests that when the government does not have a clear stance on a topic, Singaporeans are [more willing to express their opinions](#).

Not only do religious groups largely accept one another as neighbors and fellow citizens, but in many cases, there also are signs of shared religious beliefs and practices across religious lines. For example, sizable majorities in nearly every large religious community in all six countries say that karma exists, even though belief in karma (the idea that people will reap the benefits of their good deeds, and pay the price for their bad deeds, often in future lives) is not traditionally associated with all the religious groups surveyed.⁴

In addition, many people pray or offer their respects to deities or founder figures that are not traditionally considered part of their religion’s pantheon. For example, 66% of Singaporean Hindus say they pray or offer respects to Jesus Christ, and 62% of Sri Lankan Muslims do the same to the Hindu deity Ganesh.

“Offering respects” to deities – often through gestures such as bowing one’s head or putting one’s hands together – is commonly understood in the region as the act of worshipping or venerating deities and can include a variety of practices, such as burning incense, making food offerings or making wishes to the deity. These are gestures of great respect or veneration, though they may not align with formal, Western perceptions of prayer or worship.⁵ (For more on the figures people pray or offer their respects to, read [“Praying or offering respects to figures from other religions.”](#))

What are Chinese traditional religions and Indigenous religions?

The category of “Chinese traditional religions” is a fluid yet essential one. In several Southeast Asian countries, many people with Chinese ethnic backgrounds practice traditional ritual activities in temples that are devoted to Confucian, Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist deities, without necessarily seeing clear boundaries between them.

In other words, although Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist religious traditions are distinct from one another, the lines between them are fluid in practice. Furthermore, people who follow these practices [may not claim a distinct religious identity](#).

Local beliefs and Indigenous religions refer to religions that are closely associated with a particular group of people, ethnicity or tribe. Such religious traditions may be less institutionalized than other religions that have a global presence, and the boundaries between [Indigenous religions and other religions](#) can be blurry.

⁴ The [religious origins of karma are debated by scholars](#), but the concept has deep roots in Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

⁵ For more information on paying respects to spirits and deities, read this [Thai case study](#).

Clear divisions – and tensions – between religious groups

Despite these expressions of tolerance and religious mixing, religious identity also can be a firm line between groups in this part of the world.

In fact, many people across the countries surveyed say it is unacceptable for people to give up their religion or convert to another faith. In Indonesia, 92% of Muslims say it is unacceptable for a person to leave Islam, and 83% of Christians say it is unacceptable to leave Christianity for another religion.

Muslims more likely than others to say conversion away from their faith is unacceptable

% who say it is unacceptable for a person to leave the respondent's religion for another religion, among each country's religious groups

	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	82%	--	--	--
Indonesia	--	92%	83%	--
Malaysia	51	98	61	68%
Singapore	36	84	42	57
Sri Lanka	74	64	67	74
Thailand	69	93	--	--

Note: For example, 82% of Cambodian Buddhists say it is unacceptable for a person to leave Buddhism for another religion. "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Overall, Muslims are more likely than other religious communities to say conversion away from their faith is unacceptable. But this is also the position taken by two-thirds or more of Buddhists in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand – the study's three Buddhist-majority nations.

In five of the six countries surveyed, nearly all adults still identify with the religion in which they were raised. Only in Singapore do a sizable share of adults (35%) indicate their religion has changed during their lifetime. (For additional information on religious switching in Singapore, read [“Share of Singaporeans identifying as Christian or unaffiliated is increasing.”](#))

Moreover, in several countries, substantial shares see other religions as *incompatible* with their national culture and values. For instance, 45% of Sri Lankan Buddhists say Islam is incompatible with Sri Lankan values, while 38% of Indonesian Muslims say Buddhism is incompatible with Indonesian culture.

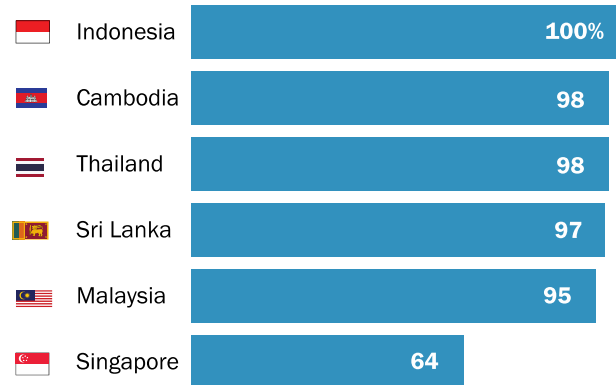
In some countries, there are also sizable shares of Muslims who say Buddhism is *not* peaceful, and conversely some Buddhists who say Islam is *not* peaceful. Malaysian Muslims are especially likely to see Buddhism as not peaceful (42%), while 36% of Thai Buddhists say Islam is not peaceful.

In some countries, substantial shares express negative feelings about Christianity and Hinduism. In Indonesia, for example, 21% of Muslim adults surveyed say Christianity is not peaceful.

These are among the key findings of a Pew Research Center survey conducted among 13,122 adults in six countries in Southeast and South Asia. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand and on mobile phones in Malaysia and Singapore. Local interviewers administered the survey from June to September 2022, in eight languages. (Read [the report’s Methodology](#) for further details.)

In most countries, high consistency between childhood and current religion

% who say they were raised in the same religion they now identify with



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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This study, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation, is part of a larger effort by Pew Research Center to understand religious change and its impact on societies around the world. The Center previously has conducted religion-focused surveys across [sub-Saharan Africa](#); the [Middle East-North Africa region](#) and many countries with [large Muslim populations](#); [Latin America](#); [Israel](#); [Central and Eastern Europe](#); [Western Europe](#); [India](#); and the [United States](#).

The rest of this Overview covers various topics in more detail, including:

- [Different patterns of religious belief and practice across religious communities and countries](#)
- [The deities to whom people pray or offer their respects](#)
- [Funerary practices](#)
- [Differing levels of religiosity by age](#)
- An exploration of religion in Singapore – particularly its [changing religious composition](#) and the [beliefs of its religiously unaffiliated population](#)
- [A deeper look at how religion and national identity intersect](#)

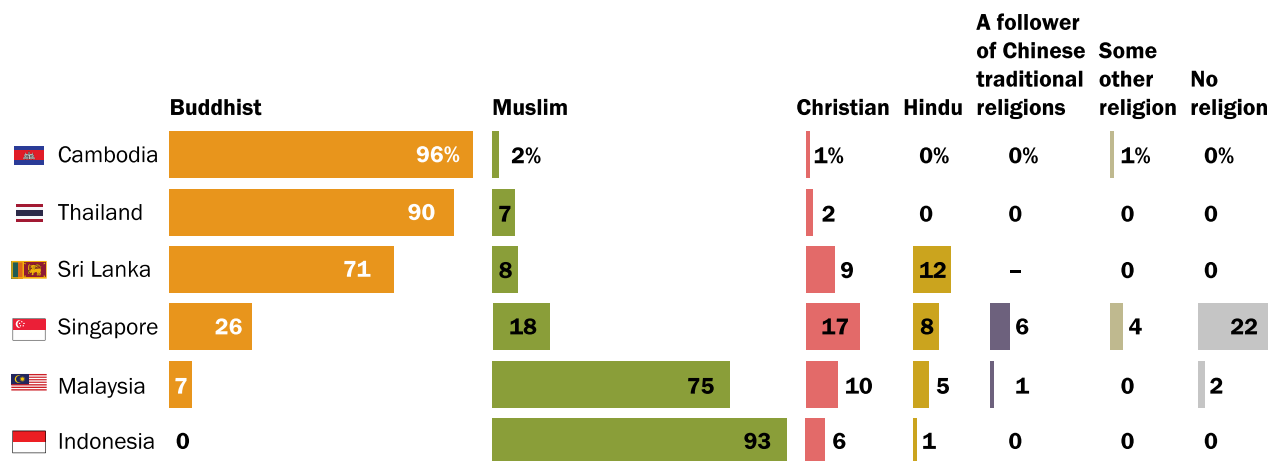
Unique patterns of belief across a highly religious region

In general, the countries surveyed are highly religious by a variety of measures – including affiliation, beliefs and practices. For instance, nearly all respondents in five of the six surveyed countries identify with a religious group, and majorities in these same five countries say religion is very important in their lives – including 98% in Indonesia and 92% in Sri Lanka.

The lone exception on both these measures is Singapore, where 22% of adults do not identify with any religion, and just 36% of adults say religion is *very* important in their lives.

Most people in the countries surveyed identify as Buddhist or Muslim

% of adults in each country who identify as ...



Note: "Some other religion" includes those who selected "Local beliefs/Indigenous religions." The full answer option wording for "Chinese traditional religions" is "Chinese traditional religions, such as Tao, Confucian or Chinese local religions." Respondents in Sri Lanka were not presented the options "Chinese traditional religions" or "Local beliefs/Indigenous religions." Don't know/Refused responses not shown.
Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.
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Even in Singapore, however, the vast majority of adults surveyed (87%) say they believe in God or unseen beings, and about seven-in-ten say they think karma and fate exist. These beliefs are common across all the countries in the survey, as is the notion that spells, curses or other magic can influence people's lives. Roughly half or more adults in each country hold this view, including 55% in Singapore and 78% in Cambodia.

Majorities across all surveyed countries believe in God or unseen beings

% in each country who say they ...

	Believe in God or unseen beings	Think karma exists	Think fate exists	Consider religion very important in their lives	Think spells, curses or other magic influence people's lives	Pray daily	Ever burn incense	Ever practice meditation	Feel protected or attacked by unseen powers at least a few times a year
Cambodia	78%	97%	90%	67%	78%	23%	96%	22%	43%
Indonesia	100	85	95	98	55	95	7	7	25
Malaysia	99	74	73	85	69	82	13	14	33
Singapore	87	73	70	36	55	43	44	26	33
Sri Lanka	90	88	85	92	54	76	92	62	33
Thailand	81	95	86	65	49	30	84	62	24

Note: Darker shades represent higher values. Respondents were asked separately if they believe in God or if they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits. Respondents were asked separately how often they have the feeling of being protected by an unseen power and how often they have the feeling of being attacked by an unseen power.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Rates of specific religious practices often are related to the religious makeup of each country. For example, overwhelming majorities in Cambodia (96%), Sri Lanka (92%) and Thailand (84%) say they burn incense; all three are Buddhist-majority countries, and Buddhists across southern Asia are more likely than Hindus, Christians or Muslims to burn incense. Meditation is also highest in the Buddhist-majority countries of Thailand and Sri Lanka (62% each), although Hindus across the region are more likely than Buddhists to say they practice meditation.

By contrast, daily prayer is most common in Indonesia and Malaysia, the two Muslim-majority countries in the survey. And, across the region, Muslims are more likely to say they pray at least once a day than are Hindus, Christians or Buddhists.

By multiple measures, religiously unaffiliated adults in Singapore are among the least religious or spiritual people in the region. But sizable shares of unaffiliated Singaporeans do express some religious or spiritual beliefs or follow some practices. (For a more detailed look at Singapore's

unaffiliated population, read [“Who are the people in Singapore who don’t identify with a religion, and what do they believe?”](#))

Praying or offering respects to figures from other religions

In the countries surveyed, many religious beliefs and practices are shared by different religious communities. This includes a propensity to show respect for – or even to pray to – deities or religious figures commonly associated with another faith.

Sri Lankans often pray or offer their respects to figures from other religions

% who say they pray or offer their respects to each of the following figures



Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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For instance, nearly one-in-five Singaporean Buddhists (18%) say they pray or offer their respects to Allah, while almost half of Malaysian Hindus (47%) say they pray or offer respects to Jesus Christ.

In general, Hindus are the most likely to pray or offer their respects to deities or founder figures not traditionally associated with their community, while Muslims are generally the least likely to do this. For example, in Singapore, 66% of Hindus and just 9% of Muslims say they pray or offer respects to Jesus Christ. In fact, Singapore's religiously unaffiliated adults (16%) are more likely than the country's Muslims to say they pray or offer respects to Jesus Christ.

Sri Lanka, an island nation south of India, also stands out as a place where people pray or offer respects to founder figures and deities – both the ones traditionally associated with their religion and those from other traditions. For instance, 48% of Sri Lankan Christians say they pray or offer their respects to Ganesh, the Hindu god of beginnings who is considered a [remover of obstacles](#). But in the other countries surveyed, only about 5% of Christians do so. And 71% of the island's Muslims say they pray or offer respects to Buddha, while very few Muslims in the other countries surveyed do this.

In addition to Buddha, Allah, Jesus Christ and Ganesh, the survey also asked about Mother Mary, Shiva, Guanyin and “protector spirits” in general. For more about people's relationships with deities, spirits and religious founder figures, read [Chapter 4](#).

Religious funeral practices

Rituals surrounding death are important to all the major religious groups in the countries surveyed.

For instance, most people in the Buddhist-majority countries of Cambodia (84%), Sri Lanka (80%) and Thailand (80%), as well as in Muslim-majority Indonesia (72%) and Malaysia (61%), say it would be very important to invite a religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach if they were planning the funeral of a family member or loved one.

Most people in the Buddhist-majority countries surveyed also say it would be very

important to perform rituals for the relative in a temple or other house of worship, and to set up a shrine or altar for the deceased.⁶ Altars are especially valued by Buddhists in these countries: For example, 63% of Thai Buddhists say that setting up an altar would be very important, compared with just 6% of Thai Muslims who say the same about a shrine. Many people across religious groups also say it is very important to offer donations in the name of deceased relatives, including 71% of Christians in Indonesia, 61% of Muslims in Malaysia and 70% of Buddhists in Cambodia.

People in Singapore generally are less inclined than those in neighboring countries to say each of the four funerary rituals is very important, although more than half of Singaporeans say each ritual would be at least somewhat important if they were planning the funeral of a loved one.

Religious funeral practices especially common in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand

*% in each country who say it would be **very important** to ____ if they were planning the funeral of a family member/loved one*

	Invite a religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach*	Perform rituals in a temple, mosque or other house of worship for the soul of the deceased relative	Offer donations in the name of the deceased relative	Set up a shrine/altar for the deceased relative
Cambodia	84%	75%	70%	74%
Indonesia	72	56	65	31
Malaysia	61	46	58	29
Singapore	37	39	32	27
Sri Lanka	80	73	81	56
Thailand	80	78	43	57

* Buddhists were asked about a monk or learned person. Muslims were asked about an imam or sheikh. Christians were asked about a priest or pastor. Hindus were asked about a pundit or learned person.

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

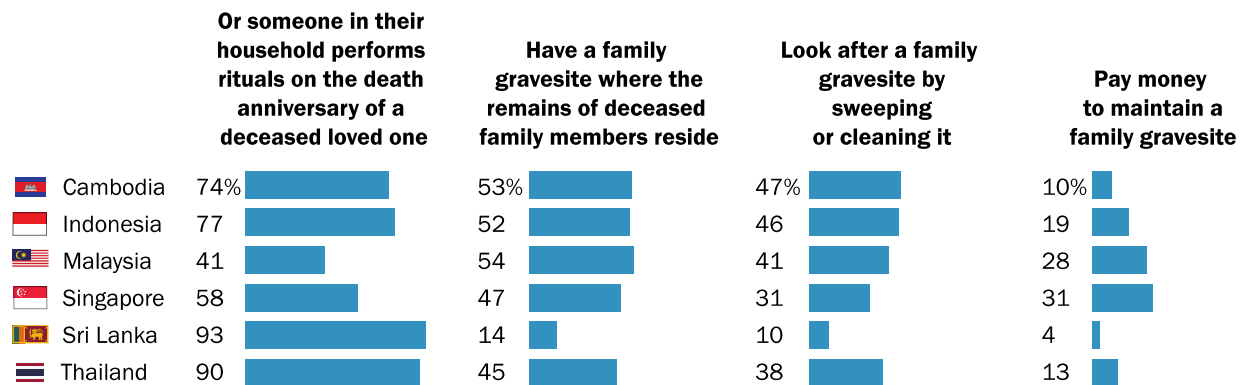
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⁶ In this context, a funerary altar may be understood as a raised location dedicated to the deceased person's memory, typically in a family member's home. It may be distinct from a household's primary altar (if they have one) or combined with other sacred objects. A memorial altar typically might include the following: an image of the deceased, a place to set out a flower, a small bowl for rice, a beverage (frequently tea) or incense sticks. Cremated remains can be placed on altars, too.

Across the countries surveyed, rituals surrounding deceased loved ones do not end after the funeral. Most people in five of the six surveyed countries (with the exception of Malaysia) say someone in their household performs rituals on the anniversary of the death of a loved one, including 93% in Sri Lanka and 90% in Thailand. This type of ritual crosses religious lines, with Sri Lanka as a prime example: Roughly eight-in-ten or more Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus in the country say someone in their household performs rituals on death anniversaries.

9 in 10 households in Sri Lanka and Thailand perform rituals on death anniversaries

% in each country who say they ...



Note: Only those who have a family gravesite were asked about sweeping gravesites or paying money to maintain them. However, the numbers here present the share of the total population who do each activity.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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It also is fairly common across these countries to have a family gravesite where the remains of family members reside. Roughly half of respondents in five of the six surveyed countries (this time, with Sri Lanka as the exception) say this is the case. Among those who have a family gravesite, most people say they look after it by sweeping or cleaning it. It is generally less common for people to pay money to maintain a family gravesite.

By some measures, older adults are more religious than younger adults

Since this is the first time Pew Research Center has conducted an extensive, national survey on religion in most of these countries, opportunities for looking at how religious beliefs and practices are changing over time are limited.⁷ But differences between older and younger adults may provide clues into how each country is changing religiously.⁸

In five of the six countries surveyed, nearly universal shares of both younger and older adults identify with a religion. Only in Singapore are younger adults (ages 18 to 34) slightly more likely than older adults to be religiously unaffiliated (26% vs. 20%).

⁷ In 2011-2012, Pew Research Center surveyed [countries with significant Muslim populations](#) around the world, including Indonesia and Malaysia. (The previous survey also included Thai Muslims, but interviews were conducted only in the country's southernmost provinces.) Given differences in the wording and translation of questions, only limited comparisons of religiosity can be made between the 2011-2012 survey and the 2022 survey, but the findings suggest that Muslims in the two countries at both times have been quite religious. For example, in 2011-2012, at least nine-in-ten Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims said religion was very important in their lives, and at least nine-in-ten Muslims in both countries say the same in the new survey. While the 2022 Malaysia survey was conducted by telephone, the 2011-2012 Malaysia survey was conducted face-to-face.

⁸ Differences between older and younger respondents, however, are not necessarily indicative of changes in a society over time. In some contexts, adults tend to [become more religious as they age](#), perhaps as a result of [marrying and having children](#) or growing closer to death.

Across the countries surveyed, however, older adults are more likely than those ages 18 to 34 to be religious by a handful of standard measures – in line with the broad patterns seen in [a 2018 Center analysis](#) of the age gap in religiosity around the world.

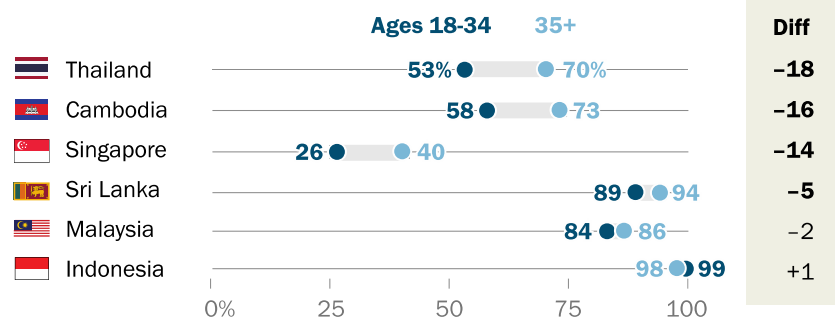
For example, in Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore and Sri Lanka, people ages 35 and older are more likely than younger adults to say religion is very important in their lives. (This is not the case in the two Muslim-majority countries surveyed, where there is little difference on this measure between age groups.)

Across most of the countries surveyed, older adults also are generally more likely than younger adults to say various religious activities would be very important for a loved one’s funeral.

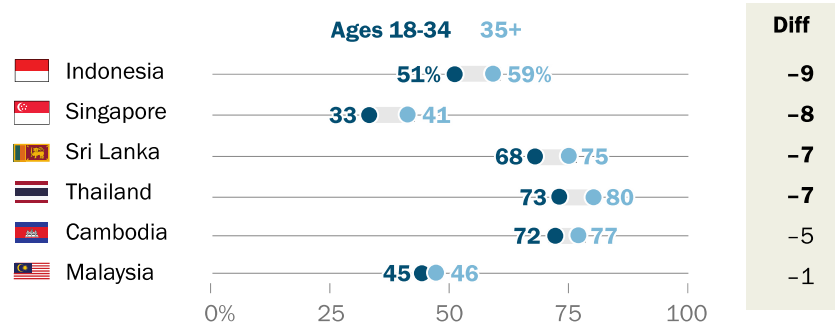
For instance, roughly four-in-ten older adults in Singapore say that if they were planning the funeral of a family member or loved one, it would be very important to perform rituals in a temple, mosque or other

Younger adults slightly more likely than their elders to believe in spirits

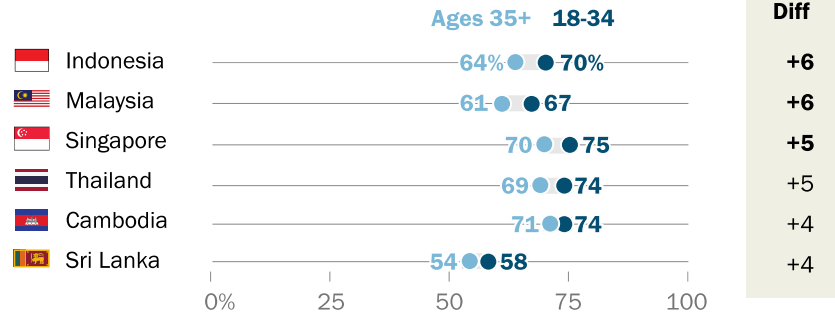
*% in each country who say religion is **very important** in their lives*



*% in each country who say it would be **very important** to perform rituals in a temple, mosque or other house of worship for the soul of the deceased relative, if they were planning the funeral for a family member/loved one*



% in each country who say they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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house of worship for the soul of the deceased relative. Just one-third of younger adults in Singapore say this.

Still, across many religious activities and beliefs, older and younger people are largely similar. For example, similar shares of older and younger adults in all six countries say they use special objects for blessings or protection.

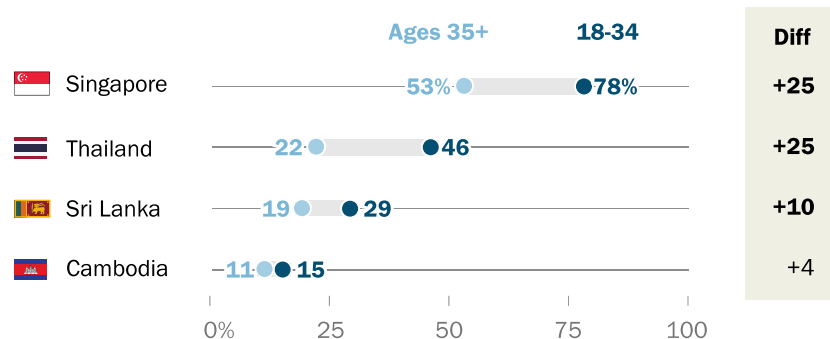
Moreover, in a few countries, older adults (ages 35 and older) are slightly *less* likely than younger adults to say they believe in unseen beings, like deities or spirits. For instance, 61% of older Malaysians say they think there are unseen beings in the world, compared with 67% of younger adults in the same country.

In several countries, younger Buddhist adults are more likely than older Buddhists to say it is acceptable for a person to leave Buddhism for another religion. For example, younger Thai Buddhists are twice as likely as those who are older to say that leaving Buddhism is acceptable (46% vs. 22%).

Among Muslims, only in Singapore are younger adults more likely than older Muslims to say it is acceptable to leave Islam for another religion (25% vs. 9%).

Younger Buddhists more accepting of religious conversion from Buddhism

% of **Buddhists** in each country who say it is acceptable for a person to leave Buddhism for another religion



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. Adequate sample size unavailable to analyze Buddhist respondents by age in Malaysia.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Sidebar: Regional economic growth has not led to widespread loss of religion

A theory in the social sciences hypothesizes that as countries advance economically and science takes a more prominent role in everyday life, populations tend to become less religious, often leading to wider social change. Known as [“secularization theory.”](#) it particularly reflects the experience of Western European countries from the end of World War II to the present, though it has its roots in earlier writings.

Recent academic research suggests that [changes in religiosity stemming from economic development are more limited](#) – tied to levels of religious identification or worship service attendance, rather than to the beliefs people hold – though others argue that [secularization has increased dramatically in recent years](#). Pew Research Center’s previous work found [only minimal support for secularization theory in India](#).

Data from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia finds a bit of a mixed bag – some cases in which higher economic development seems to go hand in hand with less religion, but many others where there is no such correlation. For example, [Singapore’s per capita gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#) is about four times as large as any other surveyed country’s GDP, and it has by far [the largest share of religiously unaffiliated individuals](#). Singapore also has the smallest share of adults [who say religion is very important in their lives](#).

