



VIETNAM

Key Findings

Despite some positive changes over the past decade, the Vietnamese government continues to imprison individuals for religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. It uses a specialized religious police force and vague national security laws to suppress independent Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai activities, and seeks to stop the growth of ethnic minority Protestantism and Catholicism via discrimination, violence, and forced renunciations of their faith. In the past year, arrests and confrontations with the Catholic Church have escalated tensions. Based on these systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations, USCIRF again recommends that Vietnam be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, in 2014. The Commission has recommended that Vietnam be named a CPC since 2001. The State Department did so in 2004 and 2005, but removed the designation in 2006 because of progress toward fulfilling a bilateral agreement to release prisoners, ban forced renunciations of faith, and expand legal protections for religious groups.

Background

Vietnam’s overall human rights record remains very poor and deteriorated in the past year, as it has for the past several years. In the wake of ongoing battles within the Communist Party’s leadership, the government has moved decisively to repress perceived challenges, tightening controls on freedom of expression, association, religion, and assembly. Over the past two years, new decrees were issued prohibiting peaceful protest, limiting speech on the Internet, tightening controls on journalists and access to the Internet at cafes, and making it more difficult for religious communities to gain legal recognition. At least 100-200 prisoners of conscience are detained in Vietnam, some for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. At least 63 human rights advocates were sentenced in the past year.

Increased U.S.-Vietnam bilateral engagement in the past few years, particularly in the areas of trade and defense, has not been accompanied by improvements in religious freedom and related human rights. The Vietnamese government responded to some U.S. religious freedom concerns in the past, particularly after being designated a CPC in 2004. That designation produced tangible religious freedom improvements without hindering other aspects of the bilateral relationship. Trade, humanitarian programs, and security cooperation all expanded in the years 2004-2006.

The government of Vietnam controls all religious activities through law and administrative oversight, severely restricts independent religious practice, and represses individuals and religious groups it views as

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challenging its authority. In the past year, the Vietnamese government targeted independent branches of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao Buddhist church, independent Protestant house churches in the central and northwest highlands, Khmer Krom Buddhist temples, and leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Relations between Catholics and local government officials in Hanoi, DaNang, Vinh, and Ho Chi Minh City deteriorated as peaceful protests over land disputes led to violence and arrests. Vietnam also issued a revised decree on religion (Decree 92) that provides clearer timetables for registration, but expands oversight of religious affairs and makes it more difficult for new religious groups to ever achieve legal status.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

Prisoners

Dozens of individuals are detained for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, including: Fr. Nguyen Van Ly; UBCV patriarch Thich Quang Do; Hoa Hao leaders Nguyen Van Lia and Tran Hoi An; Protestant pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh; human rights defender Le Quoc Quan; ethnic minority Protestant pastors, Ksor Y Du and Kpa Y Ko; Hoa Hao activist Mai Thi Dung; Cao Dai leader Cam Tu Huynh; and two Catholic residents of Con Dau village.

Cao Dai

In July, police raided the temple of an independent branch of the Cao Dai church. The Long Binh temple in Tien Giang province was closed, its property turned over to the state-approved Cao Dai branch, and its leaders detained and warned not to start another temple.

Catholics

In July, police arrested Ngo Van Khoi and Nguyen Van Hai, Catholics from the My Yen parish in Nghe An province. The two were reportedly seeking to repair or re-open a closed local shrine. A September prayer vigil for their release ended with police firing into the crowd, beating and injuring vigil participants, and detaining 15 people. The two men were convicted in October of “disturbing public order.” They were released in December after completing six months in detention.

Central Highlands

In May, eight ethnic minority Montagnard members of an independent Catholic movement were sentenced to between 3 and 11 years in prison for “undermining

Hoa Hao

Police raided the independent Hoa Hao Quang Minh Tu pagoda in An Giang province, beating followers and spraying raw sewage into the holy site. Leader Van Thanh Liem, previously jailed for leading a similar unsanctioned Hoa Hao group, slashed his stomach in protest of the attack. The pagoda remains closed and followers were told to attend the state-sanctioned Hoa Hao venue. In the past year, police in An Giang, Can Tho, Vinh Long, and Dong Thap provinces harassed independent Hoa Hao followers, barred them from worshipping, and prohibited public readings of founder Huynh Phu So’s writings.

Khmer Buddhists

Vietnamese authorities harassed Ta Set and Prey Chop temples, Soc Trang province, leading to detentions, defrockings, and several monks seeking asylum in third countries. Monks Lieu Ny, Thach Thuol, and Ly Chanh Da were detained and defrocked for being in contact with Khmer Krom organizations overseas. Monks Thach Thuol and Lieu Ny and several other monks from Ta Set pagoda are currently awaiting trial. Monk Ly Chanh Da is in hiding. Several worshippers at Prey Chop temple, who blocked police entrance, were detained for several months.

UBCV Buddhists

The largest Buddhist organization in the country, the UBCV refuses to join the state-sanctioned Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. In the past year, partly in response to the election of new UBCV leaders, police have increased pressure. In January 2014 police in Hue forcibly stopped a planned UBCV commemoration ceremony, warn-

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unity” and “sowing ethnic and religious hatred” for protesting against the relocation of their village in Gia Lai province. The Bishop of Kontum repeatedly has been denied access to the areas where the men reside.

ing worshippers, beating a nun, and detaining over 15 monks. In February 2014, in Thua Thien-Hue province, police detained, interrogated, and later restricted the movement of Le Cong Cau, head of the 500,000 mem-

ber Buddhist Youth Movement. Cau was also detained briefly in March 2013 for posting articles supporting legal status for the UBCV. In February, in Ho Chi Minh City, police rammed the motorbike of and publicly beat monk Thich Chon Tam, a newly-elected member of the UBVC executive board.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The United States should continue to link the expansion of U.S.-Vietnam relations, including the creation of a regular Strategic Dialogue and new military and trade ties, with improved human rights conditions, including the freedom of religion. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government designate Vietnam as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Ensure that human rights are pursued consistently and publicly at every level of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, including any new military and trade agreements that are being negotiated, such as Vietnam's potential membership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership;
- Demonstrate the importance of human rights as a U.S. interest by accompanying any new economic or security assistance program with initiatives in human rights and religious freedom, internet freedom, and non-commercial rule of law and civil society development;
- Increase the possibility of access to Priority 1 refugee resettlement authority (generally used for cases of compelling protection concern for individuals who would otherwise be without access to the U.S. resettlement program) for individuals from Vietnam facing a well-founded fear of persecution;
- Ensure the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue has concrete outcomes relating to religious freedom, make it part of a larger strategy of U.S. engagement, and report to Congress on the trajectory and outcomes of the bilateral discussions on human rights; and
- Set aside funds from the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund to start new Internet and religious freedom programming in Vietnam.