

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam generally trended the same as in 2019. The government actively enforced the Law on Belief and Religion, which, as written and implemented, contravened international human rights standards and systematically violated religious freedom, particularly of independent religious groups but also of government-recognized groups.

Authorities continued to actively persecute independent religious minority communities, including Protestant Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, the Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, Catholics, and Falun Gong practitioners. Ethnic minority communities faced especially egregious persecution for the peaceful practice of their faith, including physical assault, banishment, detention, imprisonment, and forced [renunciation](#) of faith. An estimated 10,000 Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands [remained effectively stateless](#) because local authorities have refused to issue household registration documents and identity cards—in many instances in retaliation for refusal to renounce their faith. During the year, central and local authorities made efforts to resettle Hmong Christians in Subdivision 179 of Dam Rong District in Lam Dong Province, but as of December implementation of this process remained incomplete.

The government also continued to harass and interfere in the religious activities of independent Hoa Hao Buddhists. In [March](#) and [July](#), local officials disrupted and prevented members of this community from conducting religious rituals and observing important religious holidays. In February, following the [death](#) of Patriarch Thich Quang Do—former leader of the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)—authorities [interfered](#) in Do’s funeral arrangements. In addition, USCIRF received a report that local officials in the Huong Tra Township of Thua

Thien-Hue Province disrupted UBCV’s disaster relief work this year, claiming that it was an “illegal church.” Authorities have in recent years also [harassed](#) independent Cao Dai believers and [attempted](#) to take over their temples or forcibly “reunite” them with state-recognized ones.

Local authorities continued to expropriate or destroy Catholic Church properties. In August, government-led thugs [harassed](#) and attacked members of a Benedictine monastery at Thuy Bang Commune in Thua Thien-Hue Province, forcing the monastery to relinquish its land. In Ho Chi Minh City, an ownership dispute involving a local parish school led one Catholic priest to [sue](#) the local government. During the year, authorities also detained and [punished](#) Falun Gong practitioners for practicing and distributing materials about their spiritual practice—including a school principal who was [punished](#) for practicing Falun Gong with others at his home—on the grounds that it is not a recognized religion.

Reports of [torture](#) and mistreatment of religious leaders and religious freedom advocates persisted in 2020. [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#)—a Hoa Hao Buddhist advocate sentenced to 11 years in April 2018—remained imprisoned at the end of the year and is reportedly in poor health. In November, Truyen started a hunger strike [protesting](#) prison conditions, including the lack of medical care. Prison authorities in Nam Ha Province continued to refuse to provide a Bible to Catholic environmental activist [Le Dinh Luong](#).

Authorities also targeted recognized groups for harassment. For example, USCIRF received reports that during the year authorities had cited Article 34 of the Law on Belief and Religion to interfere in the election of religious officers—known as “functionaries”—of recognized religious groups, leading at least one such group to suspend its election process.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a new binding agreement with the government, as authorized by Section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth commitments to further improve religious freedom;
- Encourage the Vietnamese government to amend the Law on Belief and Religion to conform to international standards to which Vietnam is party, including by making registration optional and not using it as a burdensome tool to control religious groups and activities;
- Encourage the effort by central, provincial, and local authorities to resettle Hmong Christians in Subdivision 179, urge similar efforts for other functionally stateless ethnic minority communities in the Northern and Central Highlands, and consider providing funding to facilitate improving religious freedom conditions among those communities; and
- Direct the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam to track houses of worship or religious sites of unique spiritual, cultural, or historical importance and work with Vietnamese authorities to ensure those sites receive special protection from development projects or expropriation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Send delegations focused on religious freedom and related human rights to Vietnam, and specifically request to visit areas impacted by religious freedom restrictions and individual prisoners of conscience—such as Nguyen Bac Truyen—and urge authorities to release them.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Op-Ed:** [The Rising Cost of Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#) (in *The Hill*)
- **Op-Ed:** [Hopes and Fears for Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#) (in *The Hill*)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Prisoners of Conscience in Vietnam](#)

Background

Vietnam's constitution permits citizens to "follow any religion or follow none" and mandates respect and protection for religious freedom. However, it also authorizes authorities to override human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of "national security, social order and security, social morality, and community well-being." The country's Law on Belief and Religion, which went into effect in January 2018, requires religious communities to formally register their organizations, activities, and places of worship. It allows only religious organizations that have operated for at least five years to apply for registration, and it grants registered organizations status as legal entities.