However, adults in Singapore are just as spiritual or religious as those in neighboring countries by other measures. For example, 87% of Singaporean adults say they believe in God or unseen beings – a higher share than in Cambodia (78%) or Thailand (81%). Meanwhile, nearly identical shares of Singaporeans (55%), Indonesians (55%) and Sri Lankans (54%) say that spells, curses or other magic can influence people’s lives.

Moreover, all six countries surveyed have experienced strong rates of economic growth over the last 30 years. [Global per capita GDP](#) in 2022 is almost triple what it was in 1990, but the six surveyed countries each have seen [their per capita GDP](#) grow at a faster rate, nearly quadrupling (or more) over the last three decades. Even with these rates of growth, very few adults (except in Singapore) identify as religiously unaffiliated today.

More education not universally tied to less religious observance

	Rural	Urban	Diff	Less education	More education	Diff
<i>% in each country who say religion is very important in their lives</i>						
Cambodia	68%	65%	+3	69%	54%	+15
Indonesia	99	97	+2	98	98	+1
Malaysia	85	85	+1	86	80	+5
Singapore	--	--	--	42	32	+9
Sri Lanka	92	94	-2	96	90	+6
Thailand	66	64	+2	71	53	+18

% in each country who say they believe in karma

Cambodia	97	97	0	98	95	+3
Indonesia	84	86	-2	84	86	-2
Malaysia	74	74	0	75	68	+7
Singapore	--	--	--	76	72	+4
Sri Lanka	89	83	+6	86	89	-3
Thailand	95	95	0	95	94	+2

% in each country who say they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits

Cambodia	71	74	-4	73	68	+5
Indonesia	66	68	-2	63	74	-11
Malaysia	58	67	-8	62	73	-10
Singapore	--	--	--	65	76	-10
Sri Lanka	56	55	+1	56	55	+1
Thailand	69	72	-3	69	75	-6

*% in each country who say it would be **very important** to set up a shrine or altar for a deceased relative's funeral*

Cambodia	75	72	+3	76	64	+12
Indonesia	35	27	+7	38	18	+19
Malaysia	33	26	+7	30	17	+13
Singapore	--	--	--	36	22	+13
Sri Lanka	56	51	+5	65	51	+14
Thailand	61	53	+7	62	47	+16

Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. Singapore is solely classified as "urban," so no rural-urban comparisons can be made there. In Malaysia, "suburban" is included with "urban." For the purpose of comparing educational groups across countries, we standardize education levels based on the UN's International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education, and the higher category is secondary or above in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Malaysia and Singapore, the lower education category is secondary education or below, and the higher category is postsecondary or above.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Those who live in urban settings are broadly as religious or spiritual as those in rural locations. In Malaysia, for instance, 74% of both urban and rural residents say they believe in karma.⁹ Rural people are slightly more likely than urban residents to follow a few funerary practices. In Indonesia, for example, 35% of rural residents say setting up a shrine is very important when planning a family member's funeral, compared with 27% among urban Indonesians.

There is a somewhat stronger association between educational attainment and religion. Several measures of religious commitment are less common among people who have received more education. For example, Cambodians who have received at least a secondary education are less likely than other Cambodians to say religion is very important in their lives (54% vs. 69%) or to say a shrine would be very important for a deceased relative's funeral (64% vs. 76%).

But, again, there are a number of beliefs and practices that do not show a pattern in which more education is associated with lower levels of belief. For instance, belief in karma is roughly the same within each country, no matter a person's level of education. And people who have more education are *more* likely than other adults to say they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits. In Singapore, for example, 76% of college-educated adults believe there are unseen beings, compared with 65% of other Singaporeans.

⁹ In Malaysia, "suburban" is included with "urban."

Share of Singaporeans identifying as Christian or unaffiliated is increasing

Singapore differs from the other countries surveyed in that it has no majority religion, and thus no single religion that is clearly associated with Singaporean national identity.

It also stands out in another way: While nearly all adults surveyed in the other countries still identify with the religion in which they were raised, far fewer Singaporeans do (64%). This “religious switching” has led to declines especially in the share of Singaporeans who identify as Buddhist or as followers of Chinese traditional religions, and to *increasing* shares who are Christian or religiously unaffiliated.

Among Singaporean adults, 32% say they were raised Buddhist, which is significantly more than the share who identify as Buddhist today (26%). The gap is even bigger when it comes to the share who identify with Chinese traditional religions, such as Taoism, Confucianism or Chinese local religions: 15% say they were raised in these traditions, while just 6% identify with Chinese traditional religions today.

By contrast, the share of Singaporeans who identify as Christian today is higher than the share who say they were raised Christian (17% vs. 11%). The same is true for adults in Singapore who do not identify with any religion: 22% of adults say they are religiously unaffiliated today, compared with 13% who say they were raised with no religion.

A similar pattern can be seen in Singapore’s census records over the last few decades. (Read [“Singapore’s changing religious identity”](#) for an analysis of this census data.)

Many adults in Singapore are shedding Buddhist, Chinese traditional religious identities

% of Singapore’s adults who were raised/are currently ...

	Raised	Currently	Net change
Buddhist	32%	26%	-6
Muslim	17	18	0
Christian	11	17	+6
Hindu	8	8	0
A follower of Chinese traditional religions	15	6	-10
Other religions	3	4	+1
No religion	13	22	+9

Note: The full answer option wording for “Chinese traditional religions” is “Chinese traditional religions, such as Tao, Confucian or Chinese local religions.” The small number of respondents who did not provide their current or childhood religion or selected “Local beliefs/Indigenous religions” are included in the “Other religions” category. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Yet the story of religious change in Singapore is not simply that Buddhists and followers of Chinese traditional religions are leaving their childhood faiths for Christianity or to have no religious affiliation.

For instance, while 13% of Singapore's adults were raised Buddhist but no longer identify as Buddhist, the share in the country who currently identify as Buddhist has decreased by only 6 percentage points because 7% of Singaporean adults converted into Buddhism (either from a different childhood religion or from no religion).

And while 15% of the country's adult population has left behind a childhood religion to become religiously unaffiliated, the share of Singaporeans who identify with no religion has had a net increase of only 9 points, because 6% of the adult population has moved in the opposite direction: They are people who were raised without a religious affiliation but have since joined a religion (mostly Buddhism or Christianity).

While continued religious churn and other factors will also affect Singapore's future religious composition, the way in which current parents say they are raising their children suggests that Buddhists may continue to decline as a share of the overall population.

Only two-thirds of Buddhist parents say they are raising their children as Buddhist; roughly one-quarter of Buddhist parents (27%) say their children are being raised with no religion. By contrast, much higher shares of Singapore's Muslim (99%) and Christian (90%) parents say they are raising their children as Muslims and Christians, respectively. And the survey finds that 85% of religiously unaffiliated parents are raising their children without a religion.

15% of Singaporean adults have disaffiliated from a religion since childhood

% of Singapore's adults who were ...

	Raised ___ but now identify as something else (i.e., leaving a religion)	Raised as something else but now identify as ___ (i.e., entering a religion)
Buddhist	13%	7%
Muslim	0	1
Christian	3	9
Hindu	1	1
Follower of Chinese traditional religions	11	1
Other religions	2	3
No religion	6	15

Note: The full answer option wording for "Chinese traditional religions" is "Chinese traditional religions, such as Tao, Confucian or Chinese local religions." The small number of respondents who did not provide their current or childhood religion or selected "Local beliefs" are included in the "Other religions" category, however, determination of conversion status was determined by matches between question response categories, not combined groupings.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Sidebar: Singapore's changing religious identity

According to the national census, the religious makeup of Singapore today is markedly different from 40 years ago.¹⁰ Alongside [rapid economic growth](#), the religiously unaffiliated have increased from 13% to 20% of the adult population. However, this period has also seen Christians roughly double as a share of the national population, from 10% in 1980 to 19% in 2020.

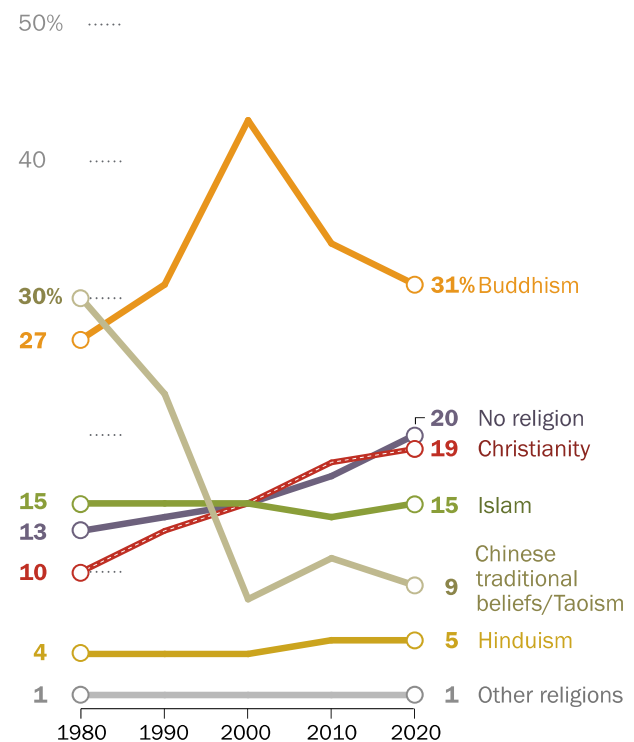
After increasing between 1980 and 2000 (from 27% to 43%), Singapore's Buddhist population has since decreased to 1990 levels (31%).

Meanwhile, the share of Singapore's adults who identify with Chinese traditional beliefs (including Taoism) decreased from 30% in 1980 to roughly one-tenth in 2000 and generally has held steady since then.¹¹

Since 1980, the percentages of Singaporeans identifying as Muslim, Hindu and other religions have remained fairly steady.

Increasing shares of Singaporean adults identify as Christian or religiously unaffiliated

% of *Singapore's adults* categorized into each religious community, based on census data



Note: The first census post-independence (1970) did not include religion as a question. Sikhism is included in "Other religions." Adults are those ages 18 and older.

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, decennial censuses. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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¹⁰ Census figures for [2000](#), [2010](#) and [2020](#) are from Singapore's Department of Statistics website. Figures for 1980 and 1990 were provided by the Department of Statistics upon request.

¹¹ Chinese Traditional Beliefs and Taoism are considered together in Singapore's census.

Who are the people in Singapore who don't identify with a religion, and what do they believe?

In stark contrast with neighboring populations in which nearly everyone claims a religious affiliation, roughly one-in-five Singaporeans do not identify with any religion – a group sometimes referred to as the “nones.” Singapore’s “nones” are overwhelmingly of Chinese descent and mostly college educated.

By some measures, Singapore’s religiously unaffiliated population does not appear very religious or spiritual. For instance, only 3% of the country’s “nones” say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 36% of Singaporean adults overall.

But as a group, Singapore’s religiously unaffiliated do not completely disavow religious or spiritual beliefs and practices. Nearly two-thirds of the “nones” (65%) say they think karma exists, and 43% say that a person can feel the presence of deceased family members – roughly comparable to the shares of Muslims (47%) and Christians (43%) in Singapore who say the same.

When asked about planning a funeral for a family member or loved one, many of Singapore’s religious “nones” also place importance on activities that could be considered spiritual or religious.

Majority of Singapore’s religious ‘nones’ say they believe in God or unseen beings

% of Singapore’s adults who say ...

	They believe in God or unseen beings	They think karma exists	A person can feel the presence of a deceased family member	They think the evil eye exists	They ever burn incense	Religion is very important in their lives	They ever practice meditation
General population	87%	73%	51%	47%	44%	36%	26%
Buddhist	91	90	60	49	77	20	32
No religion	62	65	43	26	39	3	18
Muslim	100	76	47	81	8	83	15
Christian	100	46	43	34	15	61	27
Hindu	98	95	71	68	67	52	58
Follower of Chinese traditional religions	90	86	68	52	86	13	20

Note: Darker shades represent higher values. Respondents were asked separately if they believe in God or if they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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For example, 52% of those who claim no religion say it would be important to perform rituals in temples for the soul of the deceased relative, and 46% feel it would be important to set up an altar for the deceased relative.

Everyone who took the survey was asked whether they believe in God and, separately, whether they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits.

About four-in-ten religiously unaffiliated Singaporeans (41%) say they believe in God, and a slim majority (56%) think there are unseen beings in the world. Roughly six-in-ten Singaporean “nones” (62%) hold *at least one* of these beliefs.

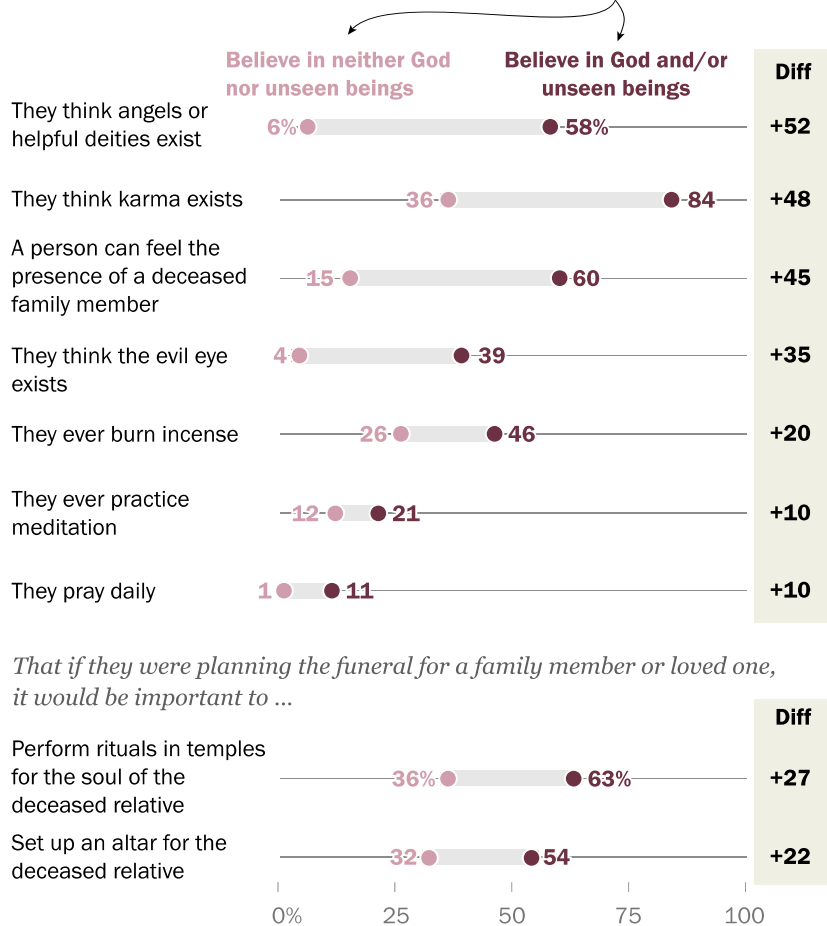
“Nones” who are women are more likely than religiously unaffiliated men to believe in God and/or unseen beings (68% vs. 57%). Also,

Singaporeans who were raised in a religion but are unaffiliated as adults are more likely to believe in God or unseen beings (66%) than Singaporeans who were raised with no religious affiliation and are still “nones” today (52%).

By nearly every measure included in the survey, the religiously unaffiliated who say they believe in God and/or unseen beings (“believing nones”) are more likely than other “nones” to connect with spiritual and religious concepts. For instance, the vast majority of “believing nones” also think

Majority of Singapore’s unaffiliated who believe in God, unseen beings also think karma exists

Among Singapore’s religiously unaffiliated adults who _____, % who say ...



That if they were planning the funeral for a family member or loved one, it would be important to ...

Note: Respondents were asked separately if they believe in God or if they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits. All differences are statistically significant. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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karma exists (84%), but only 36% of Singapore's other "nones" believe in karma. And the religiously unaffiliated who believe in God and/or unseen beings are much more likely than others to say that it would be important to perform rituals in temples for the soul of the deceased relative when planning a funeral (63% vs. 36%).

How those who link religious and national identities differ from others

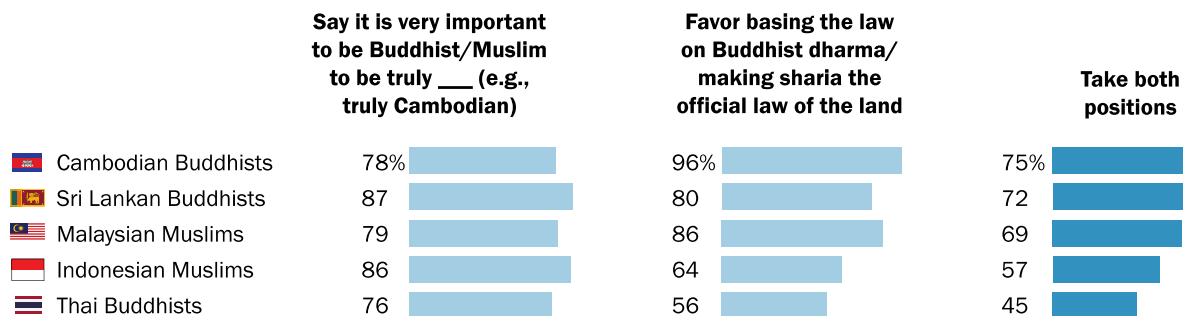
Some [regional scholars have noted](#) increasing [support for nationalistic movements](#) centered on each country's majority religion.¹²

As explained above, many members of the religious majority in each country (Buddhists in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia) say it is very important to be a member of their religious group to truly share their national identity. Many also say they want their society's laws to be based on their religion's teachings.

People who take one of these positions are especially likely to take the other. And those who express *both* views are referred to in this section as **“religion-state integrationists.”** (Broadly, religion-state integration can be understood as the opposite of “separation of church and state,” the principle that the power of the state should not be used to coerce or promote religion, which is legally or traditionally followed [in the United States](#) and [some other countries](#).)

Cambodia's Buddhists nearly all support basing the law on Buddhist dharma

% who ...



Note: In Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, respondents were asked about the importance of being Buddhist to national identity and basing the law on Buddhist dharma. In Indonesia and Malaysia, respondents were asked about the importance of being Muslim to national identity and making sharia the official law of the land.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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¹² Barr, Michael D. 2010. “[The Islamisation of Malaysia: Religious nationalism in the service of ethnonationalism.](#)” Australian Journal of International Affairs. Also refer to Tonsakulrungruang, Khemthong. 2021. “[The revival of Buddhist nationalism in Thailand and its adverse impact on religious freedom.](#)” Asian Journal of Law and Society. And read the following for information on Cambodia's distinct recent history of nationalism: Keyes, Charles. 2016. “[Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand.](#)” The Review of Faith & International Affairs.

A majority of Muslims in Indonesia (57%) and Malaysia (69%) are religion-state integrationists, as are most Buddhists in Sri Lanka (72%) and Cambodia (75%). A sizable minority of Thai Buddhists (45%) also fall into this category.

‘Religion-state integrationists’ are especially religious

Religion-state integrationists stand out from other members of their religious communities in a variety of ways.

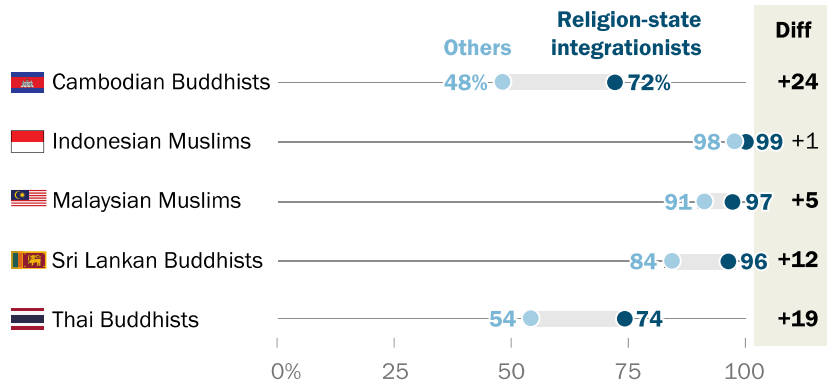
While the region overall is very religious, religion-state integrationists generally are even *more* religious than other people, across a host of measures.

Among Cambodian Buddhists, for example, those who say both that it is very important to be Buddhist to be truly Cambodian and that Cambodian law should be based on Buddhist dharma are much more likely than other Buddhists to say religion is very important in their lives (72% vs. 48%).

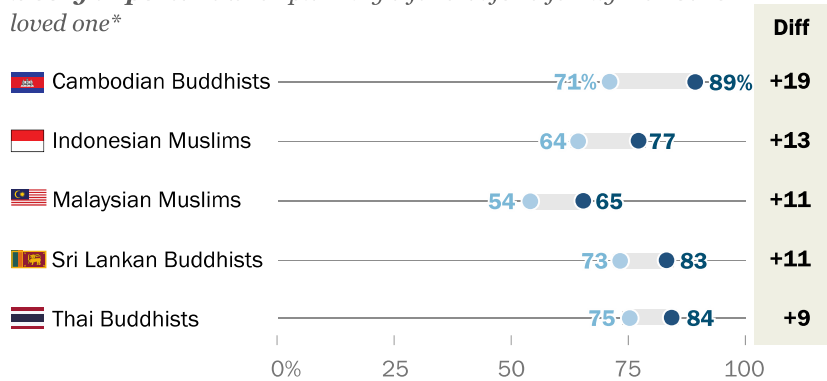
Attitudes relating to funerals show a similar divide. For instance, about three-quarters of religion-state integrationists in Indonesia’s Muslim community say inviting an imam or sheikh to recite sacred texts or preach is very important when planning a family member’s funeral, compared with roughly two-thirds of other Muslims in the country (77% vs. 64%).

Those who strongly link their nation and religion are more likely to be religious

*% who say religion is **very important** in their lives*



*% who say inviting a religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach is **very important** when planning a funeral for a family member or loved one**



* Buddhists were asked about “a monk or learned person.” Muslims were asked about “an imam or sheikh.”

Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. “Religion-state integrationists” are those who say that it is very important to be a member of their religious community to truly share the national identity and that they want their society’s laws to be based on their religion.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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(For more on this region's general levels of religiosity, including among minority communities, read [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#). For more on funeral practices, refer to [Chapter 5](#).)

Religion-state integrationists also are:

- More likely than other Buddhists or Muslims in their countries to support religious leaders' involvement in politics.
- Less likely to want neighbors from minority religions.
- Slightly more likely to see threats to their religion from minority religious communities.

These relationships generally hold even when controlling for other factors, such as level of personal religiosity, age, gender and education. In other words, correlations between views on the relationship between religion and state and opinions on these other issues exist above and beyond the fact that religion-state integrationists are more religious. Cambodia's religion-state integrationists sometimes defy the patterns seen across the other four surveyed countries.

Religion in politics

As one might expect, religion-state integrationists are somewhat more likely than others in their communities to support religious leaders' direct involvement in politics.

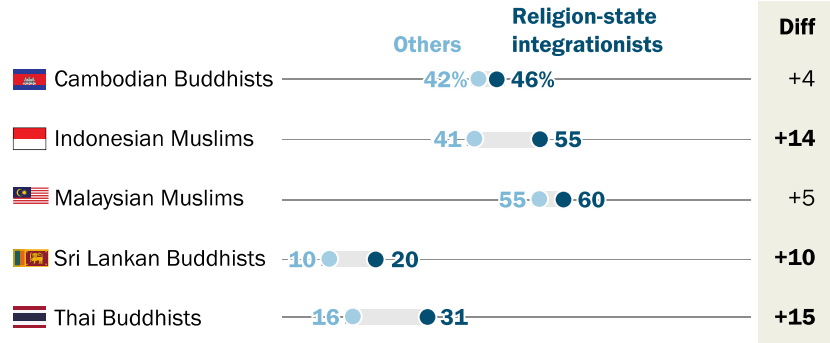
In Thailand, for instance, Buddhists who link Buddhist and Thai identities and say Thai law should be based on Buddhist dharma are roughly twice as likely as other Buddhists to say religious leaders should be politicians (31% vs. 16%).

Even among Buddhist religion-state integrationists, however, around half or fewer say religious leaders should be politicians, talk publicly about the politicians they support, or participate in political protests. Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia are more inclined to favor religious leaders' involvement in the political sphere.

