

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam generally trended the same as in 2020. The government continued to enforce the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion, which, as written and implemented, contravened international human rights standards. Authorities persecuted members of unregistered independent groups and subjected believers and religious freedom advocates to long-term imprisonment.

Authorities continued to persecute independent religious communities, including Protestant Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, and adherents of other religious movements such as Falun Gong, Duong Van Minh, the World Mission Society Church of God, and Ha Mon. The government [designated](#) many of these groups as “strange,” “evil,” or “heretical” religions and often cited security grounds to suppress them, causing some—such as Ha Mon—to reportedly face [extinction](#). As of April 2021, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) [listed](#) 85 groups as “strange religions.” In June, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs and head of the GCRA Vu Chien Thang [stated](#) that “Vietnam is ready to welcome all religions, even strange ones.” In an official [document](#) published in November, the GCRA [discussed](#) the positive and negative aspects of new religious movements but offered no indication as to when the government would recognize and permit these new religions.

Throughout 2021, authorities routinely disrupted religious services, training, and ceremonies and harassed, detained, and threatened adherents and activists belonging to independent religious groups. Unregistered Hmong and Montagnard Christian groups remain particularly vulnerable to persecution. Local authorities [harassed](#), detained, intimidated, and [physically abused](#) members of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ in Phu Yen Province. The group reportedly tried to register with the government but received no response in the past few years. The Protestant Church of Christ in Dak Lak Province similarly [had](#)

[trouble](#) registering their religious activities and gatherings with local authorities. Moreover, authorities subjected members of these Protestant groups to “[criticism sessions](#)” and forced them to [renounce](#) their faith in public. Thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Christians remain effectively stateless because local authorities refused to issue them identity cards and household registration documents, in many instances in retaliation against Christians who refuse to renounce their faith. In a positive development, this past year Lam Dong provincial authorities [issued](#) identity cards to stateless residents of Subdivisions 179 and 181 and allowed them to vote in elections.

Authorities harassed independent Hoa Hao Buddhists and [disrupted](#) their observance of important religious rituals and holidays, forcing them to carry out religious activities at home. USCIRF received reports that in January 2021, local authorities in Ben Cau Township, Tay Ninh Province, harassed adherents of a home-based independent Cao Dai group and disrupted its religious service. In September, authorities in Cho Gao District, Tien Giang Province, detained and interrogated independent Cao Dai followers and forced them to join the state-sanctioned group. Several independent Cao Dai groups tried to register their religious activities in early 2021 but received no response.

Land disputes between the Catholic community and local governments persisted. The An Hoa Parish [dissented](#) from the Da Nang City government’s decision that sold and repurposed the land the parish owned prior to 1975. The parish petitioned the government to return its land and cease construction by a private entity that had begun in March 2021. The Da Nang government, however, agreed to [resettle](#) Catholic residents of Con Dau Parish after over 10 years of land disputes that had led to violent clashes between parishioners and local authorities in the past. Moreover, authorities in Loan My Village, Tam Binh District, Vinh Long Province, [denied](#) a Khmer-Krom Buddhist group’s request to build a religious site.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a new binding agreement with the government to address key areas of concern to further improve religious freedom;
- Engage with the Vietnamese government and relevant academic and civil society stakeholders to encourage amendments to the Law on Belief and Religion and its implementing decree to conform to international standards, including by making registration simpler and optional;
- Work with the Vietnamese government to provide a pathway to full citizenship—based on the existing model of Subdivisions 179 and 181 in Lam Dong Province—for all Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Northern and Central Highlands, including by providing funding to facilitate improving religious freedom conditions among those communities; and
- Direct the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to highlight and monitor the conditions of religious prisoners of conscience and to advocate for their wellbeing in prison and their release.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation pertaining to religious freedom in Vietnam, such as the [Vietnam Human Rights Act](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [The State of Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#)
- Country Update: [Religious Freedom in Vietnam in 2021](#)
- Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project: [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#)

Background

Vietnam's [constitution](#) states that citizens “can follow any religion or follow none” and that “all religions are equal before the law.” The constitution also mandates respect and protection for freedom of belief and religion. However, it allows authorities to [restrict](#) human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of “national defense, national security, social order and security, social morality, and community wellbeing.” Vietnam's [2018 Law on Belief and Religion](#) contains similar provisions permitting restrictions on the right to religious freedom.