Roughly 20 percent of Vietnam's [estimated](#) 97 million citizens identify with a religion. Approximately 8 percent of the population follow Buddhism, while 7 percent identify as Catholics. Other religious traditions with a significant presence include Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Evangelical Protestantism, and Islam. By the end of 2020, the government had officially recognized a total of 16 religions and 43 religious organizations; however, many groups refused to register for fear of persecution or concern for their independence, which has led to both state-sponsored and independent organizations competing to represent the religion in some cases.

Positive Developments

The government has reportedly made efforts to streamline administrative processes and procedures related to religion by implementing an interagency, one-stop online platform. The platform is also used by the government's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), which monitors and evaluates the implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion, in addition to coordinating with central and local authorities to address complaints from religious organizations and individuals. In February, the Ministry of Public Security issued a circular on the regulation of detention facilities, which included a provision allowing prisoner access to religious publications.

In early 2020, the government of Dam Rong District in Lam Dong Province announced a plan to [resettle](#) stateless Hmong Christian residents in Subdivision 179 and to issue them household registration documents. For decades, local authorities have discriminated against Hmong and Montagnard Christian communities in the Northern and Central Highlands because of their faith and refused to issue them household registration and identification cards, which are necessary to access public services such as education and healthcare. If successfully implemented, Subdivision 179 could serve as a model for central and local government officials to improve conditions for other ethnic and religious minority communities.

In September, the government [released](#) Pastor A Dao, leader of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ and one of [USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience \(RPOC\)](#). State authorities had arrested A Dao in 2016 after he attended the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference, where he had shared the challenges his church faced from the government.

State-Sponsored Intolerance against Religious Groups

Human rights groups raised concerns that the government of Vietnam targets religious groups and individuals through online hate speech and defamation. In 2020, the state-backed "Red Flag Association" joined with government entities in spreading online propaganda that promoted discrimination and intolerance against religious groups and individuals such as Catholic priests, Montagnard Christians, and independent Cao Dai adherents. The Red Flag Association has been active since 2017 and was involved in violent incidents attacking the Catholic community. Although reportedly dissolved in 2018, the association has increasingly moved its operations to online platforms. In one instance, the Red Flag Association attacked three members of the Catholic community with derogatory language on its website, calling them "terrorists" and "brain dead."

Cybersecurity and State Secret Laws and Regulations

Several new laws had potentially negative implications for religious freedom. Broad and vague provisions in the Cybersecurity Law (effective January 1, 2019) and Protection of State Secrets Law (effective July 1, 2020) could be used in conjunction with their implementing decrees and decisions to punish and persecute religious groups and individuals. For example, according to the State Secrets Law, certain documents concerning religion and belief—such as meeting minutes between religious groups and the government—could be classified as state secrets, while "unauthorized" possession or dissemination of such information could be grounds for criminal prosecution or administrative punishment.

Key U.S. Policy

While the United States and Vietnam have close economic and defense relationships, religious freedom and broader human rights remain key U.S. concerns. In October 2020, during the 24th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, U.S. officials [raised concerns](#) with their Vietnamese counterparts about religious freedom conditions, the status of ethnic minority groups, and other related human rights issues. In [April](#) and during the third [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) in November, then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback called on countries, including Vietnam, to release prisoners of conscience.

In August, U.S. Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and John Cornyn (R-TX) sent a [joint letter](#) to then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo urging the U.S. Department of State to designate Vietnam as a CPC for its religious freedom violations and to consider imposing Global Magnitsky Act sanctions against perpetrators of grave human rights abuses in that country. 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.