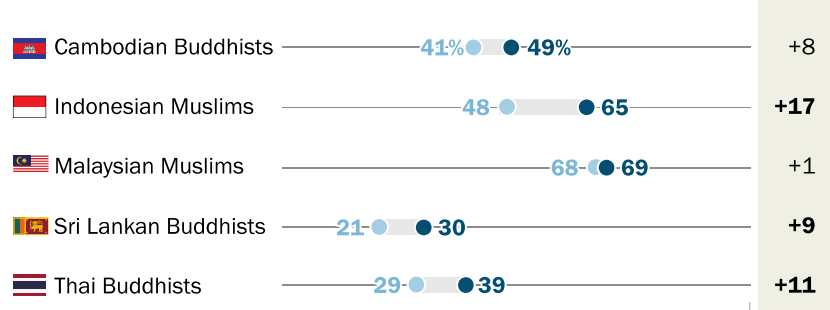
Members of the majority religious community who strongly link their religion with the national identity also are more likely than others to say that disrespecting their country

Religion-state integrationists more likely than others to support religious leaders being politicians

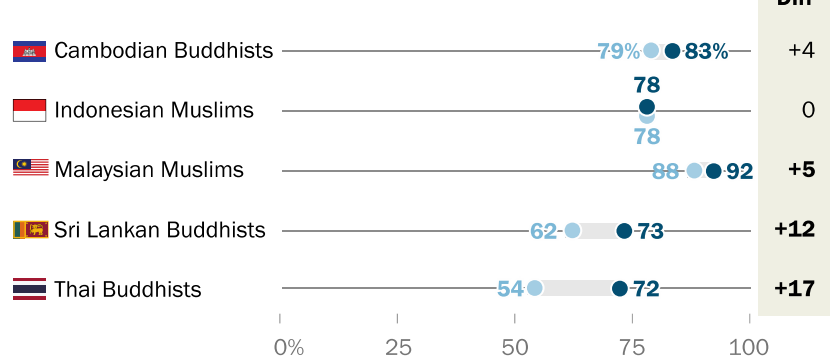
% who say religious leaders should be politicians



% who say religious leaders should talk publicly about what politicians or political leaders they support



% who say that if a person does not respect their country, they cannot be truly part of their religion



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. "Religion-state integrationists" are those who say that it is very important to be a member of their religious community to truly share the national identity and that they want their society's laws to be based on their religion.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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disqualifies someone from being truly part of their religion. Among Sri Lankan Buddhists, 73% of religion-state integrationists say that if a person does not respect Sri Lanka, they cannot be truly Buddhist – significantly more than the share of other Sri Lankan Buddhists who say disrespecting Sri Lanka disqualifies someone from being Buddhist (62%).

(For more on the role of religious leaders in politics, read [Chapter 7](#). For more on what activities would disqualify someone from being part of a religious community, refer to [Chapter 2](#).)

Views toward minority religions

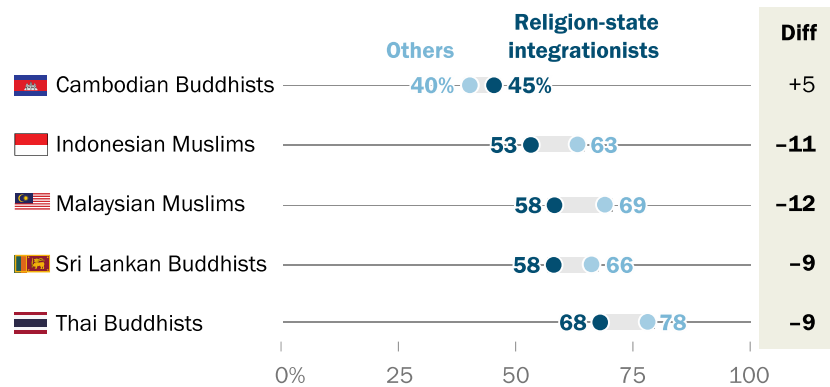
Buddhist nationalism has been linked with antagonism and violence between Buddhists and religious minorities in countries dominated by Theravada Buddhism, including during the **Sri Lankan civil war**. Similarly, some scholars have asserted that there is a connection between rising “**religious nationalism**” and xenophobia in Muslim-majority Indonesia.

In general, people who say that it is very important to be a member of their religious community to truly share the national identity *and* that they want their society’s laws to be based on their religion are less likely to see other religions as compatible with their country’s culture and values. They are also less likely to accept followers of other religions as neighbors – although most religion-state integrationists say they *would* be willing to accept people from other religions as neighbors.

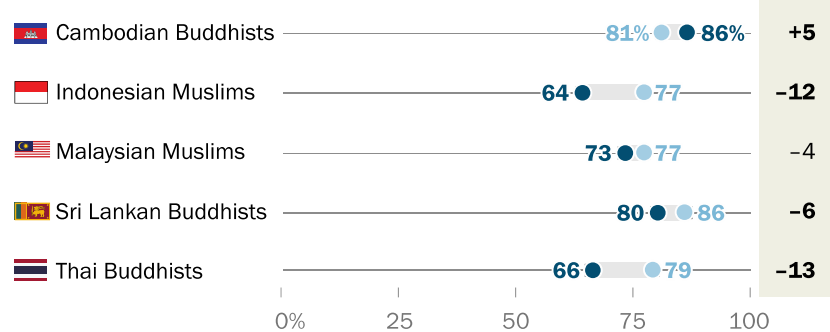
For example, among Indonesian Muslims, religion-state integrationists are less likely than other Muslims to say Christianity is compatible with Indonesian culture and values (53% vs. 63%) or to say they would accept Christians as neighbors (64% vs. 77%). This pattern broadly holds when asking about other religious communities, such as Hindus and followers of Chinese traditional religions.

Religion-state integrationists less willing to accept Christian neighbors

% who say Christianity is compatible with their country’s culture and values



% who say they would be willing to accept Christians as neighbors



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. “Religion-state integrationists” are those who say that it is very important to be a member of their religious community to truly share the national identity and that they want their society’s laws to be based on their religion.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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However, Cambodian Buddhists stand out. There are no significant differences between religion-state integrationists and other Buddhists in Cambodia on any questions about the compatibility of other religions with Cambodia's culture and values or potential neighbors.

(For more on attitudes toward other religious groups across the surveyed countries, read [Chapter 6](#).)

Those who link religion and national identity and say their national laws should be based on religion are slightly more likely to say that the growing numbers of various religious minorities are a threat to Buddhism or Islam in their country.

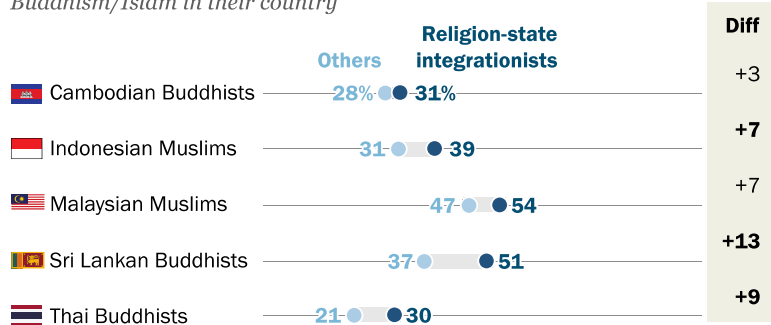
For instance, three-in-ten Thai Buddhists who are religion-state integrationists say the growing number of Christians in Thailand is a threat to Thai Buddhism – more than the 21% of other Thai Buddhists who voice this opinion.

(These questions were designed to gauge demographic anxieties, regardless of whether or not these minority populations are actually growing within the countries surveyed.)

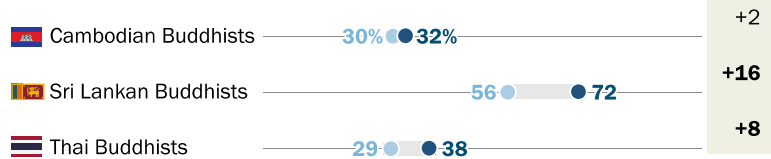
In general, religion-state integrationists also are somewhat more likely than other Buddhists or Muslims to say that tourists from other countries and the influence of China are threats to Buddhism and Islam in their country. However, they are no more likely to see extremists from their own community as a

Religion-state integrationists more likely to see threat in minority religious population growth

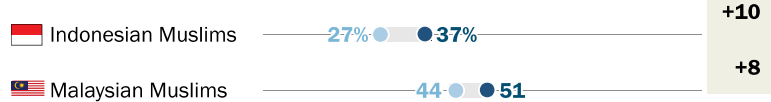
% who say the growing number of Christians is a threat to Buddhism/Islam in their country



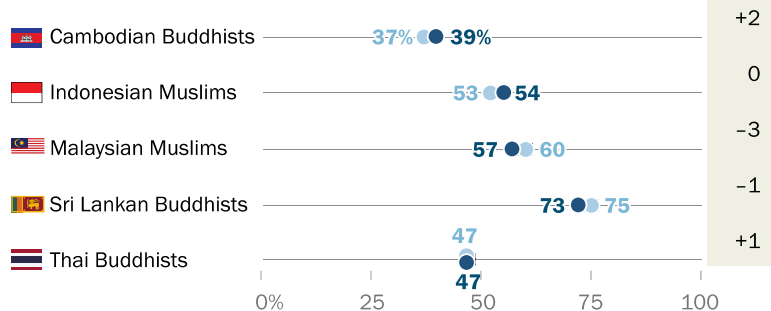
% who say the growing number of Muslims is a threat to Buddhism in their country



% who say the growing number of Buddhists is a threat to Islam in their country



% who say extremists from their own community are a threat to Buddhism/Islam in their country



Note: Buddhists were asked about threats to Buddhism; Muslims were asked about threats to Islam. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. “Religion-state integrationists” are those who say that it is very important to be a member of their religious community to truly share the national identity and that they want their society’s laws to be based on their religion. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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threat to Buddhism or Islam in their country. Among Sri Lanka's Buddhists, for example, roughly three-quarters of both religion-state integrationists and others say that Buddhist extremists are a threat to Buddhism in Sri Lanka (73% and 75%, respectively).

Similarly, there is generally no difference between the groups within a country when asked whether the influence of the United States is a threat.

As with other topics, there are no significant differences on perceived threats to Buddhism in Cambodia between Buddhists who do or do not classify as religion-state integrationists. (For more on attitudes about perceived threats to Buddhism and Islam, refer to [Chapter 6](#).)

1. Religious landscape and change

Among the six countries surveyed, Buddhists make up a majority in three (Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand) and Muslims in two (Indonesia and Malaysia). Singapore, which ranks [among the most religiously diverse countries](#) in the world, has no majority religion and is home to substantial communities of Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, followers of Chinese traditional religions and religiously unaffiliated people.

Singapore also is the only country surveyed in which a considerable share of people have a religious identity that differs from the way they were raised. Around a third of Singaporean adults (35%) have changed their religion during their lifetime.

Similarly, with the exception of Singapore, nearly all respondents in the region say they are raising their children in the same religion as their own.

Not only is there little religious change in most of these countries, but large majorities across countries and religious groups generally think it is unacceptable to leave their religion, and most respondents also consider it unacceptable for someone to try to persuade others to join their religion. Again, Singaporeans stand out with differing opinions on these questions, with the growing Christian community particularly likely to see proselytization as acceptable.

Buddhists or Muslims make up majorities in most countries surveyed

The survey finds that most adults in Cambodia (96%), Thailand (90%) and Sri Lanka (71%) identify as Buddhists, while majorities in Indonesia (93%) and Malaysia (75%) identify as Muslim. By contrast, no religious group in Singapore forms a majority.¹³

Muslims make up 7% of adults in Thailand and 8% in Sri Lanka, which also has substantial shares of Hindus (12%) and Christians (9%).

In Muslim-majority Malaysia, 10% of the adult population identifies as Christian, 7% as Buddhist and 5% as Hindu, according to this survey. And in Indonesia, Christians make up the largest religious minority group, at 6% of the adult population.

Singapore stands out from other countries because of its population's [religious diversity](#). Around a quarter of adults in Singapore identify as Buddhists (26%), according to the survey, while 18% are Muslims and 17% are Christians. Smaller shares are Hindus (8%) or followers of Chinese traditional religions (6%). Notably, 22% of Singaporean adults say they have no religion, making Singapore the only country in the survey with a substantial share of religiously unaffiliated adults.

Most people in the countries surveyed identify as Buddhist or Muslim

% of adults in each country who identify as ...

	Buddhist	Muslim	Christian	Hindu	A follower of Chinese traditional religions	Some other religion	No religion
Cambodia	96%	2%	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%
Thailand	90	7	2	0	0	0	0
Sri Lanka	71	8	9	12	--	0	0
Singapore	26	18	17	8	6	4	22
Malaysia	7	75	10	5	1	0	2
Indonesia	0	93	6	1	0	0	0

Note: "Some other religion" includes those who selected "Local beliefs/Indigenous religions." The full answer option wording for "Chinese traditional religions" is "Chinese traditional religions, such as Tao, Confucian or Chinese local religions." Respondents in Sri Lanka were not presented the options "Chinese traditional religions" or "Local beliefs/Indigenous religions." Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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¹³ For [Cambodia](#), [Indonesia](#), [Singapore](#), [Sri Lanka](#) and [Thailand](#), the survey figures broadly align with the figures cited in each country's most recent national census. However, the survey only includes adult respondents, and census figures typically include all people, regardless of age. While the [2020 Malaysian census](#) and our survey both show a clear Muslim-majority population, the survey indicates a higher share identify as Muslim (75% in the adult-only survey vs. 64% in the full population census) and a lower share identify as Buddhist (7% survey vs. 19% census).

Across the region, few people have changed their religion

In five of the six countries surveyed, [at least 95% of adults still identify with the religion in which they were raised](#). Consequently, the share of people raised in each religion roughly matches the share who identify with that religion today.

In Thailand, for instance, 98% of all respondents say their current religion is the same as their childhood religion. While 91% of Thai adults say they were raised Buddhist, 90% are Buddhists today. And identical shares of Thais say they were raised Muslim and are currently Muslim (7% each).

There is a similar pattern in Indonesia, where virtually all respondents identify with a religion that matches how they were raised as children.

Share of people who identify with each religion generally matches the share who were raised in that religion

% in each country who say they were/are ...

	Raised Buddhist	Currently Buddhist	Net change
Cambodia	96%	96%	0
Malaysia	7	7	-1
Sri Lanka	71	71	0
Thailand	91	90	0
	Raised Muslim	Currently Muslim	Net change
Indonesia	92	93	0
Malaysia	74	75	+1
Sri Lanka	8	8	0
Thailand	7	7	0
	Raised Christian	Currently Christian	Net change
Indonesia	6	6	0
Malaysia	10	10	0
Sri Lanka	8	9	+1
	Raised Hindu	Currently Hindu	Net change
Malaysia	5	5	0*
Sri Lanka	13	12	-1

* There is a difference of -0.2 percentage points between the share of Malaysians who were raised Hindu (5.1%) and the share who are currently Hindu (4.9%), which rounds to 0 but is nonetheless statistically significant.

Note: Results for Singapore not included in this table. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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In Singapore, respondents report a much higher degree of religious change. Overall, 64% of Singaporeans say their current religion is the same as their childhood religion, while 35% say their religion has changed.

These changes have resulted in a decline in the share of Singaporeans identifying as Buddhists or as followers of Chinese traditional religions. For instance, while 32% of Singaporean respondents report being raised as Buddhists, 26% currently identify as Buddhists. And 15% of adults in Singapore say they were raised to follow Chinese traditional religions, compared with 6% who claim such an identity today.

Contrastingly, a higher share of Singaporeans currently identify as Christian than the share who were raised Christian (17% vs. 11%). And the religiously unaffiliated population also has risen: 22% of Singaporeans now say they have no religion, up from 13% who say they were raised unaffiliated.

(For a more detailed discussion of religious conversion in Singapore, read [“Share of Singaporeans identifying as Christian or unaffiliated is increasing.”](#))

Many adults in Singapore are shedding Buddhist, Chinese traditional religious identities

% of Singapore’s adults who were raised/are currently ...

	Raised	Currently	Net change
Buddhist	32%	26%	-6
Muslim	17	18	0
Christian	11	17	+6
Hindu	8	8	0
A follower of Chinese traditional religions	15	6	-10
Other religions	3	4	+1
No religion	13	22	+9

Note: The full answer option wording for “Chinese traditional religions” is “Chinese traditional religions, such as Tao, Confucian or Chinese local religions.” The small number of respondents who did not provide their current or childhood religion or selected “Local beliefs/Indigenous religions” are included in the “Other religions” category. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Most parents surveyed are raising their children with the same religious identity as their own

The survey asked parents of children under 18 what religion they are raising their children in, if any. Across most countries in the survey, virtually all parents report that they are raising their children with a religious identity that matches their own.

This includes 100% of Thai Buddhist parents who are raising their children as Buddhists, as well as 100% of Malaysian Muslims who are raising their children as Muslims.

Parents in Singapore are an exception. Only 67% of Singaporean Buddhists say they are raising their children as Buddhists, while 85% of religiously unaffiliated Singaporean parents are raising their children without a religious affiliation. Even in Singapore, however, 99% of Muslim parents are raising their children as Muslims.

Virtually all Muslim parents report raising their children in Islam

% of parents who are raising their children in the same religion

Among Buddhists in ...

Cambodia	100%
Singapore	67
Sri Lanka	100
Thailand	100

Among Muslims in ...

Indonesia	100
Malaysia	100
Singapore	99
Sri Lanka	100
Thailand	99

Among Christians in ...

Singapore	90
Sri Lanka	84

Among Hindus in ...

Sri Lanka	94
-----------	----

Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...

Singapore	85
-----------	----

Note: Based on parents of children under 18. Adequate sample size unavailable to analyze Buddhist parents in Malaysia, Christian parents in Indonesia and Malaysia, Hindu parents in Malaysia and Singapore, or parents who identify as followers of Chinese traditional religions in Singapore.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Is it acceptable to leave your religion or to persuade others to join?

The stability in the religious identity of people across the region may be linked to largely restrictive attitudes on whether it is acceptable for someone to leave their religion for another religion.

Most adults across religious groups say it is unacceptable to leave one's own religion. This view is especially common among Muslims in Malaysia (98%), Thailand (93%) and Indonesia (92%).

But large majorities of Buddhists in Cambodia (82%), Sri Lanka (74%) and Thailand (69%) also say it is unacceptable for someone to leave Buddhism for another religion. Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore – where Buddhism is not the majority religion – are significantly less likely to take this position.

The Singaporean public is divided on this issue: While most Muslims (84%) and followers of Chinese traditional religions (58%) in the country say it is unacceptable to leave their religion, fewer Buddhists (36%) and Christians (42%) take this position.

The survey also asked whether it is acceptable or unacceptable for someone to try to persuade others to join his or her religion (i.e., to proselytize). Across the surveyed countries, most respondents from all religious groups say it is unacceptable, with one exception. Fewer than half of Christians in Singapore – where Christianity has been growing – say that

Most oppose religious conversion or proselytization, with some exceptions in Singapore

*% who say it is **unacceptable** for a person to do the following*

	Leave the respondent's religion for another religion	Try to persuade others to join his or her religion
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>		
Cambodia	82%	86%
Malaysia	51	70
Singapore	36	70
Sri Lanka	74	83
Thailand	69	73
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>		
Indonesia	92	72
Malaysia	98	73
Singapore	84	73
Sri Lanka	64	75
Thailand	93	70
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>		
Indonesia	83	72
Malaysia	61	75
Singapore	42	39
Sri Lanka	67	87
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>		
Malaysia	68	68
Singapore	57	75
Sri Lanka	74	91
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>		
Singapore	58	72
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>		
Singapore	–	68

Note: First question asked only of those who identify with a religion. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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proselytizing is unacceptable (39%), while 59% say it is acceptable.

2. Religious identity

Across five of the six countries surveyed, virtually all respondents identify with a religion. And even in Singapore, the lone exception, about eight-in-ten adults identify with Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or another religious tradition. But for most people in the region, these religious identities are not *just* about religion.

Indeed, most adults who claim a religion say that their tradition (e.g., Buddhism or Islam) is not just a religion one chooses to follow, but also a family tradition one must follow, an ethnicity one is born into, or a culture one is part of. Many say their religious identity encompasses *all four* of these elements.

Large shares across the region also feel connections to other religions. For instance, 46% of Sri Lanka's Muslims say they feel a personal connection to the Hindu way of life.

At the same time, many people say celebrating holidays or festivals associated with other religions disqualifies someone from their religious group. For example, roughly eight-in-ten Malaysian Muslims say a person cannot be Muslim if they celebrate Christmas or the Buddhist festival of Vesak.

Many in the region say that holding certain beliefs or participating in religious practices is essential to being part of their group. More than eight-in-ten Christians in Singapore (87%), Indonesia (86%) and Sri Lanka (84%) say that a person *cannot* be Christian if they do not believe in God. The same is also said about concepts that might seem more secular. At least six-in-ten Buddhists in all countries surveyed say that a person cannot be Buddhist if they do not respect their country.

Religion, culture and ethnicity

The survey asked respondents who identify with a religion whether they consider their religion to be each of the following: a family tradition one must follow, an ethnicity one is born into, a culture one is part of, and a religion one chooses to follow.

In nearly every country, majorities across religious communities say that each of these descriptions applies to their religion. For example, more than eight-in-ten Thai Muslims see Islam not only as a religion but also as a culture, a family tradition or an ethnicity.

That said, there are differences by country on these questions. Singaporeans often are the least likely to affirm the descriptions; for instance, while 50% of Singapore's Christians say Christianity is a family tradition, far more Christians in Malaysia (74%), Sri Lanka (88%) and Indonesia (92%) say this.

Most say their religion is also a culture – and even an ethnicity

% who say that their religion is ____

	A religion one chooses to follow	A culture one is a part of	A family tradition one must follow	An ethnicity one is born into
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	85%	86%	91%	76%
Malaysia	73	73	58	54
Singapore	68	66	50	47
Sri Lanka	95	91	89	76
Thailand	90	96	88	84
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	82	82	81	77
Malaysia	81	74	74	75
Singapore	87	73	67	72
Sri Lanka	92	89	92	84
Thailand	90	94	88	89
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	87	87	92	86
Malaysia	79	79	74	74
Singapore	82	67	50	41
Sri Lanka	93	84	88	82
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	82	75	80	80
Singapore	82	86	79	79
Sri Lanka	91	92	95	85
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	85	80	70	60

Note: Darker shades represent higher values,

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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In Sri Lanka, most Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus say that their religion can be described by *all four statements* – e.g., that Buddhism is a religion, culture, family tradition and ethnicity. The same is true for majorities of Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand, Muslims and Christians in Indonesia, and Buddhists in Cambodia.

In Malaysia and Singapore, however, no more than about half in each religious group say their religion encompasses all four dimensions. This includes Singaporeans who follow Chinese traditional religions, 35% of whom say their religious identity covers religion, culture, family tradition and ethnicity. And one-in-ten of Singapore’s Buddhists say Buddhism is about *none* of the categories measured in the survey.

Most Sri Lankans across religious groups say their religion is also a culture, family tradition and ethnicity

*% who say their religion is a religion one chooses to follow, a culture one is a part of, a family tradition one must follow, **and** an ethnicity one is born into, among ...*

	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	60%	--	--	--
Indonesia	--	58%	68%	--
Malaysia	36	48	49	50%
Singapore	24	47	23	53
Sri Lanka	69	73	66	77
Thailand	72	75	--	--

Note: “--” indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Personal connections to other religions

Despite these deeply rooted religious identities, in this religiously diverse region it is also common for people to feel a personal connection to at least one religion *other* than the one they identify with. For example, at least four-in-ten Sri Lankan Muslims say they feel “a personal connection” to the Buddhist (54%), Christian (43%) and Hindu (46%) “ways of life.”

On balance, Muslims and Buddhists are among the least likely to say that they feel an affinity toward other religions, whereas Christians and Hindus – religious minority groups throughout the countries surveyed – are somewhat more likely to say they have a personal connection to other ways of life.

Additionally, roughly a quarter or more in every group say that they have a personal connection to the local religions’ ways of life in their country. This includes at least seven-in-ten Buddhists in Thailand (78%) and Cambodia (74%), and a similar share of Hindus in Singapore (71%).

Most Buddhists feel a personal connection to Indigenous religions

% who say they feel a personal connection to the ___ way(s) of life

	Buddhist	Muslim	Christian	Hindu	Local religions’/ Indigenous religions’
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>					
Cambodia	98%	4%	13%	8%	74%
Malaysia	65	22	36	23	58
Singapore	76	31	34	33	59
Sri Lanka	98	16	27	20	--
Thailand	98	11	16	6	78
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>					
Indonesia	7	97	10	7	23
Malaysia	8	92	10	9	32
Singapore	24	97	26	23	42
Sri Lanka	54	96	43	46	--
Thailand	17	99	4	3	50
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>					
Indonesia	21	39	96	23	44
Malaysia	28	29	88	24	52
Singapore	29	25	93	23	35
Sri Lanka	61	38	95	48	--
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>					
Malaysia	60	48	41	91	55
Singapore	82	58	61	96	71
Sri Lanka	47	36	55	96	--
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>					
Singapore	36	14	21	15	29

Note: Sri Lankans were not asked if they feel a personal connection to local religions’/Indigenous religions’ ways of life. Darker shades represent higher values. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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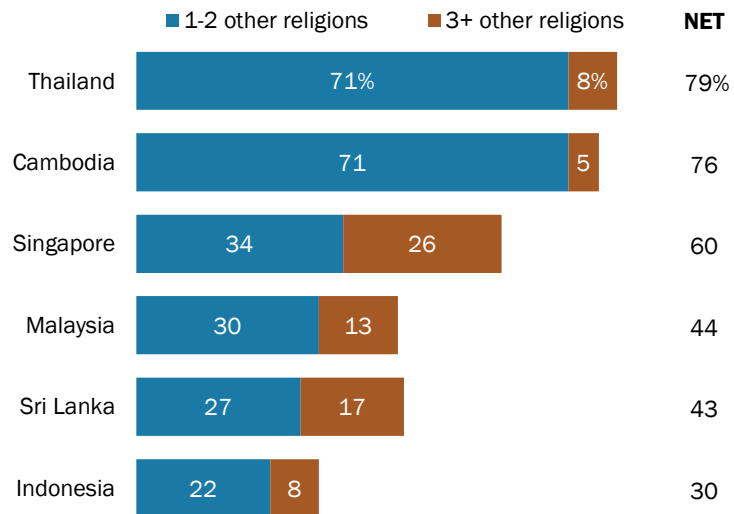
Unsurprisingly, nearly all who are religiously affiliated say they feel a personal connection to their own religion, such as the 98% of Cambodian Buddhists who feel connected to the Buddhist way of life and the 96% of Indonesian Christians who say the same about Christianity. Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore are less likely to feel personally connected to the Buddhist way of life, although most still feel this way (65% and 76%, respectively).