Vietnam is a religiously [diverse](#) country with religious demographics [varying](#) greatly across research studies and reports. Religious traditions with a significant presence in the country include Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Catholicism, and Protestantism. At the end of 2020, the government had officially recognized a total of 16 religions and 43 religious organizations. Many groups, however, refuse to register for fear of persecution or concern over their independence, which has led state-sponsored and independent religious groups to compete over who represents their religion.

Legal and Policy Developments

The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion presents notable improvements compared to the 2004 ordinance, including reducing the waiting period for religious organizations to register with the government and granting legal personhood to registered religious organizations. Nevertheless, the law imposes burdensome and complex requirements on religious groups to register with the government. For example, the law requires religious groups to register for religious activities, religious gatherings, and official recognition. Each of these steps entails a separate registration process, requiring groups to submit extensive information about their organizations and activities. Moreover, groups seeking official recognition as a religious organization must have legally operated for at least five years before applying. Over the past three years of implementation, USCIRF has observed uneven and inconsistent application of the law throughout Vietnam.

In September 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs [issued](#) an Action Plan for State Management of Belief and Religion, which included an emphasis on state control of religion to ensure political and social stability. In November, the GCRA [held](#) a meeting to amend and supplement the implementing Decree (162/2017/ND-CP) for the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion. Deputy Minister Vu Chien Thang stated that the decree has demonstrated shortcomings that need to be addressed, but he did not identify these shortcomings.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

USCIRF has long [expressed](#) concerns regarding religious prisoners of conscience in Vietnam. This year, many believers and religious freedom advocates remained in prison, serving long sentences. These prisoners included Montagnard Christian pastor [Y Yich](#) (sentenced to

12 years), founder of the Buddhist An Dan Dai Dao religious group [Phan Van Thu](#) (sentenced to life imprisonment), and many others who reportedly have been abused or otherwise mistreated in prison and are suffering from deteriorating health conditions. USCIRF has consistently advocated for the release of Hoa Hao Buddhist [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#) (sentenced to 11 years)—a renowned religious freedom advocate adopted under USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience \(RPOC\) project](#)—who has reportedly been in poor health.

Key U.S. Policy

The Biden administration has [emphasized](#) that human rights—which includes the fundamental freedom of religion and belief—are an integral part of U.S. foreign policy, including policy toward [Vietnam](#). In his July 2021 visit to the country, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin [expressed](#) concerns over Vietnam's human rights record. Prior to Vice President Kamala D. Harris' trip to Vietnam in August 2021, [members of Congress](#) and politicians in [other countries](#), as well as [civil society groups](#), called on the Vice President to raise Nguyen Bac Truyen's case and urge the government of Vietnam to release him immediately and unconditionally. Vice President Harris later said at a news conference in Hanoi that she had [raised](#) the issues of human rights abuses and the release of dissidents with her Vietnamese counterparts. Then nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper voiced the same concerns during his Senate confirmation hearing and [said](#) that bilateral relations could only reach their fullest potential if Vietnam makes significant progress on human rights. In November 2021, during the 25th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, U.S. officials [raised concerns](#) with their Vietnamese counterparts about religious freedom conditions, the situation of ethnic minority groups, and other human rights issues. With U.S.-Vietnam relations trending in a positive direction and the United States considering a potential [upgrade](#) of bilateral relations from a “comprehensive partnership” to a “strategic partnership,” experts [observe](#) that human rights remain a challenge in the growing relationship.

In May, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) [introduced](#) the bipartisan [Vietnam Human Rights Act](#) (H.R. 3001), which would allow the U.S. government to sanction Vietnamese officials and others who are complicit in systematic violations of internationally recognized human rights, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In August, Senator John Cornyn (R-TX) [sent](#) a letter to Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken urging him to take action to address the Vietnamese government's human rights abuses and discrimination against religious groups and religious expression. While USCIRF has recommended Vietnam's designation as a CPC every year since 2002—finding that despite some areas of progress, “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” violations of religious freedom within the meaning of IRFA persist—the State Department designated it as a CPC only in 2004 and 2005.