



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

November 2023

# VIETNAM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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*Vice Chair*

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Nury Turkel

Eric Ueland

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*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

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*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

On September 7, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [\*Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom\*](#). Vice Chair Frederick A. Davie led the hearing and convened a broad array of *witnesses*. The hearing followed a May [\*delegation\*](#) to the country led by Vice Chair Davie and Commissioner Eric Ueland and a September [\*Country Update\*](#) on Vietnam. Witnesses provided testimony and follow-up on key religious freedom issues in Vietnam and provided recommendations on how the United States can work with Vietnam to address violations.

[\*Representative Zoe Lofgren\*](#) (D-CA) provided recorded remarks highlighting the Vietnamese government's ongoing denial of fundamental human rights, including religious freedom. Representative Lofgren also announced the reintroduction of the bipartisan Vietnam Human Rights Act ([\*H.R.3172\*](#)).

[\*Vice Chair Frederick A. Davie\*](#) gave opening remarks on religious freedom conditions in Vietnam, particularly highlighting how the government targets ethnic and religious minorities and those from unregistered religious communities. He noted USCIRF's recent delegation to Vietnam and the gracious reception he received from various representatives of the Vietnamese government. He also highlighted that Vietnam's 2018 Law on Belief and Religion makes registration for religious organizations compulsory for their existence, despite international standards clearly indicating such registration must be optional and only for the purpose of gaining legal personality.

[\*Commissioner Eric Ueland\*](#) provided observations gained from USCIRF's visit to Vietnam in May while voicing concern for those detained and otherwise imprisoned in the country for their religious beliefs and/or their advocacy of these rights.

Quỳnh-Vi Trần, editor and journalist for *The Vietnamese* magazine, provided an assessment on the contemporary framework that governs religious practices, management, and operations in Vietnam. Trần identified three religious freedom violations created by this framework—influencing religious formation through registration requirements, intrusion into religious practices through surveillance, and interfering with the organizational structure of religious communities by making high-ranking religious appointments.

Trần recommended the U.S. government urge the Vietnamese government to exercise leadership on the global stage, particularly within the UN Human Rights Council, by:

- Recalibrating its approach to the Law on Religions and Beliefs; and
- Freeing religious institutions from the cumbersome official process of petitioning the government for the legal recognition necessary to function.

*Dr. Thang Nguyen*, CEO and President of Boat People SOS, highlighted three key areas of escalating religious freedom violations in the country—an increase in forced conversion and renunciation of faith, the expanding role of government-controlled churches as instruments of repression, and the growing use of transnational repression by the government to silence human rights defenders among the Vietnamese diaspora. Dr. Thang noted the authorities’ increased pressure and coercion aimed at unregistered religious communities to join government-backed religious organizations.

Dr. Thang recommended that:

- The Biden Administration reach an agreement with Vietnam on a framework for systemic reforms on religious freedom;
- USCIRF maintain the capacity to hold periodic meetings with persecuted churches and bring their issues to the attention of the appropriate U.S. and Vietnamese authorities;
- Members of Congress ensure the federal government act upon incidents of transnational repression targeting their constituents; and
- The Administration, Congress, and USCIRF take advantage of Vietnam’s membership in the Human Rights Council to urge the country to uphold its international human rights commitments.

*Venerable Truong Thach Dhammo*, Khmer Krom Buddhist monk and activist, gave insight into the Khmer Krom Buddhist community. This community is one of 54 recognized ethnic minorities in Vietnam that numbers approximately 1.26 million people who are primarily Theravada Buddhists. Venerable Dhammo noted members of the Khmer Krom Buddhist community regularly face violations perpetrated by the authorities targeting their properties, managing internal religious affairs such as appointments and scriptural interpretation and practice, and coercing them to conduct faith practices and instruction in Vietnamese rather than in their ethnic Khmer language. Venerable Dhammo also talked about how Buddhists monks are coerced into joining the government-approved Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), despite the majority of Vietnamese Buddhists in the VBS espousing Mahayana Buddhism.

Venerable Dhammo’s recommendations to the U.S. government included to work with the Vietnamese government to:

- Release Thach Cuong, To Hoang Chuong, Danh Minh Quang, and Dinh Thi Huynh; and
- Respect the rights of the Khmer-Krom people to establish their own independent religious organizations and practice without state interference, to teach in their own language, and to respect the sanctity and independence of Khmer-Krom Buddhist rites and sacred sites.

*Dr. Quoc-Hung (David) Tran*, Director of Communications for the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and head of its Office of External Affairs, provided testimony on the condition of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). His testimony highlighted that the youth of the UBCV in various provinces are often prevented from attending religious ceremonies and instruction. Dr. Tran also noted that authorities have prevented the UBCV from delivering humanitarian aid to those affected by natural disasters due to their status as an “illegal Church.” Leaders in the UBCV have faced discrimination and intimidation, including through police raids on homes and religious properties, and pressure to sign statements discrediting the UBCV.

Following the witnesses’ testimony, Vice Chair Davie led an interactive question and answer session. Panelists noted the need to continue advocating for religious freedom in all interactions with the Vietnamese government, as well as to recognize those who have fled Vietnam due to religious persecution as refugees. Vice Chair Davie closed the hearing by thanking the panelists and reiterating the Commission’s recommendation that the U.S. State Department designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular of Concern.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.