Fewer than half of people in Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka say they feel a personal connection to a religion besides their own. By contrast, majorities in Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand feel a connection to at least one religion outside their own, even though these countries differ drastically in their religious makeup.

In Singapore, [one of the most religiously diverse countries](#) in the world, 26% of respondents feel a personal connection to at least three religions they do not identify with, while 34% feel connected to one or two other faiths. And while 96% of Cambodian adults identify with Buddhism, about three-quarters also say they feel personally connected to another religion, many of them to local Cambodian religions – which [could include animism](#).

Most in Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand feel connected to a religion other than their own

% in each country who feel a personal connection to ...



Note: These figures are based on how many religions (other than their own) a respondent says they feel a personal connection to; figures include those without a religious affiliation. Those who say they do not have a personal connection to any religion or only have a personal connection to their own religion are not shown. Most respondents could say they have a personal connection with up to four other religions. However, Sri Lankans were not asked about local religions/Indigenous religions, and respondents with no religious affiliation or who identified with a religion besides Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or local religions/Indigenous religions could say they have a personal connection with up to five other religions. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Differences between those with and without personal connections to a religion

On balance, people who say they have a personal connection with a religion besides their own express more tolerant views of that religion. They are more likely to think the religion is very peaceful, to be willing to accept members of that religion as neighbors, and to say the religion is compatible with their country's values and culture.

Having a personal connection to another religion is linked with belief that the religion is very peaceful

% of **Buddhists** in each country who say that ____ is very peaceful

	Islam			Christianity			Hinduism		
	Has Muslim affinity	No Muslim affinity	Diff	Has Christian affinity	No Christian affinity	Diff	Has Hindu affinity	No Hindu affinity	Diff
Cambodia	--	--	--	27%	17%	+11	14%	10%	+4
Singapore	52%	29%	+24	55	31	+24	53	36	+17
Sri Lanka	41	23	+18	58	34	+23	48	32	+16
Thailand	26	10	+16	36	19	+17	23	12	+11

% of **Muslims** in each country who say that ____ is very peaceful

	Buddhism			Christianity			Hinduism		
	Has Buddhist affinity	No Buddhist affinity	Diff	Has Christian affinity	No Christian affinity	Diff	Has Hindu affinity	No Hindu affinity	Diff
Indonesia	47%	25%	+23	50%	25%	+25	56%	24%	+32
Malaysia	29	17	+12	24	17	+7	27	18	+9
Singapore	--	--	--	61	45	+15	--	--	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for comparison. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. Having an "affinity" for a religion refers to those who say they feel "a personal connection" to that religion. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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For example, Sri Lankan Buddhists who say they have a personal connection to Islam are more likely than those who do not have this connection to say that Islam is very peaceful (41% vs. 23%). Similarly, Malaysian Muslims who feel a personal connection to Buddhism are more likely than other Malaysian Muslims to say that Buddhism is very peaceful (29% vs. 17%).

Additionally, people who say they have a personal connection to another religion are more likely to say someone can celebrate that religion's holiday while still remaining a member of their own religious community. For example, in Malaysia, 38% of Muslims who have a personal connection to Christianity say that a person can be truly Muslim if they celebrate Christmas; only 18% of Malaysian Muslims who do not have this personal connection say the same.

Personal connections with other religions also increase the likelihood that someone prays or offers their respect to that religion's deities or founder figures. For instance, 77% of Sri Lankan Buddhists who have a personal connection to Hinduism say they pray or offer their respects to Shiva, compared with 59% of other Sri Lankan Buddhists. And among religiously unaffiliated Singaporeans who feel personally connected to Christianity, 38% pray or offer respects to Jesus Christ – far more than among others in Singapore's religiously unaffiliated community (11%).

Few without Buddhist, Christian affinity say that you can be Muslim and celebrate other religions' festivals

*% of **Buddhists** in each country who say a person can be truly Buddhist if they celebrate ...*

	The Muslim festival of Eid			The Christian festival of Christmas		
	Has Muslim affinity	No Muslim affinity	Diff	Has Christian affinity	No Christian affinity	Diff
Cambodia	--	--	--	55%	21%	+34
Singapore	91%	73%	+18	90	79	+11
Sri Lanka	52	28	+23	71	45	+26
Thailand	68	35	+34	89	60	+29

*% of **Muslims** in each country who say a person can be truly Muslim if they celebrate ...*

	The Buddhist festival of Vesak			The Christian festival of Christmas		
	Has Buddhist affinity	No Buddhist affinity	Diff	Has Christian affinity	No Christian affinity	Diff
Indonesia	33%	7%	+26	33%	8%	+26
Malaysia	27	16	+11	38	18	+20
Singapore	--	--	--	54	31	+23

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for comparison. All differences are statistically significant. Differences are calculated before rounding. Having an "affinity" for a religion refers to those who say they feel "a personal connection" to that religion.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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What disqualifies someone from a religious group?

The survey asked respondents if a person can still be a member of their religious group under a variety of conditions – such as if they don’t participate in religious practices that are traditionally associated with their religion, or if they partake in specific religious practices associated with *other* religions.

Muslims and Christians generally are more likely than Buddhists to say one must pray or attend a house of worship to be a member of their group. And they’re more likely than Buddhists to say that making offerings to deceased ancestors’ spirits disqualifies someone from their religion.

In four of five countries, most Buddhists say not respecting deities and spirits disqualifies someone from being Buddhist. Muslims, Christians and Hindus received a different question, with most saying that not believing in God is incompatible with being Muslim, Christian or Hindu. In

Many Muslims say you cannot be Muslim if you make offerings to spirits of deceased relatives

% who say a person cannot be truly a member of their religion (e.g., % of Buddhists who say a person cannot be truly Buddhist) if they ___

	Do not respect deities or spirits/Do not believe in God*	Do not pray	Never go to temple/mosque/church**	Make offerings to spirits of deceased relatives
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	70%	57%	66%	4%
Malaysia	71	40	39	18
Singapore	70	37	34	26
Sri Lanka	60	60	64	--
Thailand	29	33	34	4
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	91	81	70	71
Malaysia	95	93	78	77
Singapore	85	71	53	77
Sri Lanka	94	81	82	--
Thailand	93	74	66	10
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	86	80	78	53
Malaysia	79	79	61	51
Singapore	87	60	46	65
Sri Lanka	84	69	66	--
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	73	66	47	38
Singapore	52	35	42	24
Sri Lanka	72	65	56	--
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	66	41	50	--

* Buddhists and followers of Chinese traditional religions were asked about not respecting deities or spirits. Muslims, Christians and Hindus were asked about not believing in God.

** Buddhists were asked about going to “temple, pagoda or dharma hall.” Hindus and followers of Chinese traditional religions were asked about going to temple. Muslims were asked about going to mosque. Christians were asked about going to church.

Note: Sri Lankans and followers of Chinese traditional religions were not asked about making offerings to deceased relatives. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Singapore, though, only 52% of Hindus take this view.

Most Muslims in the region say that a person cannot be Muslim if they celebrate Christmas or the Buddhist festival of Vesak. But among Buddhists and Christians, opinions vary about whether participating in other religions' holidays is compatible with their religion. For instance, most Christians in Sri Lanka (64%) and Indonesia (63%) say a person cannot be Christian if they celebrate Eid, but far fewer Christians in Malaysia (35%) and Singapore (37%) take this view.

On balance, Hindus are open to fellow Hindus celebrating non-Hindu religious festivals. In Malaysia, only 28% of Hindus say celebrating Christmas disqualifies someone from being Hindu.

Christians split on whether a person can be Christian and celebrate Eid or Vesak

% who say a person **cannot** be truly a member of their religion (e.g. % of Buddhists who say a person cannot be truly Buddhist) if they ____

	Celebrate the Buddhist festival of Vesak	Celebrate the Muslim festival of Eid	Celebrate the Christian festival of Christmas
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>			
Cambodia	--	72%	66%
Malaysia	--	28	23
Singapore	--	20	14
Sri Lanka	--	62	43
Thailand	--	55	32
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>			
Indonesia	90%	--	89
Malaysia	81	--	79
Singapore	65	--	61
Sri Lanka	50	--	61
Thailand	94	--	89
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>			
Indonesia	76	63	--
Malaysia	53	35	--
Singapore	50	37	--
Sri Lanka	38	64	--
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>			
Malaysia	21	20	28
Singapore	5	11	3
Sri Lanka	31	60	48
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>			
Singapore	15	20	17

Note: Buddhists were not asked about Vesak. Muslims were not asked about Eid. Christians were not asked about Christmas. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Majorities among all religious groups say that a person cannot be a member of their religion if they disrespect either elders or their own country.

Views on drinking alcohol, however, are more mixed, even within some religious groups across the region. For example, about six-in-ten Buddhists in Cambodia and Sri Lanka say drinking alcohol disqualifies someone from being Buddhist, but just 19% of Thai Buddhists say the same. Overwhelming shares of Muslims in every country surveyed, meanwhile, say that a person cannot be Muslim if they drink.

Older Buddhists are somewhat more likely to say that a person cannot be Buddhist if they disrespect their country. For example, 74% of Singaporean Buddhists ages 35 and older say that a person cannot be Buddhist if they disrespect Singapore, compared with 48% of younger Buddhist adults.

There are other patterns among Buddhists on questions about Buddhist identity. Buddhists who say religion is very important in their lives and have a lower education are, on the whole, more inclined to view certain behaviors as disqualifying. For example, Buddhists with lower levels of education in Sri Lanka and Thailand are more likely than Buddhists with more education in those countries to say a person cannot be Buddhist if they disrespect deities or spirits or if they celebrate Eid.

Cambodia sometimes stands out from these general patterns; Cambodian Buddhists with more education are especially likely to view Eid celebrations as disqualifying in Buddhism.

Majorities say disrespecting country disqualifies someone from their religion

% who say a person **cannot** be truly a member of their religion (e.g. % of Buddhists who say a person cannot be truly Buddhist) if they ____

	Do not respect elders	Do not respect their country	Drink alcohol
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>			
Cambodia	84%	82%	59%
Malaysia	83	66	34
Singapore	79	67	30
Sri Lanka	78	70	60
Thailand	59	62	19
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>			
Indonesia	83	78	91
Malaysia	95	91	98
Singapore	81	70	86
Sri Lanka	89	76	83
Thailand	75	60	89
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>			
Indonesia	85	82	74
Malaysia	91	92	62
Singapore	78	68	18
Sri Lanka	80	72	60
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>			
Malaysia	87	80	83
Singapore	78	69	33
Sri Lanka	75	65	49
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>			
Singapore	75	65	38

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Older Buddhists more likely to say respecting country necessary to be Buddhist

% of **Buddhists** in each country who say a person **cannot** be truly Buddhist if they do not respect deities or spirits

	Ages			Lower education			Higher education			Religion very important			Religion less important		
	18-34	35+	Diff			Diff			Diff			Diff			Diff
Cambodia	72%	69%	+2	70%	71%	-1	69%	73%	-4	69%	73%	-4	69%	73%	-4
Singapore	74	69	+5	70	71	-1	78	69	+9	78	69	+9	78	69	+9
Sri Lanka	55	63	-8	69	56	+13	61	48	+13	61	48	+13	61	48	+13
Thailand	23	32	-9	35	18	+17	35	19	+16	35	19	+16	35	19	+16

% of **Buddhists** in each country who say a person **cannot** be truly Buddhist if they do not respect their country

	Ages			Lower education			Higher education			Religion very important			Religion less important		
	18-34	35+	Diff			Diff			Diff			Diff			Diff
Cambodia	82%	81%	+1	81%	85%	-4	81%	82%	0	81%	82%	0	81%	82%	0
Singapore	48	74	-26	70	64	+6	82	63	+20	82	63	+20	82	63	+20
Sri Lanka	65	73	-8	78	67	+11	71	56	+15	71	56	+15	71	56	+15
Thailand	47	67	-20	69	47	+23	68	52	+17	68	52	+17	68	52	+17

% of **Buddhists** in each country who say a person **cannot** be truly Buddhist if they celebrate the Muslim festival of Eid

	Ages			Lower education			Higher education			Religion very important			Religion less important		
	18-34	35+	Diff			Diff			Diff			Diff			Diff
Cambodia	77%	68%	+9	69%	85%	-16	71%	72%	-1	71%	72%	-1	71%	72%	-1
Singapore	19	21	-2	24	17	+7	14	22	-8	14	22	-8	14	22	-8
Sri Lanka	59	64	-5	72	58	+14	63	48	+15	63	48	+15	63	48	+15
Thailand	49	57	-8	59	45	+14	58	50	+8	58	50	+8	58	50	+8

Note: Adequate sample size unavailable to analyze Buddhists in Malaysia. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. For the purpose of comparing educational groups across countries, we standardize education levels based on the UN's International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education, and the higher category is secondary or above in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Singapore, the lower education category is secondary education or below, and the higher category is postsecondary or above.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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3. Religious beliefs

Overwhelming shares of Muslims, Christians and Hindus in the countries surveyed say they believe in God, including many who are absolutely certain in this belief. But Buddhists are less likely to believe in God, and in this survey we sought [to expand religious measurement tools](#) beyond questions – such as about belief in God – that are implicitly geared toward Abrahamic, monotheistic religions.

For example, the survey also asked about unseen beings, unseen powers and other spiritual forces. Majorities across the countries surveyed – including especially large shares of Buddhists – say they think there are unseen beings in the world, such as deities or spirits. Younger individuals and those with more education are *more* likely than older adults or people with less education to believe in unseen beings, the opposite of [the age pattern](#) found with many measures of religious belief and practice around the world.

It is far less common for people to think unseen forces protect or attack them. But belief in the supernatural is widespread throughout the region: Half or more of adults surveyed in all six countries say they think spells, curses or other magic influence people’s lives, while similar shares in most of these countries believe in the evil eye. And clear majorities in each country believe in angels or helpful deities (though fewer tend to believe in demons or evil deities).

Most people across the region also believe in fate and karma. This is true not only among Buddhists and Hindus but also among Muslims and Christians, even though karma is not traditionally associated with Islam or Christianity.

The survey also asked respondents whether their religion is the only true religion, finding a range of views. Most Hindus say “many religions can be true,” while most Muslims say “my religion is the only true religion.” Buddhists and Christians are more evenly divided.

Belief in God

Nearly all respondents in Indonesia (99%) and Malaysia (98%) say they believe in God, and the same is true for large majorities in Sri Lanka (85%) and Singapore (78%). Far fewer Thai (48%) and Cambodian (44%) adults believe in God.

Across the countries surveyed, almost universal shares of Muslims, Christians and Hindus say they believe in God. However, Buddhists are less likely to believe.

Thai, Cambodian adults least likely to believe in God

% who say they believe in God, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Indonesia	99%	--	99%	100%	--
Malaysia	98	82%	100	100	100%
Sri Lanka	85	80	98	97	98
Singapore	78	80	99	99	95
Thailand	48	42	100	--	--
Cambodia	44	44	--	--	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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This reflects the fact that belief in God is [not an essential element of Buddhism](#). For example, in Singapore, 99% of Muslims and Christians say they believe in God, compared with 80% of Buddhists.

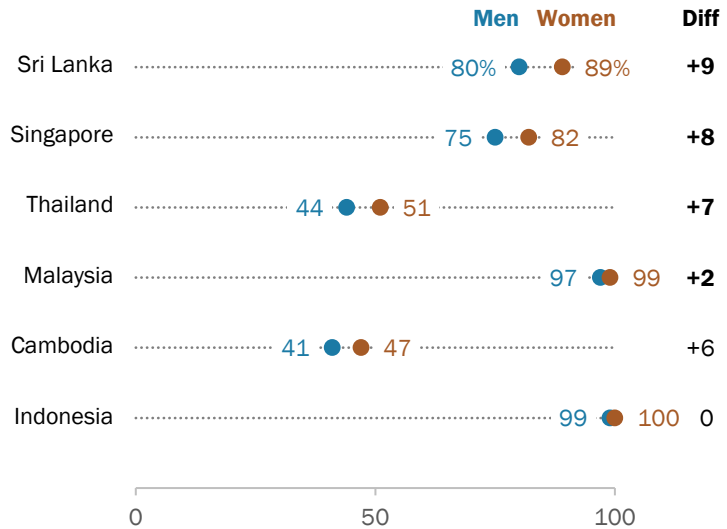
Buddhists who have more education are somewhat less likely than other Buddhists to believe in God. For instance, 37% of Thai Buddhists who have completed a secondary education believe in God, while 45% of Thai Buddhists with less education say the same.

In Singapore, 79% of those who identify with Chinese traditional religions and 41% of the religiously unaffiliated express belief in God.

Across the region, women generally are more likely than men to believe in God. For example, nearly nine-in-ten Sri Lankan women affirm this belief, versus eight-in-ten Sri Lankan men.

Women more likely to believe in God in most countries surveyed

% in each country who say they believe in God, by gender



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Few Buddhists certain of belief in God

Respondents who said they believe in God were asked how certain they are in this belief. Most Muslims, Christians and Hindus say they are “absolutely” certain of God’s existence, though Muslims generally are more likely than Christians or Hindus to say this. Relatively few Buddhists believe in God with complete certainty.

Adults with less education are slightly more likely than others in their country to be “absolutely” certain about their belief in God. In Cambodia, 12% of adults who have not completed a secondary education believe in God with absolute certainty, while just 4% of adults who have completed a secondary education feel this level of certainty about God.

Among Buddhists, younger adults (ages 18 to 34) are less inclined to believe in God with absolute certainty. For instance, in Singapore, 13% of younger Buddhists take this position, while twice as many Buddhists ages 35 and older say the same (26%).

Most Muslims ‘absolutely certain’ in their belief in God

% who say they believe the following

	Believe in God			Do not believe in God
	Absolutely certain	Fairly certain	Less certain	
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	10%	31%	3%	49%
Malaysia	22	43	17	18
Singapore	23	42	16	18
Sri Lanka	39	39	2	18
Thailand	15	21	6	55
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	94	5	0	1
Malaysia	97	2	0	0
Singapore	86	10	2	1
Sri Lanka	92	5	1	2
Thailand	91	8	1	0
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	91	9	0	0
Malaysia	74	17	9	0
Singapore	77	17	5	1
Sri Lanka	88	7	1	3
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	82	16	2	0
Singapore	66	25	4	5
Sri Lanka	82	16	0	1
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	18	45	17	17
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>				
Singapore	10	17	14	57

Note: Don’t know/Refused responses about belief in God or certainty of belief not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Beliefs about unseen beings, like deities or spirits

In all six countries, majorities say they believe there are unseen beings, like deities or spirits, in the world. Inverting the pattern for belief in God, Cambodia (72%), Singapore (71%) and Thailand (71%) are the countries with the *highest* shares who think unseen beings exist.

Also, a majority of Buddhists in each country surveyed say they believe in unseen beings like deities or spirits, unlike belief in God. And more of

Singapore's religious "nones" say there are unseen beings in the world (56%) than say they believe in God (41%).

Most Buddhists think unseen beings exist

% who say they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	72%	73%	--	--	--
Singapore	71	79	73%	82%	69%
Thailand	71	71	71	--	--
Indonesia	67	--	67	54	--
Malaysia	64	77	63	67	60
Sri Lanka	56	57	42	51	59

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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In most surveyed countries, people with higher levels of education are *more* likely than those with less education to say they believe in unseen beings. This pattern differs from other measures of religious or spiritual belief in the region, in which highly educated people typically are *less* religious.

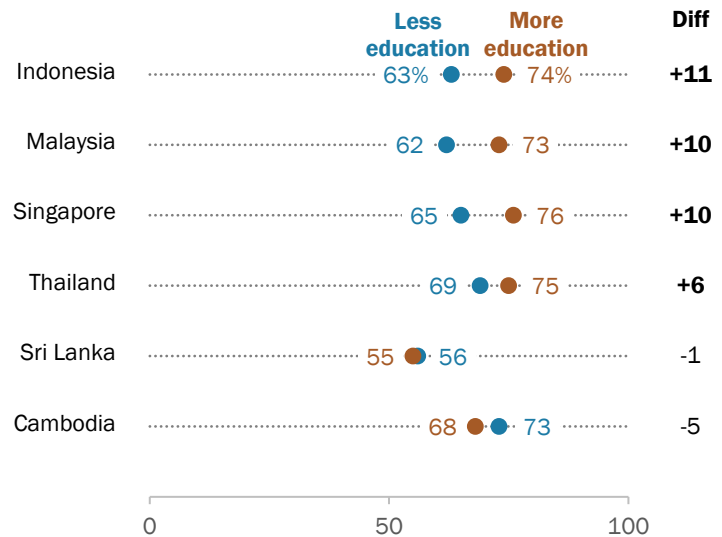
For instance, 76% of Singaporeans who have a postsecondary degree think there are unseen beings in the world, while 65% of other adults in Singapore hold this belief.

Younger adults (ages 18 to 34) are a little more likely than their elders to say they believe in unseen beings, again in contrast with the global trend in which [younger adults tend to be less religious](#). For example, two-thirds of younger adults in Malaysia think there are unseen beings like deities or spirits, slightly higher than the 61% of older adults who say this.

Buddhist women in the countries surveyed are slightly more likely than Buddhist men to think there are unseen beings in the world.

Adults with more schooling generally are more likely to believe in unseen beings

% in each country who say they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits, by educational attainment



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. For the purpose of comparing educational groups across countries, we standardize education levels based on the UN's International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education, and the higher category is secondary or above in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Malaysia and Singapore, the lower education category is secondary education or below, and the higher category is postsecondary or above.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Most are not absolutely certain that unseen beings exist

All respondents who said they believe in unseen beings like deities or spirits were asked how certain they are of this belief. Though majorities in almost every religious group think there are unseen beings in the world, in no group does a majority say they are absolutely certain of this. And among Buddhists, the more common response is that they are only fairly certain in this belief.

Among Muslims, men are more likely than women to express absolute certainty in the belief that there are unseen beings. For example, 37% of Muslim men in Indonesia hold this view, compared with 20% of Muslim women.

Also among Muslims, those who have completed more education are somewhat more likely than those with less education to feel certain about the existence of unseen beings. By contrast, among Buddhists, those who have completed more education are slightly *less* likely to believe in unseen beings with complete certainty.

No more than a quarter of Buddhists are absolutely certain about the existence of unseen beings

% who say they think the following

	Think there are unseen beings in the world			Do not think unseen beings exist
	Absolutely certain	Fairly certain	Less certain	
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	14%	52%	7%	22%
Malaysia	23	35	18	23
Singapore	22	33	23	18
Sri Lanka	12	34	10	40
Thailand	25	33	12	27
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	29	29	9	32
Malaysia	36	17	9	36
Singapore	41	20	11	27
Sri Lanka	21	10	9	55
Thailand	44	18	8	28
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	12	28	13	45
Malaysia	30	20	17	28
Singapore	46	29	8	17
Sri Lanka	25	17	8	47
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	27	22	9	38
Singapore	27	26	16	24
Sri Lanka	24	30	4	36
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	19	29	28	23
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>				
Singapore	10	22	23	43

Note: Don't know/Refused responses about belief in unseen beings or certainty of belief not shown. Survey first asked, "Do you think that there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits?" Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Belief in angels and demons

Majorities in every country surveyed believe that angels or helpful deities exist, including roughly nine-in-ten adults in both Indonesia and Malaysia. Within individual religious communities, too, most people across the region believe in angels – including 59% of Singapore’s followers of Chinese traditional religions, 77% of Sri Lankan Buddhists and Hindus, and 89% of Indonesia’s Christians. Only among Singapore’s religiously unaffiliated adults do fewer than half hold this belief (38%).

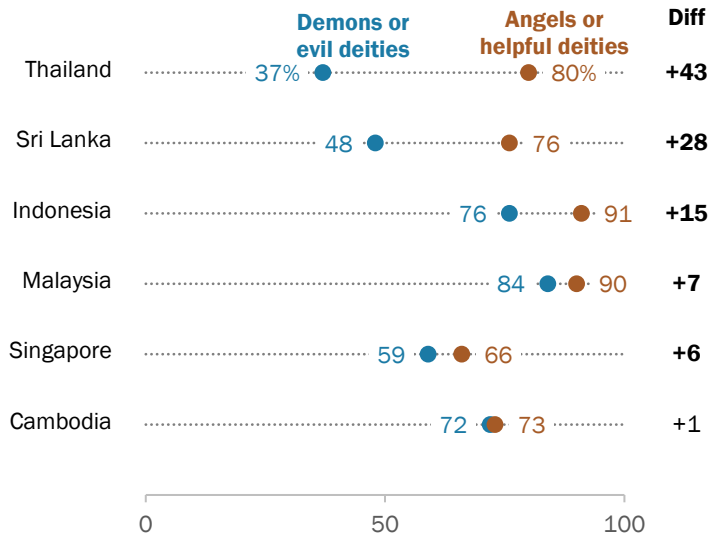
In several countries, people are substantially less likely to say they think demons or evil deities exist. For example, while 76% of Sri Lankans

believe in angels, 48% say the same about demons. And though Muslims in other countries are more likely than other religious groups to believe in demons or evil deities, Sri Lankan Muslims are the group least likely to say this in the country.

