



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

**Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom**

**Remarks as Prepared:**

**Frederick A. Davie, USCIRF Vice Chair**

Good morning and welcome to our hearing on challenges and opportunities for better religious freedom in Vietnam.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Since 2002, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. State Department designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for engaging in egregious, ongoing, and systematic violations of religious freedom. Our reporting has attempted to provide some nuance in reflecting how Vietnam continues to engage in such violations and yet has made some clear progress toward improvement, particularly over the last decade. More recent developments, unfortunately,

have threatened to reverse this progress, which is why USCIRF welcomed the Department of State's 2022 placement of Vietnam on its Special Watch List.

The United States and Vietnam have taken great strides in repairing relations and building a deepening partnership, such as finding ways to partner together in multilateral fora as the Human Rights Council. Our economic and geostrategic interests in preserving and furthering an international rules-based order ensure this trajectory of deeper partnership. However, one clear barrier to ever deepening ties remains: Vietnam's recent backsliding in regard to meeting its obligations to international human rights standards.

I recently had the privilege of leading a USCIRF delegation to Vietnam, alongside my colleague Commissioner Ueland, where we visited with government officials and representatives of various unregistered, registered, and recognized religious communities.

The government officials with whom we met were gracious hosts and were clear in characterizing the diversity of religious communities as a national asset—a point we wholeheartedly agreed. However, our assessment of religious freedom conditions within the country differed significantly.

As we consistently emphasized during our meetings, chief among our concerns is the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion. This 2018 Law was a milestone when it was first released, improving standards over previous laws and regulations, but unfortunately it still falls short of meeting

international standards of human rights and Vietnam's obligations to such standards, to which it has voluntarily signed.

This law outlines how a religious group can officially register and, ultimately, become a recognized religion. But this law confuses the international standards of registration for religious organizations as *compulsory* for the organizations to exist; in fact, international standards clearly indicate that any such registration must be *optional*, and mainly applicable for a religious organization to gain a legal personality.

When we spoke with religious communities during our trip—regardless of their registration or recognition status spectrum—all groups shared a persistent concern that the burdensome registration process has often led to official intervention into two core components of their activities: choosing religious leadership and interpreting scripture. Such intervention represents a violation of international standards of religious freedom.

All religious organizations shared with us their desire to contribute to the local community and to the social and economic development of Vietnam in general. They wish simply to practice their faith freely—and, for ethnic minorities, in their native language—and to pass on their religious traditions to their children. For Vietnam to continue to develop into a mature economy, and to secure greater stability, the government must recognize the rights of these religious communities to realize.

With that, I would now like to turn to my colleague and travel partner, Commissioner Ueland.