In Buddhist-majority countries, adults who have completed less education are more likely than others to say they believe in angels or helpful deities.

Belief in angels more common than belief in demons

% in each country who say they think ___ exist



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Do unseen powers protect or attack people?

Although many people in the surveyed countries believe in unseen beings, it is less common for people to feel that unseen powers protect them. For instance, 13% of Sri Lankans say they feel protected by an unseen power on a daily basis, while about one-in-five feel this way less often. Most Sri Lankan adults (62%) never have this feeling.

Even smaller shares feel attacked by unseen powers; majorities in each country say they *never* feel this way, including 74% in Sri Lanka.

Overall, Christians are somewhat more likely than other religious communities to feel daily protection by unseen powers, while Buddhists are among the least likely to say this. In Singapore, 32% of Christians say they feel protected by an unseen power every day, while 8% of Buddhists say the same.

Even among Christians, however, no more than one-in-ten in any country say they have the feeling of being attacked by unseen powers daily.

People who pray daily are more likely than others to say they feel protected by unseen powers on a daily basis. For example, in Malaysia, 17% of those who pray daily feel such daily protection, compared with only 8% of other adults.

People more likely to feel protected than attacked by unseen powers

% in each country who say they feel protected by an unseen power ...

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly/ Less often	Never
Cambodia	7%	6%	38%	46%
Indonesia	12	3	14	71
Malaysia	15	5	17	62
Singapore	14	5	27	52
Sri Lanka	13	4	17	62
Thailand	3	3	29	63

% in each country who say they feel attacked by an unseen power ...

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly/ Less often	Never
Cambodia	2%	3%	29%	64%
Indonesia	1	2	13	83
Malaysia	4	3	19	74
Singapore	2	3	18	76
Sri Lanka	5	4	15	74
Thailand	0	1	16	82

Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Belief in fate

In all the region's major religious communities, most adults say they think fate exists, including a near-universal share of Indonesian Muslims (96%). Even among Singapore's religiously unaffiliated, 59% of adults believe in fate. ([Fate is often defined](#) as the idea that important events, or even the overall course of one's life, are largely or wholly preordained.)

Among Buddhists, those who say religion is very important are especially likely to believe in fate. For instance, while 89% of Sri Lankan Buddhists who place great importance on religion say fate exists, 73% of other Sri Lankan Buddhists believe this.

Most in every religious community think fate exists

% who say they think fate exists, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Indonesia	95%	--	96%	73%	--
Cambodia	90	90%	--	--	--
Thailand	86	89	63	--	--
Sri Lanka	85	88	71	71	90%
Malaysia	73	78	72	73	78
Singapore	70	79	78	59	78

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Changing fate through rituals

While belief in fate is widespread across the countries surveyed, in some places, substantial shares say they have changed their fate by performing rituals.

Cambodians (51%) and Sri Lankans (45%) are more likely than people in the other countries surveyed to say they have done this.

In general, Buddhists and Hindus are more likely than Muslims and Christians to claim they have changed their

fate. Indeed, while 95% of adults in Muslim-majority Indonesia believe in fate, just 6% say they have ever changed their fate through rituals.

Across the countries surveyed, adults ages 35 and older are modestly, but consistently, more likely than younger adults (ages 18 to 34) to say they have changed their fate by performing rituals. For example, 49% of older Sri Lankan adults say they have altered their fate through rituals, while 37% of younger adults say the same. Among Buddhists, those who pray daily tend to be more likely to say they have changed their fate by performing rituals.

Roughly half of Cambodians say they have changed their fate by performing rituals

% who say they have changed their fate by performing rituals, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	51%	52%	--	--	--
Sri Lanka	45	51	26%	25%	39%
Thailand	26	28	4	--	--
Singapore	14	18	17	8	26
Malaysia	10	20	6	18	34
Indonesia	6	--	5	9	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Belief in karma

Roughly three-quarters or more adults in all six surveyed countries say they believe karma exists. (Although the survey did not define the term, karma is generally described as the idea that people will reap the benefits of their good deeds, and pay the price for their bad deeds, often in future lives.) This includes near-universal shares in Cambodia (97%) and Thailand (95%).

Overall, Buddhists and Hindus are especially inclined to think karma exists, which may not be surprising considering that the concept is often associated with these traditions.¹⁴ But even most Muslims and Christians in the region believe karma exists, including 86% of Muslims and 69% of Christians in Indonesia.

Singapore's Christians are the only religious community in the countries surveyed in which fewer than half of adults think karma exists (46%). Among Singapore's followers of Chinese traditional religions, 86% believe in karma, as do 65% of the religiously unaffiliated.

Belief in karma common among Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians

% who say they think karma exists, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	97%	97%	--	--	--
Thailand	95	95	89%	--	--
Sri Lanka	88	95	68	66%	77%
Indonesia	85	--	86	69	--
Malaysia	74	81	73	68	89
Singapore	73	90	76	46	95

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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¹⁴ The [religious origins of karma are debated by scholars](#), but the concept has deep roots in Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

Most Buddhists see importance in making merit

Buddhists who took the survey were asked how important “making merit” is in their lives.

According to Buddhist teachings, [making merit is something people can do in this life](#) to better their situation in a future life; it also can be seen as something that brings happiness in the nearer future. Making merit can come from many actions – such as meditation or giving offerings to temples, monks or the poor.

Roughly eight-in-ten or more Buddhists in each country surveyed say making merit is very or somewhat important. In the Buddhist-majority countries surveyed, majorities say making merit is *very* important, including nearly all Buddhists in Sri Lanka (96%).

Buddhists who pray daily are more inclined than other Buddhists to place great importance on making merit. For example, 58% of Singaporean Buddhists who pray daily say making merit in their lives is very important, compared with 34% of those who pray less often.

Younger Buddhists (ages 18 to 34) are somewhat less likely than their elders to say making merit is very important. For instance, half of younger Thai Buddhists place great importance on making merit, while nearly two-thirds of older Buddhist adults say this.

Similarly, Thai and Cambodian Buddhists with more education are less likely than other Buddhists in these countries to feel that making merit is very important. Though 59% of Cambodian Buddhists who have completed a secondary education say making merit is very important, the share increases to 73% among other Buddhists in the country.

Sri Lankan Buddhists especially likely to place great importance on making merit

*% of **Buddhists** in each country who say making merit in their life is ...*

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not very/Not at all important
Sri Lanka	96%	3%	1%
Cambodia	71	28	2
Thailand	62	33	5
Singapore	42	38	18
Malaysia	41	38	22

Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Belief in spells, curses and other magic

About half or more of adults in each country think that spells, curses or other magic influence people's lives, including nearly eight-in-ten Cambodians.

This belief is held by substantial shares of Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus in the countries surveyed. For example, at least half of people in all four religious groups in Singapore say they think magic influences people's lives. Even among Singapore's religiously unaffiliated population, 37% hold this view.

About half or more in all countries surveyed believe magic influences people's lives

% who say they think spells, curses or other magic influence people's lives, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	78%	78%	--	--	--
Malaysia	69	48	72%	66%	75%
Indonesia	55	--	56	46	--
Singapore	55	60	68	53	63
Sri Lanka	54	54	37	48	67
Thailand	49	51	38	--	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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In several countries surveyed, those who place great importance on religion are more likely than others to say spells, curses or other magic influences people's lives. For example, in Malaysia, 71% of adults who say religion is very important to them also think magic influences people's lives, compared with 55% of other adults.

Belief in the evil eye

In five of the six countries surveyed, roughly half or more of adults say they think the evil eye exists, including as many as 85% in Malaysia. Thailand, however, stands out, with only 16% expressing this belief.

Although the evil eye was not defined for respondents, it's typically understood as the [idea that certain people can cast curses or spells](#) that cause bad things to happen to others.

Muslims often are among the most likely to think the evil eye exists. For instance, in Malaysia, 91% of Muslims believe in the evil eye, while smaller shares of Christians (70%), Hindus (68%) and Buddhists (53%) share this view.

Among Buddhists in some of the countries surveyed, adults with less education are somewhat more likely to say the evil eye exists. For instance, 53% of Cambodian Buddhists who have not completed a secondary education believe in the evil eye, compared with four-in-ten Cambodian Buddhists who have a secondary education.

In general, those who pray daily are more likely than others to say the evil eye exists.

Large majorities in Malaysia, Sri Lanka believe in the evil eye

% who say they think the evil eye exists, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Malaysia	85%	53%	91%	70%	68%
Sri Lanka	79	82	81	53	81
Indonesia	59	--	60	41	--
Cambodia	50	51	--	--	--
Singapore	47	49	81	34	68
Thailand	16	16	20	--	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Is your religion the one true faith?

When asked to choose between two statements – “My religion is the only true religion” or “Many religions can be true” – Muslims tend to express an exclusivist view of their religion. In Malaysia, 87% of Muslims say their religion is the only true faith. By contrast, most Hindus feel that many religions can be true.

Buddhists and Christians in the region are more evenly split. For example, in Sri Lanka, slim majorities in both communities say their religion is the only true one, while most Malaysian Buddhists and Christians say many religions can be true. And Christians in Indonesia and Singapore are evenly divided between these two perspectives.

Alongside religious identification, demographic indicators such as age and education also correlate with views on religious exclusivism.

Among Buddhists, younger people and those with higher levels of education are more likely to say that many religions can be true. For example, 60% of Buddhists under 35 in Sri Lanka say many religions can be true, compared with 33% of older Sri Lankan Buddhists.

And in Cambodia, 59% of Buddhists who have completed a secondary education say many religions can be true, while just 26% of other Cambodian Buddhists say the same.

Muslims generally say Islam is the one true faith; Hindus most likely to say many religions can be true

% who say the following

	My religion is the only true religion	Many religions can be true
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>		
Cambodia	66%	32%
Malaysia	25	75
Singapore	9	89
Sri Lanka	57	42
Thailand	30	69
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>		
Indonesia	78	21
Malaysia	87	13
Singapore	62	35
Sri Lanka	63	33
Thailand	65	35
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>		
Indonesia	49	49
Malaysia	37	56
Singapore	50	49
Sri Lanka	56	41
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>		
Malaysia	10	90
Singapore	9	91
Sri Lanka	27	68
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>		
Singapore	9	91

Note: Other/Both/Neither/Depends/Don't know/Refused options not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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4. Religious practices

From the 98% of Indonesians who say religion is very important in their lives to the 96% of Cambodians who burn incense, people in the countries surveyed generally appear to be highly religious, based both on the self-assessed, overall importance of religion in their lives and on a variety of specific religious practices.

The survey offered people many opportunities to describe the practices they follow, and some patterns are evident. In general, adults in Singapore appear to be among the least religious in the six countries surveyed; they are the least likely to say religion is very important in their lives as well as the least likely to visit a house of worship on a regular basis.

Sri Lankan adults, meanwhile, appear to be among the most religious or spiritual by several measures, and their religious behaviors often extend to practices not traditionally associated with their own religious community. For example, 62% of Muslims in Sri Lanka say they pray or offer their respects to the Hindu deity Ganesh; in no other country do more than 3% of Muslims do this.

However, practices differ across religious groups, and no single religious group is consistently the most religious across all measures. For instance, Muslims are the group most likely to report praying daily, while Buddhists are the most likely to use incense.

On a handful of measures, older individuals are more inclined than other people in their countries to say that they follow specific religious practices.

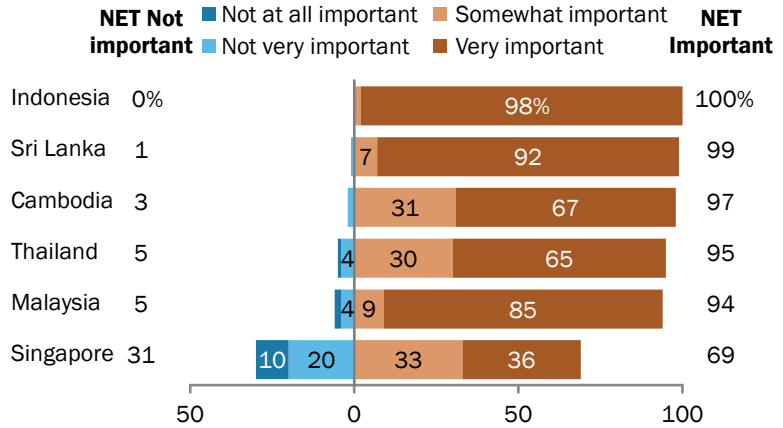
This chapter also looks at meditation, using special objects for blessings or protection, and visiting mediums to communicate with spirits.

Personal importance of religion

In every country except Singapore, more than nine-in-ten adults say that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. And large majorities in these countries say that religion is *very* important to them, including 98% of Indonesians. In Singapore, by contrast, only 36% of adults say religion is very important in their lives.

Almost all Indonesians say religion is very important

% in each country who say religion is ___ in their life



Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Overall, Muslims and Christians are more likely than Hindus and Buddhists in the region to say religion plays a very important role in their lives, although many Buddhists and Hindus also take this view. Young Buddhist adults (ages 18 to 34) are less likely than older Buddhists to say religion is very important in their lives.

Within Singapore, the religiously unaffiliated are the least likely to place importance on religion. Indeed, 35% of the country's "nones" say religion is not at all important in their lives.

On average, women in the region are slightly more inclined than men to say religion is very important to them. For instance, in Sri Lanka, 96% of women say this, compared with 88% of men.

In general, adults with more education are *less* likely than other adults to say religion plays a very important part in their lives. For example, 53% of Thai adults who have completed at least a secondary education place great importance on religion, compared with 71% of other Thais.

Nearly all Thai Muslims say religion is very important in their lives

*% who say religion is **very important** in their lives, among*

	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	66%	--	--	--
Indonesia	--	98%	98%	--
Malaysia	21	95	78	69%
Singapore	20	83	61	52
Sri Lanka	93	98	93	86
Thailand	63	95	--	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Rates of prayer

While most people in the countries surveyed say they pray with some regularity, only in Indonesia (95%), Malaysia (82%) and Sri Lanka (76%) do majorities pray daily. Meanwhile, 19% of Singaporeans say they never pray.

Muslims are the religious group that is most likely to report praying daily, though majorities of Christians and Hindus across the surveyed countries also say they pray every day. While smaller shares of Buddhists in most countries pray daily, about three-quarters of Sri Lanka's Buddhists say they do this.

Very few religiously unaffiliated Singaporeans pray daily (7%). In fact, 52% of Singapore's "nones" say they *never* pray.

Nearly all Indonesians pray daily; in Singapore, nearly 1 in 5 never pray

% in each country who say they pray ...

	At least daily	Weekly	Monthly/ Less often	Never
Indonesia	95%	4%	1%	0%
Malaysia	82	7	6	5
Sri Lanka	76	10	13	1
Singapore	43	11	26	19
Thailand	30	25	35	9
Cambodia	23	37	34	6

Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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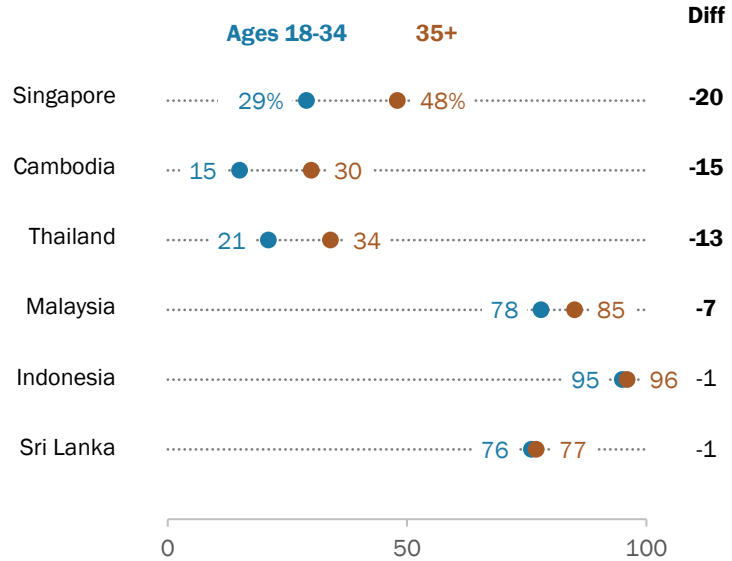
Younger adults (ages 18 to 34) are less likely than their elders to pray daily. For instance, 21% of younger Thais say they pray daily, compared with 34% of older Thais.

Across the countries surveyed, men are less likely than women to say they pray daily. The biggest divide is in Sri Lanka, where 65% of men and 86% of women report praying daily.

Among Buddhists, those with more education are somewhat less likely to say they pray daily. For example, 14% of Cambodian Buddhists who have completed secondary education pray daily, while 24% of other Buddhists do this.

Younger adults less likely to pray every day

% in each country who say they pray *daily*, by age



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Thai Muslims least likely to pray 5 salah daily

Not only are Muslims the most likely to pray daily, but in several of the countries surveyed, upward of seven-in-ten Muslims say they pray five salah every day. The lone exception is Thailand, where about half of Muslims pray all five salah daily.

Muslim women are more likely than Muslim men to pray five salah each day. For example, 78% of Muslim women in Indonesia do this, compared with 67% of Indonesian Muslim men.

Older Muslim adults also are more likely than those younger than 35 to pray five times a day. In Singapore, 77% of Muslims ages 35 or older pray five salah every day, compared with 54% of Muslim adults under 35.

Most Muslims in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore pray 5 times every day

% of Muslims in each country who say they pray five salah every day

Sri Lanka	90%
Malaysia	75
Indonesia	73
Singapore	71
Thailand	52

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read [Methodology](#) for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Praying or offering respects to figures from other religions

The survey asked respondents whether they currently pray or offer respects to several deities or founder figures – including those associated with the respondent’s own religious community as well as other religious traditions.

“Offering respects” is commonly understood in the region as the act of worshipping or venerating deities. It can include a variety of practices, such as burning incense, making food offerings, or making wishes to a deity. It is often expressed through gestures like bowing one’s head or putting one’s hands together; these are gestures of great respect, though they may not align with Western notions of formal prayer.

Muslims almost universally pray or offer their respects to Allah – in Islam, considered [the only God](#) – as do Christians with Jesus Christ. Most Buddhists revere Buddha, [the religion’s founder](#), who Buddhists believe achieved enlightenment. Likewise, the vast majority of Hindus pray or offer their respects to Ganesh (a deity associated with [removing obstacles](#)) and Shiva (often referred to by Hindus as the [god of destruction](#)).

While people across the countries surveyed generally are most connected to the deities or founder figures of their own religion, there is a relatively high degree of cross-religious reverence. For instance, substantial minorities of Buddhists say they pray or offer their respects to Allah in Sri Lanka (39%), Malaysia (22%) and Singapore (18%).

Meanwhile, Jesus and Mother Mary – believed by Christians to be [the mother of Jesus Christ](#) – are the most widely revered figures among the region’s Christians, but some Christians in Malaysia (14%) and Singapore (13%) pray or offer respects to Guanyin (or the Guanyi Bodhisattva, whom Buddhists consider to have been enlightened and now to [aid those who are suffering](#)). And roughly one-quarter of Christians in Indonesia and Malaysia pray or offer respects to the protector spirits or guardian deities of the area where they live.

This type of interreligious reverence toward founder figures and deities is especially common in Sri Lanka. For instance, majorities of Sri Lankan Christians pray or offer respects to Buddha (61%), a practice that is far less common among Christians in other countries. Similarly, 57% of Sri Lankan Buddhists say they pray or offer respects to Jesus Christ.

In general, Hindus are more likely than members of other religious communities to pray or offer their respects to figures from outside their traditional pantheon: Most Hindus in Sri Lanka (84%) and Singapore (66%), for example, pray or offer respects to Jesus. And 62% of Singapore’s Hindus

pray or offer their respects to Guanyin. By contrast, Muslims are typically the least likely community to cross religious lines in revering founder figures or deities. However, Sri Lanka's Muslims stand out as being particularly open to other religious traditions: Most say they pray or offer respects to Buddha, Shiva or Ganesh.

Many Hindus pray or offer respects to figures from Buddhism, Christianity, Islam

% who say they currently pray or offer their respects to the following figures

	Buddha	Allah	Jesus Christ	Mother Mary	Ganesh	Shiva	Guanyin	Protector spirits or guardian deities
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>								
Cambodia	98%	2%	6%	3%	4%	6%	14%	89%
Malaysia	79	22	30	23	27	20	81	61
Singapore	82	18	25	24	31	25	85	39
Sri Lanka	100	39	57	52	84	62	--	86
Thailand	96	5	9	12	41	23	36	90
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>								
Indonesia	1	99	1	1	1	1	2	11
Malaysia	1	97	6	1	0	1	1	2
Singapore	4	98	9	5	3	3	4	7
Sri Lanka	71	100	69	72	62	64	--	59
Thailand	1	99	2	0	1	0	0	8
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>								
Indonesia	3	10	100	54	5	2	2	27
Malaysia	8	37	89	52	4	7	14	23
Singapore	12	11	94	35	5	4	13	12
Sri Lanka	61	41	99	84	48	44	--	58
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>								
Malaysia	55	37	47	43	93	85	35	73
Singapore	75	53	66	66	95	95	62	60
Sri Lanka	71	55	84	76	100	99	--	90
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>								
Singapore	68	22	21	20	28	20	97	48
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>								
Singapore	27	7	16	12	11	11	36	19

Note: Respondents were asked about "Guanyin or the Guanyi Bodhisattva" and about "protector spirits or guardian deities of the area where you live." Respondents in Sri Lanka were not asked about Guanyin. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in Singapore, nearly all pray or offer respects to Guanyin (97%), and 68% pray or offer their respects to Buddha. Singapore's "nones" are less likely to revere various figures, but still, 36% pray or offer respects to Guanyin and 27% do this to Buddha.

Altars or shrines at home

Of the six countries surveyed, Sri Lanka has the highest proportion of adults who say they have altars or shrines in their home (88%), though solid majorities in Cambodia (74%) and Thailand (61%) also have home altars or shrines. By contrast, only about one-in-ten people surveyed in Malaysia and Indonesia say they have an altar or shrine in their home.

In general, among Buddhists and Hindus in each country, half or more report having an altar at home, including nearly universal shares of Sri Lanka's Buddhists (97%) and Hindus (95%). Meanwhile, Malaysia's Buddhists (38%) and Hindus (37%) are less likely than those in other countries to have altars or shrines at home.

About one-quarter of Christians in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore – and fully two-thirds of Sri Lanka's Christians – have a shrine at home. Muslims in the countries surveyed, meanwhile, are consistently the least likely to have an altar or shrine. Even in Sri Lanka, only 23% of Muslims have a shrine at home, as do just 1% of Thai Muslims.

In Singapore, 68% of those who follow traditional Chinese religions say there is an altar or shrine in their home – more than most other religious communities in the country. And Singapore's "nones" are more likely than the country's Muslims to have one (16% vs. 6%).

Nearly all Sri Lankan Buddhists, Hindus have shrines or altars at home

% who say there is an altar or shrine in their home, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Sri Lanka	88%	97%	23%	67%	95%
Cambodia	74	76	--	--	--
Thailand	61	67	1	--	--
Singapore	33	52	6	22	80
Malaysia	12	38	6	26	37
Indonesia	10	--	8	23	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Burning incense

Buddhists in the countries surveyed are more likely than people in other religious communities to say they ever burn incense. This includes near-universal shares of Buddhists in Cambodia (99%) and Sri Lanka (97%). Many Hindus also burn incense, including 93% in Sri Lanka and 67% in Singapore.

Several religious traditions use incense as a way to sanctify spaces. For example, after

[Buddhists light incense during sacred activities](#), they may place it into a container (called a censer) in front of a divine statue.

Muslims and Christians, in general, are much less likely than Buddhists to burn incense. In Indonesia, for instance, just 6% of Muslims and 4% of Christians burn incense. In Sri Lanka, however, this practice is common even among Muslims (73%) and Christians (62%).

In Singapore, followers of Chinese traditional religions are the most likely to say they burn incense (86%). And almost four-in-ten of the Singapore's "nones" burn incense – greater than the shares of the country's Christians (15%) and Muslims (8%) who do the same.

Large majorities in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand burn incense

% who say they ever burn incense, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	96%	99%	--	--	--
Sri Lanka	92	97	73%	62%	93%
Thailand	84	92	12	--	--
Singapore	44	77	8	15	67
Malaysia	13	68	5	15	49
Indonesia	7	--	6	4	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Visiting houses of worship

The survey asked respondents how frequently they visit religious sites or houses of worship. Buddhists were asked about going to temples, pagodas or dhamma halls; Muslims about attending mosque; Christians about going to church (aside from weddings and funerals); and all other respondents, including Hindus, about going to temple.

In every country but Singapore, more than half of adults attend temples, mosques or churches at least monthly. Indonesia (88%), Sri Lanka (86%) and Malaysia (76%) stand out as the places with the largest share of adults who report visiting houses of worship at least monthly. In Singapore, 42% say they go to these religious sites regularly. (Indonesia and Malaysia are the only countries in the survey where most people say they attend houses of worship *at least weekly*.)

Christians and Hindus generally are the most likely to go to houses of worship monthly or more often, while Buddhists typically are among the least likely. However, in Sri Lanka, Buddhists (87%) are just as likely as Christians (86%) and only slightly less likely than Hindus (95%) to visit their religious institutions monthly.

Indonesians and Sri Lankans most likely to attend houses of worship at least monthly

% in each country who say they go to temple/mosque/church ...

	At least monthly	Less often	Never
Indonesia	88%	11%	1%
Sri Lanka	86	13	1
Malaysia	76	19	4
Thailand	61	36	3
Cambodia	54	44	2
Singapore	42	44	13

Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Buddhists were asked about temples, pagodas or dhamma halls; Muslims about mosques; Christians about churches (aside from weddings and funerals); and all others about temples.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

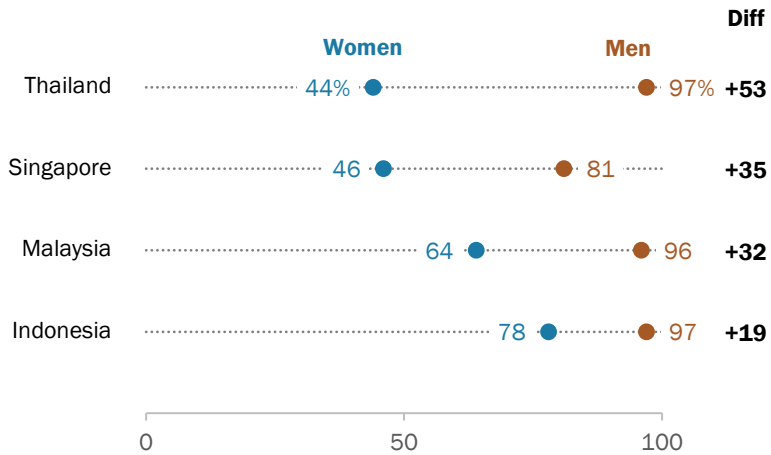
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In line with [traditional expectations within Islam](#), Muslim men are substantially more likely than Muslim women to go to the mosque monthly or more often. For instance, while Muslim men in Thailand nearly universally attend the mosque at least monthly (97%), fewer than half of Muslim women in the country do this (44%).

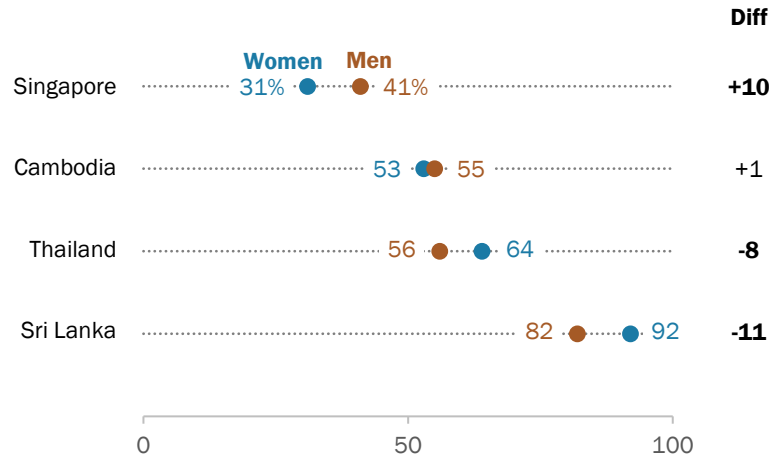
By contrast, there is no consistent difference in attendance patterns by gender among Buddhists across the countries surveyed.

Among Muslims, men much more likely than women to regularly attend mosque

% of Muslims in each country who say they go to mosque at least monthly, by gender



% of Buddhists in each country who say they go to temple, pagoda or dhamma hall at least monthly, by gender



Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. Adequate sample size unavailable to analyze Muslim respondents in Sri Lanka and Buddhist respondents in Malaysia.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Meditation

In Sri Lanka and Thailand, most people say they practice meditation (62% each). In other countries, about a quarter or fewer say they ever meditate.

Regionally, Hindus are the religious community that is most likely to practice meditation, though Buddhists generally are more inclined to meditate than Christians or Muslims. For instance, in Singapore, Buddhists (32%) are less likely than Hindus (58%) but more likely than Muslims (15%) to say they ever meditate.

In Singapore, roughly one-in-five followers of Chinese traditional religion and religious “nones” ever practice meditation.

Among Buddhists, those with more education are more likely to say they ever meditate. For example, 38% of Singaporean Buddhists with a college education meditate, compared with 23% of other Buddhists in Singapore. Also among Buddhists, those who pray daily are more likely than other Buddhists to ever meditate.

Singapore’s Hindus more likely than others in country to meditate

% who say they ever practice meditation, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Sri Lanka	62%	64%	47%	47%	66%
Thailand	62	67	17	--	--
Singapore	26	32	15	27	58
Cambodia	22	22	--	--	--
Malaysia	14	32	8	20	69
Indonesia	7	--	6	12	--

Note: “--” indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Few in countries surveyed do tai chi

The Chinese martial art of tai chi, which has been described as “[meditation in motion](#),” is practiced by relatively few people in the countries surveyed. Even among those in Singapore who follow Chinese traditional religions, only 5% say they ever do tai chi.

15% of Hindus in Sri Lanka, Malaysia do tai chi

% who say they ever do tai chi, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	2%	2%	--	--	--
Indonesia	1	--	1%	2%	--
Malaysia	5	10	4	7	15%
Singapore	6	8	7	5	5
Sri Lanka	4	2	4	4	15
Thailand	3	3	1	--	--

Note: “--” indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Using special objects for blessings or protection

In every country surveyed, fewer than half of adults say they ever use special objects for blessings or protection. While the survey did not ask respondents to specify the objects they use, these objects may include amulets made of various materials (such as metal, wood or stone). They could come from vendors, or from sites like temples or shrines where the objects may have received sacred blessings.

Half of Thai Buddhists use special objects for blessings

% who say they ever use special objects for blessings or protection, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Thailand	46%	50%	3%	--	--
Cambodia	35	36	--	--	--
Sri Lanka	35	34	15	46%	49%
Singapore	26	39	8	21	41
Malaysia	11	33	7	17	32
Indonesia	4	--	4	4	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Buddhists and Hindus are the religious groups most inclined to use special objects for protection, including about half of Hindus in Sri Lanka and Buddhists in Thailand. In Sri Lanka, 46% of Christians also say they do this.

People in the Muslim-majority countries of Malaysia (11%) and Indonesia (4%) are much less inclined to seek blessings through such objects. Overall, Muslims across the region are the least likely to do this.

Visiting mediums to communicate with spirits

Across the countries surveyed, relatively few people say they have gone to a medium to communicate with spirits. The practice is most common in Cambodia (25%) and Thailand (22%).

Buddhists tend to be among the most likely to have visited a medium to communicate with a spirit, while Muslims generally are among the least likely. In Singapore, Buddhists and followers of Chinese traditional religions are equally likely to have gone to a medium (both 19%).

Among Buddhists, those who pray daily are slightly more likely than other Buddhists to have visited a medium to communicate with a spirit. In Singapore, for example, 27% of Buddhists who pray daily have visited a medium, compared with 16% of other Buddhists in the country.

Buddhists generally more likely than Muslims to have visited a medium

% who say they have visited a medium to communicate with a spirit, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	25%	26%	--	--	--
Thailand	22	24	6%	--	--
Singapore	12	19	7	6%	13%
Sri Lanka	8	8	4	10	13
Indonesia	7	--	5	19	--
Malaysia	7	23	4	9	16

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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5. Funeral practices and beliefs about the afterlife

As is the case in many world religions, rituals around death are a key part of religious practice for multiple groups in the region.

In most countries surveyed, when people are asked to consider planning a loved one's funeral, they place great importance on religious elements. For example, 72% of Indonesians say inviting an imam or other religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach would be very important, and 78% of Thais say performing rituals at a temple or other religious site would be very important. But for most people in the region, religiously commemorating a family member's death extends beyond the funeral: Many people also perform rituals on the death anniversary of a loved one.

Throughout Southeast Asia, family gravesites where deceased family members' remains reside are fairly common. Many families look after their gravesites by sweeping or cleaning them. Sri Lankans, though, are far less likely than others in the survey to have a family gravesite.

In addition to questions about funerals and gravesites, we also asked respondents to share their beliefs about the afterlife. In general, most people surveyed expressed belief in heaven and hell, including majorities in almost every religious group. Even among Singapore's religiously unaffiliated population, roughly four-in-ten believe in each concept.

Across the countries surveyed, most Buddhists and Hindus believe in rebirth, as well as the idea that people can escape or be liberated from the cycle of rebirth (nirvana for Buddhists and *moksha* for Hindus). And many Muslims and Christians say they believe in Judgment Day, an end-time belief that the dead shall rise and be judged for their life's works.

Even with such widespread beliefs in the afterlife, far fewer adults think a person can know the afterlife destination or the destination of rebirth of a deceased family member. Only among Malaysia's Hindu community does a majority believe this is possible.

What elements are very important for a family member's funeral?

Respondents were asked how important several elements would be if they were planning the funeral of a family member or loved one. In general, inviting a religious leader, such as a monk, imam or priest, to recite sacred texts or preach is seen as very important by the largest shares of people. Majorities in every country say this, except in Singapore (37%).

Many people also say that if they were planning a loved one's funeral, it would be crucial to perform rituals at a house of worship and to offer donations in the name of the deceased relative. In Cambodia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, majorities say each of these funeral activities is very important.

Setting up a shrine or altar for the deceased relative is seen as less important in some countries. Still, more than half of people in the Buddhist-majority countries of Cambodia, Thailand and Sri Lanka see memorial altars as very important.¹⁵

Cambodians are among the most likely to say each of these four funeral activities is very important, while people in Singapore are consistently the least likely to say this.

Many of these rituals are shared across religious groups. For instance, most Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus in Sri Lanka say that inviting a religious leader to recite sacred texts, performing rituals in a house of worship and offering donations are very important. But, on the

Most people feel it is very important to invite leaders to preach at family funerals

*% in each country who say it would be **very important** to ____ if they were planning the funeral of a family member/loved one*

	Invite a religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach*	Perform rituals in a temple, mosque or other house of worship for the soul of the deceased relative	Offer donations in the name of the deceased relative	Set up a shrine/altar for the deceased relative
Cambodia	84%	75%	70%	74%
Indonesia	72	56	65	31
Malaysia	61	46	58	29
Singapore	37	39	32	27
Sri Lanka	80	73	81	56
Thailand	80	78	43	57

* Buddhists were asked about a monk or learned person. Muslims were asked about an imam or sheikh. Christians were asked about a priest or pastor. Hindus were asked about a pundit or learned person.

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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¹⁵ In this context, a funerary altar may be understood as a raised location dedicated to the deceased person's memory, typically in a family member's home. It may be distinct from a household's primary altar (if they have one) or combined with other sacred objects. A memorial altar typically might include the following: an image of the deceased, a place to set out a flower, a small bowl for rice, a beverage (frequently tea) or incense sticks. Cremated remains can be placed on altars, too.

whole, Buddhists and Hindus in the region are more inclined than Muslims to value a funerary altar or shrine.

Religious funeral activities seen as very important across religious groups

% who say it would be **very important** to ___ if they were planning the funeral of a family member/loved one

	Invite a religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach*	Perform rituals in a temple, mosque or other house of worship for the soul of the deceased relative	Offer donations in the name of the deceased relative	Set up a shrine/altar for the deceased relative
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	85%	75%	70%	74%
Malaysia	35	40	30	32
Singapore	35	38	32	38
Sri Lanka	81	71	82	57
Thailand	79	77	42	63
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	71	55	65	29
Malaysia	62	43	61	22
Singapore	58	54	55	26
Sri Lanka	76	71	85	45
Thailand	87	91	52	6
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	90	60	71	48
Malaysia	76	68	60	61
Singapore	51	38	25	16
Sri Lanka	79	75	73	48
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	64	61	67	52
Singapore	44	69	54	46
Sri Lanka	79	83	79	59
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	30	38	30	38
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>				
Singapore	15	20	16	16

* Buddhists were asked about a monk or learned person. Muslims were asked about an imam or sheikh. Christians were asked about a priest or pastor. Hindus were asked about a pundit or learned person.

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

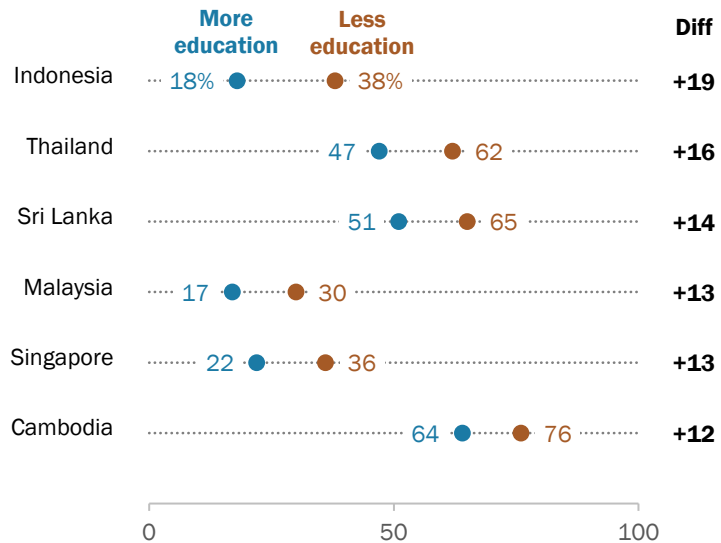
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People with less formal education are more likely than others in their country to say each of the four activities would be very important for a family member’s funeral. For example, 65% of Sri Lankans who have not completed secondary school say it would be very important to set up a shrine or altar for the deceased relative if they were planning the funeral, compared with 51% of Sri Lankans with more education.

People who say religion is very important in their lives also are more inclined than others to say the four funeral activities would be very important if they were planning the funeral of a family member. For instance, 56% of Singaporeans who consider religion to be very important also say it would be very important to invite a religious leader to recite sacred texts or preach at a funeral, roughly double the share of other Singaporeans who place this much importance on the activity (26%).

Those with less education more likely to see funeral shrines for deceased relatives as very important

*% in each country who say it would be **very important** to set up a shrine/altar for a deceased relative if they were planning the funeral of a family member/loved one, by educational attainment*



Note: All differences are statistically significant. Differences are calculated before rounding. For the purpose of comparing educational groups across countries, we standardize education levels based on the UN’s International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education, and the higher category is secondary or above in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Malaysia and Singapore, the lower education category is secondary education or below, and the higher category is postsecondary or above. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Marking death anniversaries with rituals

For many people in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, commemorating a family member's death is not limited to the immediate time after their death. In five of the six countries surveyed, majorities say they or someone in their household performs rituals on the death anniversary of a deceased loved one, including 93% in Sri Lanka and 90% in Thailand.

Most people in nearly every religious community say their household performs death anniversary rituals. Even among Singapore's religiously unaffiliated population, 52% say this. The only groups in which fewer than half do this are Muslims in Singapore (46%) and Malaysia (31%) and Christians in Singapore (33%).

Majorities in most countries mark death anniversaries of loved ones with rituals

% in each country who say they or someone in their household performs rituals on the death anniversary of a deceased loved one

Sri Lanka	93%
Thailand	90
Indonesia	77
Cambodia	74
Singapore	58
Malaysia	41

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Family gravesites

In all five of the Southeast Asian countries surveyed, people are somewhat split between those who do and do not have a family gravesite where the remains of deceased family members reside. For example, 52% of Indonesians say they have a family gravesite, while 48% do not. However, only 14% of Sri Lankans have family gravesites.

Among Buddhists, those who live in rural locations are more likely than urban dwellers to have family gravesites. In Cambodia, for instance, 57% of rural Buddhists say they have a family gravesite, versus only 44% of urban Buddhists.

Survey respondents who reported having a family gravesite were asked whether their household looks after it by sweeping or cleaning it, and separately, whether they pay money to maintain it.

Among those with a family gravesite, most say they or someone in their household sweeps or cleans the graves. Generally, people are much less likely to say they pay money to maintain the gravesites. Only in Singapore do similar shares say their household personally looks after the family gravesite and pays money to maintain it.

Nearly half in Cambodia, Indonesia sweep or clean family gravesites

% in each country who say they ...

	Have a family gravesite where the remains of deceased family members reside	Look after a family gravesite by sweeping or cleaning it	Pay money to maintain a family gravesite
Malaysia	54%	41%	28%
Cambodia	53	47	10
Indonesia	52	46	19
Singapore	47	31	31
Thailand	45	38	13
Sri Lanka	14	10	4

Note: Respondents were asked, "Do you have a family gravesite where the remains of deceased family members reside, or not?" Respondents who have a family gravesite were asked, "Do you or someone in your household look after the family gravesite by sweeping or cleaning it?" and "Do you or someone in your household pay money to maintain the family gravesite, or not?" The numbers here present the share of the total population who do each activity.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Belief in rebirth

Most people in the Buddhist-majority countries of Cambodia (79%), Sri Lanka (69%) and Thailand (62%) say they think people can be reborn after they die. And across the countries surveyed, majorities of Buddhists and Hindus believe in rebirth.

Muslims are the religious group least likely to believe in rebirth. In Singapore, Muslims are less likely than even religiously unaffiliated people to believe in this concept (22% vs. 32%).

Among Muslims, women are less likely than men to think that rebirth exists. For instance, 21% of Muslim women in Malaysia believe in rebirth, compared with 32% of Muslim men in the country.

Conversely, Buddhist women in the region are generally *more* likely than Buddhist men to hold this belief. In Cambodia, for example, 85% of Buddhist women believe in rebirth, compared with 76% of Buddhist men.

Cambodians most likely to believe in rebirth

% who say they think rebirth exists, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	79%	80%	--	--	--
Sri Lanka	69	80	18%	43%	57%
Thailand	62	64	41	--	--
Singapore	44	69	22	26	75
Malaysia	36	59	27	65	69
Indonesia	31	--	29	42	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Nirvana, moksha and Judgment Day

Members of different religious communities were asked about their belief in afterlife concepts commonly associated with their tradition.

Buddhists were asked if they believe in [nirvana](#), a term used in Buddhist teachings to refer to the state of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. While most Buddhists say they think nirvana exists, the belief is especially common in the Buddhist-majority countries of Sri Lanka (87%), Cambodia (71%) and Thailand (68%).

Hindus were asked about [moksha](#), a concept that also commonly refers to escaping reincarnation's cycle of rebirth. Most Hindus believe in moksha, but Sri Lankan Hindus (75%) are more likely to believe in it than are Hindus in Singapore (64%) or Malaysia (58%).

Muslims and Christians were asked if they believe in [Judgment Day](#). This often refers to an end-time belief that the dead shall rise and be judged for their life's works. Among the countries surveyed, Sri Lanka's Muslims and Christians are the *least* likely to profess belief in Judgment Day. By contrast, Malaysian and Singaporean Muslims nearly universally think Judgment Day will happen.

Nearly all Muslims in Malaysia believe in Judgment Day

*% of **Buddhists** in each country who say they think nirvana exists*

Sri Lanka	87%
Cambodia	71
Thailand	68
Singapore	59
Malaysia	55

*% of **Hindus** in each country who say they think moksha exists*

Sri Lanka	75%
Singapore	64
Malaysia	58

*% of **Muslims** in each country who say they think Judgment Day exists*

Malaysia	98%
Singapore	96
Thailand	89
Indonesia	88
Sri Lanka	51

*% of **Christians** in each country who say they think Judgment Day exists*

Singapore	87%
Malaysia	82
Indonesia	80
Sri Lanka	48

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Heaven and hell

Teachings about heaven and hell vary widely across the religions found in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. [Some religions teach that heaven and hell are temporary states](#), while others say [they are final destinations](#) based on [how people lived](#) their lives.

In almost every country surveyed, most people believe in both heaven and hell, and the shares are usually quite similar. For example, 72% of Singaporeans think heaven exists, and 69% believe in hell.

The exception is Sri Lanka, where far fewer adults believe in heaven than in hell (52% vs. 80%). Much of this divergence is driven by Sri Lanka's Buddhists, who are about half as likely to believe in heaven as they are to believe in hell (42% vs. 82%).

Nearly all Indonesians believe in heaven

% in each country who say they think ___ exists

	Heaven	Hell
Cambodia	77%	80%
Indonesia	99	95
Malaysia	94	92
Singapore	72	69
Sri Lanka	52	80
Thailand	80	81

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read [Methodology](#) for details.

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Muslims and Christians are consistently the most likely to believe in heaven. Still, majorities in almost every religious group say they think heaven exists.

In general, those who pray daily are more likely than other adults to say heaven and hell exist. In Malaysia, 97% of adults who pray daily believe in heaven, but belief in heaven falls to 80% among those who pray less often.

Women are more likely than men to believe in heaven. For example, 85% of Thai women say heaven exists, compared with 74% of Thai men. And among Buddhists, women also are more likely than men to believe in hell.

Christians, Muslims especially likely to believe in heaven

% who say they think ____ exists

	Heaven	Hell
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>		
Cambodia	76%	80%
Malaysia	73	71
Singapore	73	74
Sri Lanka	42	82
Thailand	79	80
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>		
Indonesia	99	96
Malaysia	98	97
Singapore	97	93
Sri Lanka	80	76
Thailand	96	97
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>		
Indonesia	98	85
Malaysia	92	82
Singapore	96	86
Sri Lanka	85	73
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>		
Malaysia	82	68
Singapore	67	62
Sri Lanka	69	74
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>		
Singapore	72	68
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>		
Singapore	40	39

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Knowing what will happen to a family member in the afterlife

Fewer than half of adults in each country surveyed think that “a person can know the afterlife destination or the destination of rebirth for a deceased family member.”

People in Cambodia (45%) and Indonesia (41%) are most likely to hold this view.

Muslims generally are less likely than other adults in the countries surveyed to say that someone can know the afterlife or rebirth destination of dead family members. For instance, 27% of Malaysian Muslims take this stance, compared with 42% of Christians, 45% of Buddhists and 60% of Hindus in the country.

Muslims less likely to say people can know where deceased relatives will go in the afterlife

% who say they think a person can know the afterlife destination or the destination of rebirth for a deceased family member, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	45%	46%	--	--	--
Indonesia	41	--	40%	50%	--
Malaysia	32	45	27	42	60%
Singapore	32	38	30	33	46
Sri Lanka	26	24	16	29	37
Thailand	25	26	22	--	--

Note: “--” indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

“Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Among Buddhists, those who say religion is very important in their lives are slightly more likely than others to think that a person can know the afterlife destination of a deceased family member.

Is it possible to feel the presence of the deceased?

Slim majorities of adults in Indonesia and Cambodia think “a person can feel the presence of a deceased family member.” About half in Singapore and Malaysia express this view, as do slightly smaller shares in Sri Lanka and Thailand (42% each).

In general, this sentiment is especially common among Hindus in the countries surveyed. For instance, 71% of Singapore’s Hindus say a person can feel a deceased family member’s presence, compared with 60% of Buddhists, 47% of Muslims and 43% of Christians in the country. About two-thirds of Singapore’s followers of Chinese traditional religions also believe in this concept (68%).

People with less education are more inclined than adults with higher levels of schooling to think a deceased family member’s presence can be felt by the living. For example, in Indonesia, 62% of those who did not complete a secondary education take this stance, compared with 48% of adults with a secondary degree.

Most Indonesians and Cambodians think a person can feel the presence of deceased family members

% who say they think a person can feel the presence of a deceased family member, among ...

	General population	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Indonesia	57%	–	56%	58%	–
Cambodia	56	57%	–	–	–
Singapore	51	60	47	43	71%
Malaysia	48	73	42	64	75
Sri Lanka	42	43	16	38	58
Thailand	42	43	30	–	–

Note: “–” indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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6. Religious diversity and national identity

Many people throughout the countries surveyed – including all major religious groups – express a general acceptance of religious diversity. For example, large majorities in each country say they would accept followers of other religions as their neighbors. Most people across the region also describe other religions as peaceful and as compatible with their national culture and values.

Moreover, survey respondents across the region are far more likely to say that religious, ethnic and cultural diversity has a positive impact on their country than to say it has a negative impact. In Malaysia (62%), Sri Lanka (62%) and Singapore (56%), majorities say that having people from many different backgrounds makes their country a better place to live, while just 6% or fewer of adults in these countries say diversity makes their country worse. (Many people across the region also say that religious, ethnic and cultural diversity has neither a positive nor a negative impact on their country; 68% of Thai adults and 54% of Cambodians take this ambivalent position.)

Along with broad support for religious coexistence, however, the countries surveyed also are home to strong nationalist sentiment. Clear majorities across these countries agree with the notion that their “culture is superior to others.” And most people in every country but Singapore say that having been born in their country, as well as belonging to its dominant ethnic and/or religious groups is very important to “truly” be a member of the nation (e.g., that being Buddhist is very important to be truly Cambodian, or that being Muslim is very important to be truly Indonesian).

In general, people who say religion is very important in their lives are especially likely to see birth, ethnicity and religion as key to national identity and to express a sense of cultural superiority. Adults with relatively low levels of education also are more likely to see birthplace and religion as critical to national identity and to completely agree that their country’s culture is superior, while people with higher levels of education are more likely to express opinions tolerant of other religions. For instance, in Thailand, 55% of adults with at least a secondary education view Islam as very or somewhat peaceful, compared with 39% of those with less education.

This chapter also looks at views about [whether violence is justified over political or religious beliefs](#), as well as [threats Muslims and Buddhists see toward their religions](#).

CORRECTION (Sept. 28, 2023): A previous version of the text in Chapter 6 swapped the Sri Lankan and Singaporean percentages of adults who say that religious, ethnic and cultural diversity has a positive impact on their country. The charts and graphics with this data were correct. This change does not substantively affect the findings of this report.

Attitudes toward diversity of religion, ethnicity and culture

Across the region, the most common view is that having people from many different religions, ethnic groups and cultures makes a country a better place to live. Large shares also express the view that this kind of diversity doesn't make much of a difference. Far fewer take the stance that diversity makes their country worse.

For example, a majority of Malaysian adults (62%) say that having a diverse population improves their country, while 33% say the diversity makes no difference and just 4% say religious, ethnic and cultural diversity makes their country a worse place to live.

In Cambodia and Thailand, however, the most common response is that diversity doesn't make much of a difference; just 19% of Thai adults say diversity makes their country better, while 68% say it doesn't make much difference and 11% say it makes Thailand worse.

Hindus, a religious minority across the countries surveyed, generally are more likely than other religious groups in the region to say that diversity makes their country a better place to live. Most Christians and Muslims share this view, while Buddhists are less likely to say that having people of different religious, ethnic and cultural groups makes their country a better place to live.

Majorities in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore say diversity makes their country better

% in each country who say that having people of many different religions, ethnic groups and cultures makes their country a ___ place to live

	Better	Worse	No difference
Malaysia	62%	4%	33%
Sri Lanka	62	6	27
Singapore	56	4	37
Indonesia	50	6	41
Cambodia	31	12	54
Thailand	19	11	68

Note: Other/Both/Neither/Depends/Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Views of other religions as peaceful

Most adults surveyed across the region say they view other religions as very or somewhat peaceful. Far fewer say that other religions are not very, or not at all, peaceful.

But there are some instances where a religion is not seen as peaceful by a substantial share of respondents in a given country. For example, 36% of Thai Buddhists say Islam is not peaceful, while a similar share of Thai Muslims (35%) say the same about Buddhism.

Among the region's main religious groups, Hindus and Christians are the most likely to view other religions as peaceful, and Muslims are generally the least likely to describe other religions as peaceful. Still, clear majorities of Muslims in most countries *do* view other religions as peaceful. For example, 76% of Muslims in Singapore say Buddhism is a peaceful religion, while Singaporean Hindus (95%) and Christians (85%) are even more likely to take that position.

Sri Lankan Muslims are a notable outlier, representing one of the groups *most* likely in the entire region to describe other religions as peaceful. About nine-in-ten Sri Lankan Muslims (91%) say that Buddhism is very or somewhat peaceful, with similarly high shares saying the same about Christianity (87%) and Hinduism (86%).

Sizable shares of the population in Buddhist-majority Cambodia and Thailand report that they “don't know” or otherwise refuse to answer when asked whether Islam, Christianity and Hinduism are peaceful religions. This may be due, in part, to unfamiliarity. For example, 45% of Cambodian respondents do not give an answer when asked about Hinduism, a religion with virtually no presence in the country.

Hindus, Christians generally see other religions as peaceful

% who say that they think ___ is *very/somewhat peaceful*

	Buddhism	Islam	Christianity	Hinduism
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	99%	50%	57%	35%
Malaysia	91	76	88	78
Singapore	98	82	89	87
Sri Lanka	97	65	80	74
Thailand	88	40	58	42
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	66	99	68	65
Malaysia	51	99	54	51
Singapore	76	96	75	72
Sri Lanka	91	98	87	86
Thailand	63	91	60	55
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	82	85	100	81
Malaysia	85	86	92	76
Singapore	85	76	96	80
Sri Lanka	80	65	97	75
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	88	93	92	91
Singapore	95	86	88	94
Sri Lanka	78	69	84	95
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	96	85	88	91
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>				
Singapore	91	77	82	84

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Willingness to have neighbors from other religions

To further measure religious tolerance, the survey asked whether respondents would be willing to accept followers of different religions as neighbors. Consistent with the broader regional pattern, majorities – often overwhelming ones – of all major religious groups in the countries surveyed report a willingness to accept members of other religions as neighbors.

And even though followers of Chinese traditional religions and practitioners of local beliefs or Indigenous religions have a limited presence in these countries, clear majorities across the region say they would accept members of these groups as neighbors.

In many cases, younger adults (ages 18 to 34) are more willing than older people to accept members of other groups as neighbors. However, most older adults also express a willingness to live near people of other religions. For example, 78% of younger Thai adults say they would be willing to accept Hindus as neighbors, as do 57% of Thai adults ages 35 and older.

People with higher levels of education also are more likely to say that they would accept members of other religious groups as neighbors. For instance, 80% of Indonesians with at least a secondary education say they would accept practitioners of Chinese traditional religions as neighbors, compared with 55% of Indonesians with less education.

Men also are generally more likely than women to say they would accept members of other religious groups as neighbors.

In religiously diverse region, people generally accept neighbors of other religions

% who say that they would be willing to accept ___ as neighbors

	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus	Followers of Chinese traditional religions	Followers of local beliefs/Indigenous religions
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>						
Cambodia	--	77%	84%	76%	88%	93%
Malaysia	--	84	88	83	93	82
Singapore	--	94	95	92	96	90
Sri Lanka	--	75	82	81	--	--
Thailand	--	65	73	62	72	84
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>						
Indonesia	68%	--	70	67	63	64
Malaysia	72	--	74	74	78	78
Singapore	92	--	94	90	89	88
Sri Lanka	98	--	98	96	--	--
Thailand	85	--	68	65	66	81
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>						
Indonesia	83	88	--	84	77	79
Malaysia	87	89	--	85	90	90
Singapore	94	95	--	93	93	89
Sri Lanka	92	85	--	92	--	--
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>						
Malaysia	78	85	78	--	82	91
Singapore	96	95	97	--	99	97
Sri Lanka	85	78	89	--	--	--
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>						
Singapore	100	95	96	91	--	98
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>						
Singapore	96	94	96	91	93	92

Note: Darker shades represent higher values. Respondents were not asked about having followers of their own religious tradition as neighbors (e.g., Muslims were not asked about having Muslim neighbors). Respondents in Sri Lanka were not asked about having followers of Chinese traditional religions or followers of local beliefs/Indigenous religions as neighbors.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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How religions fit with national cultures

Further demonstrating the broad religious tolerance in the countries surveyed, majorities in most countries agree that other religions are compatible with their country's way of life. For example, roughly two-thirds of Sri Lankans say that Christianity (68%) and Hinduism (68%) are compatible with Sri Lanka's culture and values. (People were not asked about the predominant religion in their country, so Sri Lankans were not asked whether Buddhism is compatible with Sri Lankan culture.)

Adults in the religiously diverse country of Singapore are the most likely to view several religions as compatible with their country's culture and values, with at least eight-in-ten saying this is the case for Islam, Christianity and Hinduism, as well as for Chinese traditional religions and local beliefs or Indigenous religions.

On the other hand, Cambodians are by far the least likely of those surveyed to say various religions are compatible with their country. Fewer than half of Cambodian adults say that Christianity (44%), Islam (43%) and Hinduism (29%) are compatible with Cambodian culture and values, although most say that local beliefs or Indigenous religions (78%) and Chinese traditional beliefs (64%) are compatible with their national culture. In fact, majorities in all countries surveyed say that local beliefs and Indigenous religions are compatible with their national culture and values.

Indigenous religions seen as compatible with each country's culture and values

% who say ___ is/are compatible with their country's culture and values, by country

	Buddhism	Islam	Christianity	Hinduism	Chinese traditional religions	Local beliefs/ Indigenous religions
Cambodia	--	43%	44%	29%	64%	78%
Indonesia	58%	--	60	60	48	56
Malaysia	67	--	65	65	67	67
Singapore	--	88	89	87	89	85
Sri Lanka	--	50	68	68	--	--
Thailand	--	67	73	58	70	84

Note: Darker shades represent higher values. "Buddhism" was only asked in Indonesia and Malaysia. "Islam" was only asked in Cambodia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. "Chinese traditional religions" and "Local beliefs/Indigenous religions" were not asked in Sri Lanka. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Once again, Cambodia has higher rates of respondents who choose not to answer these questions about various religious communities, including nearly one-third who do not offer an opinion about whether Hinduism is compatible with the country's culture and values.

Highly religious adults in most countries are less likely than others to perceive non-majority religions such as Christianity and Hinduism as compatible with their national values. For example, 64% of Malaysians for whom religion is very important view Christianity as compatible with Malaysian culture and values, compared with 73% of less religious Malaysians.

There also are differences by gender and community type, with men and urban respondents generally more likely than women and rural residents to view Hinduism and Christianity as compatible with the values and culture of their country.

These differences in opinion are still overshadowed by the broad tolerance displayed throughout the region. Though women, residents of rural areas, and more religious respondents are somewhat less likely to view minority religions as compatible with their national culture and values, most people within these three groups still generally say that minority religions are compatible.

Key elements of national identity

Overwhelming majorities across the countries surveyed say that values associated with order and intergroup harmony – such as being polite and welcoming, and respecting their nation’s institutions and laws – are very important to truly be a part of their nation (e.g., that it is very important to be polite and welcoming to be truly Cambodian).

Most people in the region also say willingness to support the country when others criticize it is very important to national identity. For instance, at least nine-in-ten adults in Indonesia say each of these three qualities is very important to being truly Indonesian.

What attributes are important to truly sharing national identity?

% in each country who say ___ is **very important** to being truly part of the nation (e.g., truly Cambodian)

	Being polite and welcoming	Respecting the country's institutions and laws	Being willing to support the country when others criticize it	Being able to speak the national language*	Having been born in the country	Being part of the majority ethnic group	Being Buddhist/Muslim**
Cambodia	86%	81%	72%	84%	85%	78%	77%
Indonesia	94	90	91	89	79	75	81
Malaysia	88	90	79	83	75	69	67
Singapore	74	78	58	27	39	19	13
Sri Lanka	87	88	75	83	86	73	71
Thailand	82	83	60	79	74	80	73

* While Singapore and Sri Lanka both recognize multiple official languages, figures shown reflect views about speaking Mandarin Chinese in Singapore and Sinhala in Sri Lanka.

** Respondents in Cambodia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand were asked about being Buddhist. Respondents in Indonesia and Malaysia were asked about being Muslim.

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Strong majorities in most surveyed countries also say being able to speak the national language, having been born in the country, being a part of the majority ethnic group and being a member of the main religious group are very important to truly share their nationality.

Singaporeans are far less likely than others in the region to emphasize these nativist elements to national belonging. Around four-in-ten (39%) say that it is very important to have been born in Singapore to truly be Singaporean, and only 19% say being ethnically Chinese is highly important to national identity. ([About three-quarters of Singaporeans are ethnically Chinese.](#)) Even fewer (13%) say it is very important to be Buddhist to be truly Singaporean, which may be unsurprising considering there is no majority religious group in the country.

Furthermore, only 27% of Singaporeans say it is very important to be able to speak Mandarin Chinese to truly share the national identity. Singaporeans also were asked about the importance of speaking “Singlish,” [a Singaporean colloquial dialect of English](#), to national identity, to which 23% said it is very important to be able to speak Singlish to be truly Singaporean. The relatively low importance of language to national identity may be due to the multilinguistic nature of Singapore. [Singapore has no majority language spoken at home](#), and the country recognizes four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

While [Sinhala is the predominant language in Sri Lanka](#), a significant portion of the country speaks Tamil. A slim majority (56%) of Sri Lankans say that being able to speak Tamil is very important to being truly Sri Lankan, compared with 83% who say the same about Sinhala.

Within each of Sri Lanka’s main ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and Tamil people, most view the ability to speak their own language as very important to being truly Sri Lankan. However, less than two decades after the end of [a long civil war fought mostly along ethnic lines](#), large majorities in both groups also view the other community’s language as at least somewhat important.

Among the majority Sinhalese, 96% say that being able to speak Sinhala is very or somewhat important to being truly Sri Lankan, while 85% say the same about Tamil. Among the minority Tamil, 90% say that it is at least somewhat important to speak Tamil to truly be part of the nation, while 84% say the same about Sinhala.

In general across the countries surveyed, age and education level are strongly linked with views toward the nativist elements of national identity. Though majorities among all age groups and education levels tend to find these elements very important to truly sharing their nationality, younger and highly educated adults are less likely than their older or less-educated counterparts to identify nativist requirements as very important to national identity.

In Thailand, for example, younger adults (ages 18 to 34) are less likely than their elders to say that it is very important to have been born in Thailand to truly be Thai (60% vs. 79%). The same difference exists between Thais with at least a secondary education and those with fewer years of formal schooling (61% vs. 80%).

Among Thais, older adults and those with less education more likely to see religion, birth and ethnicity as central to national identity

% of *Thai adults* who say ____ is **very important** to being truly Thai

	Being Buddhist	Having been born in Thailand	Being of Thai ethnicity	Being able to speak Thai	Respecting Thailand's institutions and laws	Being willing to support Thailand when others criticize it	Being polite and welcoming
Ages 18-34	58%	60%	68%	70%	75%	56%	78%
35+	78	79	85	82	86	62	83
Diff	-20	-19	-16	-12	-11	-6	-5
Secondary education or more	59	61	69	70	77	57	80
Less education	79	80	85	83	86	61	82
Diff	-20	-19	-16	-12	-9	-5	-2

Note: Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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There are similar gaps when it comes to the importance of religion to Thai identity, with 20 percentage points separating these age and education groups in the shares who say being Buddhist is very important to being truly Thai. But on two questions about the civic-oriented elements of national identity – the importance of supporting their country in the face of criticism, and the importance of being polite and welcoming – there is no significant difference between the responses of older and younger Thais or Thais of different education levels.

Followers of the majority religion in each country overwhelmingly say that membership in their religion is very important to truly being a part of their nation. For example, 79% of Malaysian Muslims say that it is very important to be Muslim to be truly Malaysian; far fewer Malaysian Christians (32%) place such importance on being Muslim to Malaysian identity.

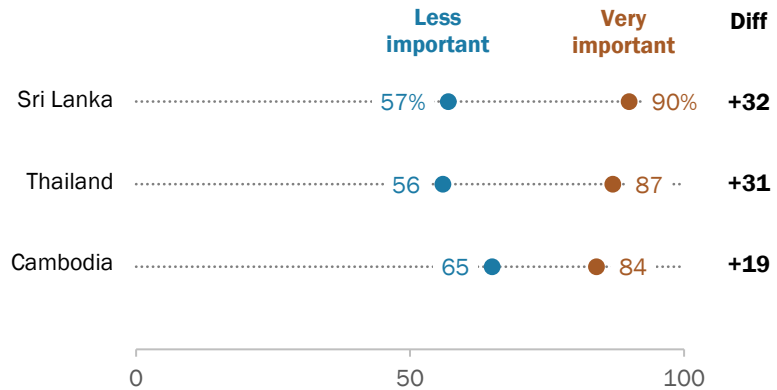
In the Buddhist-majority countries surveyed, Buddhists who consider religion very important in their own lives are also more likely to say that Buddhism is very important to national identity.

However, majorities of Buddhists for whom religion is personally not as important still express the view that Buddhism is very important to truly be a part of the nation. For instance, 90% of Sri Lankan Buddhists who consider religion very important in their lives say that Buddhism is very important to being truly Sri Lankan, compared with 57% of less devout Sri Lankan Buddhists who take this position.

This pattern among more- and less-religious Buddhists holds for other nativist measures as well. For example, 82% of more religious Thai Buddhists say being born in Thailand is very important to Thai identity, compared with 56% of Thai Buddhists who place less personal importance on religion.

Devout Buddhists see being Buddhist as a crucial aspect of national identity

Among **Buddhists** in each country for whom religion is ____, % who say that it is **very important to be Buddhist** to be truly part of the nation (e.g., truly Sri Lankan)



Note: All differences are statistically significant. Differences are calculated before rounding. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Feelings of cultural superiority

Beyond measuring what people view as important to their national identity, the survey sought to gauge nationalism by asking respondents whether they completely agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or completely disagree with the notion that their country's culture is superior to others. For example, people in Malaysia were asked whether they agree that "Malaysian people are not perfect, but Malaysian culture is superior to others."

Clear majorities in each country either completely or somewhat agree that their culture is superior to others. But while roughly nine-in-ten or more agree with this statement in Cambodia (93%), Sri Lanka (92%), Malaysia (91%) and Indonesia (89%), fewer feel the same way in Thailand (76%) and Singapore (61%).

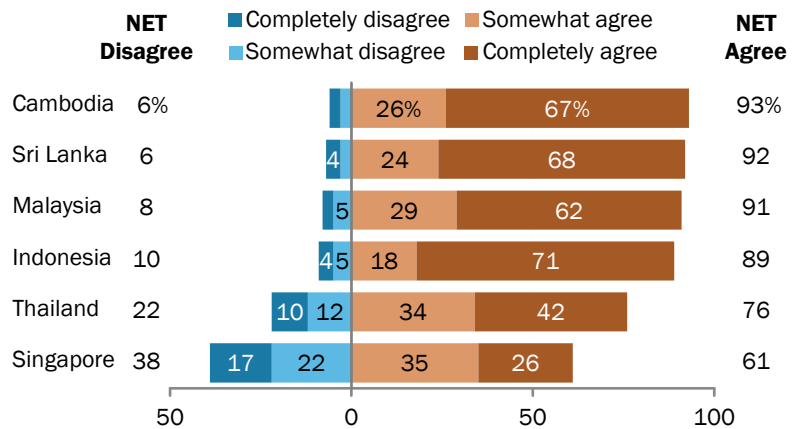
Though adults of different religions respond similarly to this question, those who say that religion is very important in their lives are more likely than others to completely agree that their culture is superior to others. For

example, 70% of Sri Lankans for whom religion is very important completely agree that Sri Lankan culture is superior to others, compared with 41% of Sri Lankans for whom religion is less important.

Pew Research Center also has asked this question in India, as well as in many countries across Europe (including Central and Eastern Europe as well as Western Europe). A strong consensus appears across South and Southeast Asia: [The 90% of Indian adults](#) who say they either somewhat or completely agree that "Indian people are not perfect, but Indian culture is superior to others" broadly aligns with the new survey's results across South and Southeast Asian countries. [Western](#)

Most surveyed say their national culture is superior

% in each country who agree/disagree with the statement, "[Country's] people are not perfect, but [country's] culture is superior to others"



Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Europeans (45% median) and Central and Eastern Europeans (55% median) are far less likely to say their country's culture is superior.

Views toward violence based on political or religious beliefs

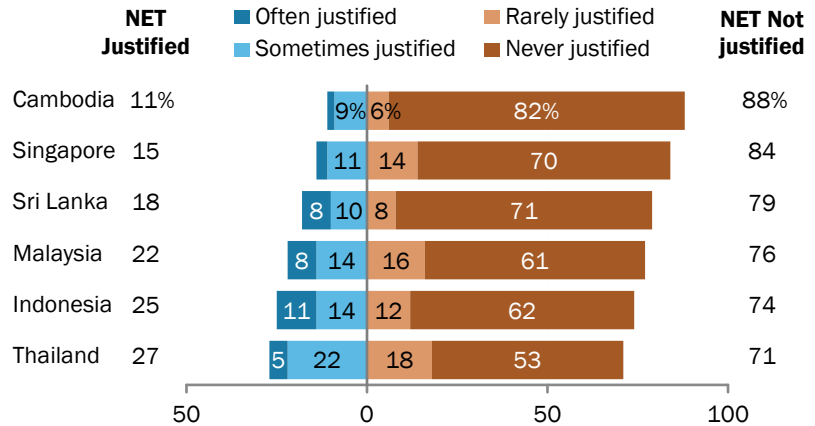
In all six Southeast and South Asian countries surveyed, roughly half or more of the public says that using violence against people because of their political beliefs or religion can *never* be justified. At least seven-in-ten adults in Cambodia (82%), Sri Lanka (71%) and Singapore (70%) take this position.

Thai adults are less inclined to say such violence can never be justified, with around half of the survey respondents in Thailand (53%) taking this stance.

Roughly a quarter of adults in Thailand (27%), Indonesia (25%) and Malaysia (22%) say that violence can sometimes or often be justified against people because of their political beliefs or religion.

Most say political or religious violence can never be justified

% in each country who say that violence against people because of their political beliefs or religion can be ...



Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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What Muslims and Buddhists see as threats to their religions

When asked about a series of potential threats to their religion in their country (e.g., Sri Lankan Buddhists were asked about threats to Buddhism in Sri Lanka), Muslims and Buddhists are most likely to see *extremists from their own faith* as a threat. Muslims generally are more likely than Buddhists to say extremists from their own religion are a threat, but in Sri Lanka, Buddhists are much more likely than Muslims to perceive such extremists as a threat (74% vs. 54%).

Muslims and Buddhists see extremism in their own faiths as a threat

% of **Muslims** in each country who say that ___ is/are **a threat to Islam** in their country

	Muslim extremists	The influence of the United States	The influence of China	The growing number of Christians	Tourists from other countries	The growing number of Buddhists
Indonesia	54%	46%	39%	35%	34%	33%
Malaysia	58	59	49	52	31	49
Singapore	54	33	22	20	18	20
Sri Lanka	54	31	33	13	18	14
Thailand	45	39	24	28	27	21

% of **Buddhists** in each country who say that ___ is/are **a threat to Buddhism** in their country

	Buddhist extremists	The influence of the United States	The influence of China	The growing number of Christians	Tourists from other countries	The growing number of Muslims
Cambodia	39%	22%	31%	31%	15%	31%
Malaysia	40	23	20	25	18	28
Singapore	39	22	24	20	16	21
Sri Lanka	74	43	39	47	26	68
Thailand	47	25	23	25	22	33

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Muslims across the region are generally more likely than Buddhists to perceive the influence of the United States as a threat to their religion. For example, 39% of Thai Muslims say U.S. influence is a threat to Islam in their country, compared with 25% of Thai Buddhists who say the same about Buddhism. Sri Lanka is an exception to this pattern: Buddhists there are more likely than Muslims to see the U.S. as a threat to their faith. No such pattern exists when it comes to views about the influence of China.

Among both Muslims and Buddhists, most people do *not* see growing populations of other religious groups in their countries as threats to their religion. Buddhists were asked about "the

growing number” of Muslims in their country, while Muslims were asked about the growing number of Buddhists, and members of both communities were asked about the growing number of Christians. (These questions were designed to gauge demographic anxieties, regardless of whether or not these minority populations are actually growing within the countries surveyed.)

However, in some instances, substantial shares do identify the increasing presence of other religions as a threat. Around half of Malaysian Muslims (52%) identify the growing number of Christians as a threat to Islam in Malaysia, and a clear majority of Sri Lankan Buddhists (68%) say that the growing number of Muslims is a threat to Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Among both Muslims and Buddhists, highly educated adults are more likely than those with less education to say that extremists within their own religion are a threat. For instance, 58% of Indonesian Muslims with at least a secondary education say that Muslim extremists are a threat to Islam in their country, compared with 51% of Muslims in Indonesia with less education who say this.

What do Buddhists see as appropriate for foreign non-Buddhists?

News reports have highlighted the tension in this region between local Buddhists and foreign tourists, with local authorities taking action against tourists for [disrespecting local temples](#) or [displaying tattoos of Buddha](#).

Although most Buddhists in the countries surveyed do not see foreign tourists as a threat to Buddhism in their country, the survey also asked Buddhists if they see a variety of activities as *appropriate* for foreign non-Buddhists to participate in.

Buddhists generally do not approve of Buddhist tattoos for foreign non-Buddhists

% of Buddhists in each country who say that it is appropriate for non-Buddhist people from other countries to ...

	Participate in Buddhist practices such as meditation and chanting	Visit Buddhist temples, pagodas or dhamma halls for tourism	Marry Buddhists from their country	Wear images of Buddha or other Buddhist symbols	Have Buddhist symbols or images tattooed on their body wherever they like
Cambodia	91%	83%	75%	40%	36%
Malaysia	66	91	88	63	38
Singapore	86	85	88	63	48
Sri Lanka	93	88	54	11	4
Thailand	90	93	87	63	35

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Vast majorities of Buddhists say it is appropriate for foreign non-Buddhists to participate in Buddhist practices such as meditation and chanting, and to visit Buddhist temples, pagodas or dhamma halls for tourism. For example, 93% of Thai Buddhists say it is appropriate for non-Buddhist tourists to visit Buddhist temples and other places of worship.

Similarly large majorities in most countries say that it is appropriate for non-Buddhist foreigners to marry Buddhists from their country. Adults in Sri Lanka are notably less likely to agree with this statement: Only 54% of Sri Lankan Buddhists say such marriages are appropriate, while in other countries, three-quarters or more of Buddhists take this stance.

Buddhists generally report less support for foreign non-Buddhists adopting Buddhist symbols and images. About six-in-ten Buddhists in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand (63% each) and even fewer in Cambodia (40%) and Sri Lanka (11%) say that it is appropriate for non-Buddhists from other countries to wear images of Buddha or other Buddhist symbols. And non-Buddhists having Buddhist symbols or images tattooed on their body is even less accepted by Buddhists. Among Thai Buddhists, for example, 35% say that such tattoos are appropriate, while 60% say they are *not* appropriate.

7. Religion and politics

Most Buddhists and Muslims in the countries surveyed support basing laws on religious doctrine.

In Buddhist-majority countries – where [Buddhism is embedded in the constitutions](#) – a majority of Buddhists favor basing the law on Buddhist dharma, with support ranging from 56% of Buddhists in Thailand to nearly all in Cambodia (96%). And most Muslims in Muslim-majority countries favor making sharia the official law of the land. Furthermore, a majority of Muslims in other countries support the implementation of sharia law in the parts of their countries where Muslims are a majority. (The survey did not define what a [dharma-based](#) or [sharia-based](#) legal code would entail.)

Respondents in these countries have a range of views on their preferred role for religious leaders in politics. Although most respondents agree that religious leaders should vote in political elections, opinions vary on whether they should be politicians, participate in political protests, or publicly express their political views. For example, Cambodian Buddhists are significantly more likely than Thai Buddhists to say that religious leaders should participate in political protests (50% vs. 18%) or be politicians (45% vs. 22%).

The survey asked a few other questions about politics, finding that free speech and democracy are not always widely embraced in the region. While Indonesians overwhelmingly prefer “a democratic form of government” over “a leader with a strong hand” to solve their country’s problems, half or more of respondents in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore say they would rather rely on a strong leader. And in five of the six countries, people are more likely to say that “harmony with others is more important than the right to speak one’s opinion,” rather than the opposing view that “people should be able to speak their opinions publicly even if they upset other people.”

At the same time, majorities generally support the right to publicly criticize the government. For instance, even though six-in-ten Sri Lankans prefer a leader with a strong hand to solve problems, an even larger majority (71%) say people who disagree with the government’s actions should be able to publicly criticize the government. Notably, [Sri Lanka experienced widespread protests against the government](#) while the survey was taking place.

Differences between religious groups on these questions about democracy and free speech are muted, although there are much bigger gaps by religion when it comes to views toward same-sex marriage, with Buddhists generally much more likely than Muslims to say gay and lesbian couples should be able to marry legally.

Should religion influence national laws?

The survey asked Buddhist and Muslim respondents whether they favor basing the law in their country (or the areas where their group is a majority) on their respective religions. Most Buddhists in the Buddhist-majority countries studied and most Muslims in the Muslim-majority countries say the law in their countries should be based on their religious teachings.

Nearly all Cambodian Buddhists (96%) favor basing their law on [Buddhist dharma](#) – a wide-ranging concept that includes the knowledge, doctrines and practices stemming from Buddha’s teachings. A large majority of Sri Lankan Buddhists (80%) feel the same way. Buddhists in Thailand are less likely to support basing Thai law on Buddhist dharma, yet more than half (56%) still express this view. [The national constitutions of these three countries already establish a special role for Buddhism.](#)

In countries where Buddhists are not a majority, Buddhists are less supportive of dharma-based laws. Fewer than half of Malaysian Buddhists (43%) support basing the law on Buddhist dharma in the areas where Buddhists are a majority, and a similar share of Singaporean Buddhists (39%) say that Singapore’s laws should be based on dharma. According to 2020 census figures, [19% of Malaysians](#) and [31% of Singaporeans](#) are Buddhist.

Cambodia’s Buddhists almost universally support basing national laws on Buddhist dharma

*% of **Buddhists** in each country who favor basing the law on Buddhist dharma in their country/in the areas where Buddhists are a majority*

Buddhist-majority countries

Cambodia	96%
Sri Lanka	80
Thailand	56

Other countries

Malaysia	43
Singapore	39

Note: Respondents in Cambodia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand were asked, “Do you favor or oppose basing the law on Buddhist dharma in [COUNTRY]?” Respondents in Malaysia were asked, “Do you favor or oppose basing the law on Buddhist dharma in the areas where Buddhists are a majority?”

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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An overwhelming majority of Muslims in Malaysia (86%), where [Islam is the official religion](#), favor making sharia the official law of the land. Nearly two-thirds of Indonesian Muslims also support establishing sharia. While [Indonesia's constitution does not favor Islam](#), certain areas of the country [have enacted](#) elements of [Islamic law](#).

Support for sharia also is widespread among Muslims in the study's Muslim-minority countries. A majority of Muslims in Sri Lanka (71%), Thailand (67%) and Singapore (63%) back sharia as the official law of the land in the areas where Muslims are a majority.

In these countries, Muslim citizens have access to Islamic law in limited circumstances. In Thailand, Muslims living in four southern provinces (where Muslims are a majority) can use [Islamic law for family disputes](#). Muslims in Sri Lanka can settle family and inheritance cases through a [special legal system](#) that includes aspects of sharia. Similarly, a [Sharia Court in Singapore](#) can hear and decide on cases related to family affairs.

Among Muslims in Malaysia and Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Thailand, respondents who pray daily are moderately more likely than others to want to base their country's laws on religious teachings. However, Muslims in Indonesia who pray daily are about as likely as those who pray less often to support instituting sharia in Indonesia.

Most Muslims surveyed favor sharia as official law in their country or area

% of Muslims in each country who favor making sharia the official law of the land in their country/in the areas where Muslims are a majority

Muslim-majority countries

Malaysia	86%
Indonesia	64

Other countries

Sri Lanka	71
Thailand	67
Singapore	63

Note: This question was not asked in Cambodia. Respondents in Indonesia and Malaysia were asked, "Do you favor or oppose making sharia the official law of the land in [COUNTRY]?" Respondents in Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand were asked, "Do you favor or oppose making sharia the official law of the land in the areas where Muslims are a majority?"

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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The role of religious leaders in politics

The survey asked all respondents whether they support the involvement of religious leaders in political life – specifically, whether religious leaders should vote in political elections, talk publicly about what politicians or political parties they support, participate in political protests, or be politicians.

Countries have varying traditions around the involvement of religious leaders in political life. In Thailand, for example, [monks are not allowed to vote](#), take

part in protests or express their political opinions. By contrast, Sri Lanka has a [long tradition of monks participating in politics](#), including holding positions in Parliament.

While respondents across various countries and religions generally say that religious leaders should vote in political elections, views are mixed when it comes to the other three political activities.

Respondents in Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia generally are the most supportive of political involvement by religious leaders. On the other hand, most adults in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Thailand are against the active participation of religious leaders in political life. For example, fewer than a third of Singaporeans (29%), Thais (24%) and Sri Lankans (21%) believe religious leaders should be politicians – significantly smaller than the shares of adults in Cambodia (45%), Indonesia (48%) and Malaysia (54%) who take the same position.

Most across countries surveyed say religious leaders should vote in elections

% in each country who say religious leaders should ...

	Vote in political elections	Talk publicly about what politicians or political parties they support	Participate in political protests	Be politicians
Cambodia	81%	47%	50%	45%
Indonesia	91	57	57	48
Malaysia	84	66	53	54
Singapore	56	29	18	29
Sri Lanka	70	31	29	21
Thailand	56	35	19	24

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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In the countries surveyed, Muslims are more likely than Buddhists to say religious leaders should vote in political elections. For instance, in Sri Lanka, a large majority of Muslims support religious leaders voting (81%), compared with a smaller majority of Buddhists (66%) who share this view.

Nevertheless, more than half of respondents across all religious groups – with the exception of religiously unaffiliated Singaporeans (48%) – say religious leaders should vote.

Overall, public support is lower for the other types of political engagements by religious leaders. And Muslims generally are more supportive than Buddhists of these behaviors.

For example, fewer than half of Buddhists in all countries surveyed think religious leaders should be politicians. Muslims are more supportive of religious leaders being politicians, including a majority of Malaysian Muslims (58%) who say this.

Buddhists less likely than Muslims to support religious leaders' involvement in politics

% who say religious leaders should ...

	Vote in political elections	Talk publicly about what politicians or political parties they support	Participate in political protests	Be politicians
<i>Among Buddhists in ...</i>				
Cambodia	81%	47%	50%	45%
Malaysia	73	48	37	33
Singapore	53	26	18	22
Sri Lanka	66	28	22	17
Thailand	54	33	18	22
<i>Among Muslims in ...</i>				
Indonesia	91	58	58	49
Malaysia	86	69	56	58
Singapore	66	41	23	39
Sri Lanka	81	42	43	37
Thailand	79	58	34	43
<i>Among Christians in ...</i>				
Indonesia	92	54	48	38
Malaysia	81	64	44	41
Singapore	60	26	16	32
Sri Lanka	72	27	36	13
<i>Among Hindus in ...</i>				
Malaysia	85	62	51	58
Singapore	57	37	19	33
Sri Lanka	84	44	54	39
<i>Among followers of Chinese traditional religions in ...</i>				
Singapore	60	33	17	34
<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated in ...</i>				
Singapore	48	24	18	23

Note: Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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In general, adults who have received more education are less likely to say religious leaders should be politicians or talk publicly about what politicians or political parties they support. For example, 39% of Indonesians with at least a secondary education feel religious leaders should be politicians, while 52% of Indonesians with less education feel this way.

And people who are more religious – that is, those who say religion is very important in their lives – are slightly more inclined than others to believe that religious leaders should publicly support political parties or candidates.

Strong leader or democratic government?

The survey asked respondents to choose between a “democratic form of government” or a “leader with a strong hand” as the better option to solve their country’s problems. While it is possible for a democratically elected leader to rule with a strong hand, by forcing a choice between these two options, the question aimed to capture respondents’ overall preference for what type of government is best.

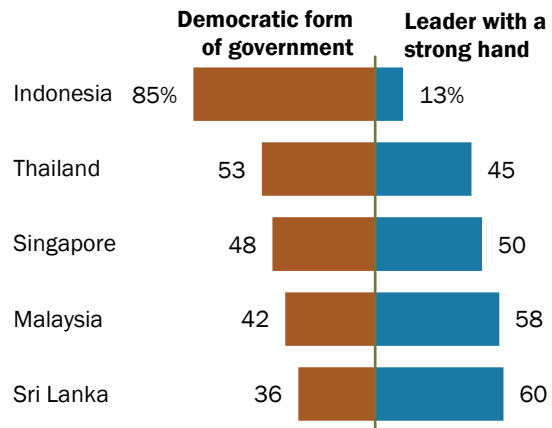
Indonesia is the only country in the survey where an overwhelming majority (85%) supports democracy as the best form of government to solve the country’s problems. Roughly half of adults in Thailand (53%) and Singapore (48%) also prefer a democratic form of government. In Malaysia and Sri Lanka, however, most people would rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve the country’s problems (58% and 60%, respectively).¹⁶

Across the surveyed countries, adults with more education generally are more likely than those with less education to prefer a democratic form of government. And adults younger than 35 tend to be more likely than their elders to prefer democracy over a strong leader.

Within countries, differences between religious groups on this question are modest.

Thais, Singaporeans express divided views on democracy

% in each country who say they should rely on a ___ to solve their country’s problems



Note: This question was not asked in Cambodia. Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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¹⁶ This question was not asked in Cambodia due to local political sensitivities.

Views toward criticism of government, free speech and harmony

The survey asked two questions about people's opinions on political speech and dissent: 1) whether those who disagree with the government should be able to express their criticisms publicly, and, separately, 2) whether it is better to speak one's opinion, even if it upsets other people, or to maintain harmony with others.¹⁷

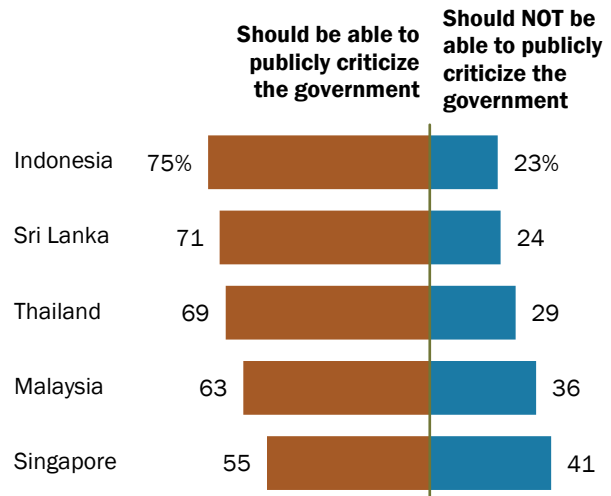
Most adults in every country where the question was asked express the view that people who disagree with the government's actions should be able to publicly criticize the government.¹⁸ Substantial majorities in Indonesia (75%), Sri Lanka (71%) and Thailand (69%) take this position, as do 63% of Malaysians.

Singaporeans are somewhat less supportive of a right to publicly criticize the government, with 55% of adults expressing this view. ([Freedom of expression](#) and [of the press](#) are limited in Singapore, and the government has [many tools to surveil the public](#). Scholars have noted that, in Singapore, [“people often refrain from expressing their views when they believe that the government disagrees with their opinions.”](#))

Within Singapore, considerable differences emerge by religious group. Singaporean Christians (59%) and those with no religion (65%) are the most likely to say that people should be able to publicly criticize the government if they disagree with its actions. Those who follow traditional Chinese religions (40%) are the least supportive.

Three-quarters of adults in Indonesia say people should be able to publicly criticize the government

% in each country who say that people who disagree with their government's actions ...



Note: This question was not asked in Cambodia. Other/Both/Neither/Depends/Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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¹⁷ The degree to which people are free to criticize their government differs among the five countries. For example, a [new Indonesian criminal code](#) extends governmental control over online speech and criminalizes challenging the honor of the president. In recent years, Thailand has used a controversial [lèse-majesté law](#), prohibiting royal insults, to [detain protesters](#). The Sri Lankan government recently [proposed an anti-terror law](#) that some lawyers and human rights activists say could be used to suppress dissent. And in Malaysia, enforcement agencies launched [investigations into government critics](#) following the latest election.

¹⁸ This question was not asked in Cambodia due to local political sensitivities.

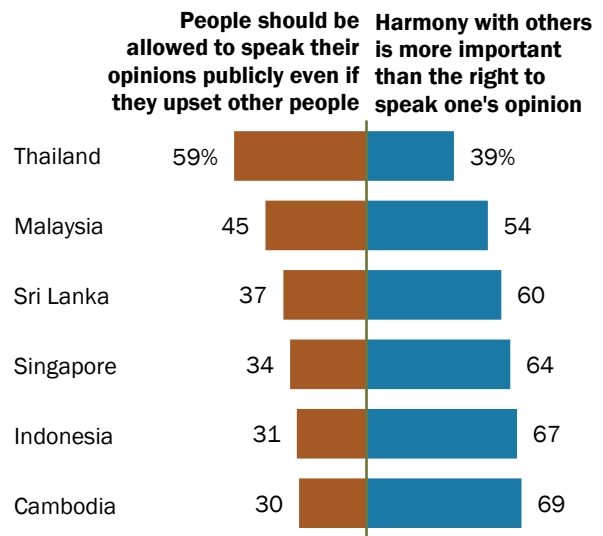
While most adults in the countries studied express the view that people should have the option to publicly criticize the government, respondents generally are less likely to say that people should exercise free speech rights if doing so would disrupt social harmony.

At least half of adults in five of the six countries surveyed take the position that “harmony with others is more important than the right to speak one’s opinion,” including around two-thirds of adults in Cambodia (69%), Indonesia (67%) and Singapore (64%).

Most Thais (59%) take the opposite stance, that “people should be allowed to speak their opinions publicly even if they upset other people.” But Muslims in Thailand differ from the Buddhist majority on this question. Roughly half of Thai Muslims (52%) say that harmony with others is more important than the right to speak one’s opinion, compared with 38% of Thai Buddhists who take the same stance.

In most countries surveyed, harmony with others is prioritized over the right to speak one’s opinion

% in each country who say that ...



Note: Other/Both/Neither/Depends/Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia”

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Across all five countries where the question about criticizing the government was asked, respondents with higher levels of education are more likely than those with less education to support the right to publicly criticize the government.

In Malaysia, for instance, 72% of individuals with a college education say that people who disagree with the government's actions should be able to publicly criticize the government, compared with 61% of Malaysians with less education. The education gap is even more pronounced in Singapore, where 64% of college-educated respondents support the right to criticize the government, compared with 40% of those with less education.

Younger respondents, those with more education support the right to criticize the government

% in each country who say that people who disagree with their government's actions should be able to publicly criticize the government

	More education	Less education	Diff	Ages 18-34	35+	Diff
Indonesia	87%	69%	+17	80%	72%	+9
Malaysia	72	61	+11	63	63	0
Singapore	64	40	+24	67	50	+17
Sri Lanka	75	62	+14	74	69	+5
Thailand	83	62	+21	79	65	+15

% in each country who say that people should be allowed to speak their opinions publicly even if they upset other people

	More education	Less education	Diff	Ages 18-34	35+	Diff
Cambodia	35	28	+7	31	28	+3
Indonesia	39	27	+12	35	28	+7
Malaysia	44	45	-1	45	45	0
Singapore	35	32	+3	44	30	+14
Sri Lanka	39	33	+6	37	37	+1
Thailand	69	54	+15	67	56	+11

Note: Respondents in Cambodia were not asked the question about whether people who disagree with their government's actions should be able to publicly criticize the government. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. For the purpose of comparing educational groups across countries, we standardize education levels based on the UN's International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education, and the higher category is secondary or above in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Malaysia and Singapore, the lower education category is secondary education or below, and the higher category is postsecondary or above.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Younger adults (ages 18 to 34) also are more likely than older people to back the right to public government criticism in Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. Similarly, younger adults in these three countries are more likely than older adults to say that people should be able to speak their opinions even if they upset other people. For example, 35% of younger Indonesians share this view, while somewhat fewer Indonesians ages 35 and older support free expression even at the expense of social harmony (28%).

Views on legalization of same-sex marriage

As of 2023, same-sex marriage is not legal in any of the six surveyed countries, although Thailand was taking [initial legislative steps toward approving same-sex unions](#) while the survey was in the field. A majority of Thai adults strongly or somewhat favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally (60%). Neighboring Cambodia is the only other surveyed country where a majority takes this stance (57%).

By contrast, large majorities of the public in Indonesia (95%), Malaysia (82%) and Sri Lanka (69%) oppose legal same-sex marriage. Singaporeans are more evenly divided (45% favor vs. 51% oppose). Shortly after the survey fieldwork concluded, [sex between men was decriminalized in Singapore](#), though the constitution was amended at the same time to limit future avenues for legalizing same-sex marriage. And, in May 2023, [Sri Lanka's Supreme Court also opened the door to decriminalizing homosexuality](#).

Most Thai, Cambodian adults favor legal same-sex marriage

% in each country who say they ___ allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally

	Strongly favor	Somewhat favor	NET Favor	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	NET Oppose
Thailand	24%	36%	60%	14%	18%	32%
Cambodia	17	40	57	8	34	42
Singapore	18	27	45	21	30	51
Sri Lanka	9	14	23	9	60	69
Malaysia	10	8	17	7	75	82
Indonesia	3	2	5	5	90	95

Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Overall, Buddhists are much more likely than Muslims and Christians to support gays and lesbians marrying legally. Half or more of Buddhists in Thailand (64%), Malaysia (59%), Cambodia (57%) and Singapore (53%) take this position, with Sri Lanka (24%) the only exception.

In Singapore, those without a religious affiliation (62%) are more likely than Buddhists to say they favor the legalization of same-sex marriage.

By contrast, no more than about a quarter of Muslims in any country surveyed support legal same-sex marriage, including just 4% in Indonesia. Support for allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry is somewhat more common among Christians, but still no higher than 35% in any of the countries studied.

Buddhists generally favor legal same-sex marriage

*% who **strongly/somewhat favor** allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally, among ...*

	Buddhists	Muslims	Christians	Hindus
Cambodia	57%	--	--	--
Indonesia	--	4%	16%	--
Malaysia	59	8	35	49%
Singapore	53	21	29	60
Sri Lanka	24	24	23	14
Thailand	64	14	--	--

Note: "--" indicates adequate sample size unavailable for analysis. Darker shades represent higher values.

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details.

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Younger Buddhists (ages 18 to 34) are much more likely than their elders to support legal same-sex marriage. For instance, while 76% of younger Buddhists in Singapore say they strongly or somewhat favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally, 45% of older Buddhists in the country take this position.

Buddhists who say religion is very important in their lives are less likely to support legal same-sex marriage. And Buddhist men tend to be less likely than Buddhist women to hold this view.

Young Buddhists especially likely to support legal same-sex marriage

% of Buddhists who strongly/somewhat favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally, by age

	Ages 18-34	35+	Diff
Singapore	76%	45%	+31
Thailand	84	57	+27
Cambodia	68	49	+19
Sri Lanka	28	22	+6

Note: Adequate sample size unavailable to analyze Buddhist respondents by age in Malaysia. Statistically significant differences are highlighted in **bold**. Differences are calculated before rounding. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read Methodology for details. "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

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Methodology

Pew Research Center conducted random, probability-based surveys among 13,122 adults (ages 18 and older) across six South and Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Interviewing was carried out under the direction of Langer Research Associates. In Malaysia and Singapore, interviews were conducted via computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) using mobile phones. In Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, interviews were administered face-to-face using tablet devices, also known as computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). All surveys were conducted between June 1 and Sept. 4, 2022.

The surveys were designed to be nationally representative, with samples ranging from about 1,500 to 2,600 respondents in each country, allowing researchers to analyze the opinions of respondents by age, gender, education and religious affiliation. In Thailand, the Southern region was oversampled to ensure a large enough sample of Muslims for analysis.

Fieldwork took roughly 10 weeks for CATI countries and, on average, 11 weeks for CAPI countries. In Sri Lanka, [widespread protests against the government](#) forced a brief pause in fieldwork on July 10 and 11.

The phone surveys were based on random-digit-dial (RDD) probability samples of mobile phone users based on national

Sample sizes, margins of error and languages

	Unweighted sample size	Margin of error, plus or minus ...	Languages
Cambodia	1,502	3.6 percentage points	Khmer
Indonesia	2,571	2.9 percentage points	Bahasa Indonesian
Malaysia	1,999	3.0 percentage points	Chinese, English, Malay
Singapore	2,036	2.7 percentage points	Chinese, English, Malay
Sri Lanka	2,510	2.8 percentage points	Sinhala, Tamil
Thailand	2,504	2.9 percentage points	Thai

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries.

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Fieldwork dates and data collection method

	Fieldwork dates	Data collection method
Cambodia	July 10–Sept. 4, 2022	Face-to-face
Indonesia	June 9–Aug. 28, 2022	Face-to-face
Malaysia	June 1–Aug. 9, 2022	Mobile phone
Singapore	June 1–Aug. 9, 2022	Mobile phone
Sri Lanka	June 4–Sept. 2, 2022	Face-to-face
Thailand	June 1–Sept. 1, 2022	Face-to-face

Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries.

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numbering plans. Interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was 18 years of age or older. Up to seven attempts were made to complete the interview. In Singapore, only permanent residents and citizens were selected to take the survey to align with national census data for weighting.

In the face-to-face samples, the surveys were administered using random household selection. All samples are based on multistage cluster designs, which typically entailed proportional stratification by region and locality size or urbanicity and selection of primary sampling units (PSUs) proportional to population size. Interview teams were assigned to designated starting points at the block or street level and followed predetermined skip patterns to contact a random selection of households. Within households, the CAPI device randomly selected a respondent to be interviewed from a detailed list of all adult household members. In Indonesia, about 5% of the total population could not be accessed due to insecurity, poor infrastructure or extreme remoteness. In Thailand, about 2% of the population was inaccessible due to security concerns.

The questionnaire was designed by Pew Research Center staff in consultation with subject matter experts and project advisers. Early in the development process, three focus groups were conducted in Sri Lanka and three more were held in Thailand to explore and identify key topics related to religion, intergroup relations and nationalism. Additionally, two cognitive interviews were conducted in Thailand to test the wording of several questions and concepts. All qualitative work was overseen by Ipsos MORI. The full survey questionnaire was pretested in all countries prior to fieldwork. A small number of political questions were moved from the start of the survey to the end in Sri Lanka due to political sensitivities, in order to decrease the likelihood of refusals and breakoffs.

In Singapore and Malaysia, samples were weighted using iterative proportional fitting (raking) that matches age, gender, education and regional population distributions in the sample to parameters from the latest census data available for each country. For the face-to-face countries, the data was first weighted to account for different probabilities of selection among respondents. It was then raked to align the samples with official population figures for age, gender, education, urbanicity and region, including aligning the Thai Southern oversample with its actual share of the population. Statistical tests of significance are adjusted to account for the survey's design (e.g., cluster sampling in face-to-face countries) and weighting applied (e.g., selection probabilities and raking to census parameters).

Our website also has more information on [country-specific sample designs](#) for this study and [general information on international survey research](#) at Pew Research Center.