

State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom in Vietnam



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

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ABOUT THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. Federal Government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the president and congressional leaders of both political parties. The Commission's work is supported by a professional, nonpartisan staff of regional and subject matter experts. USCIRF is separate from the U.S. Department of State, although the department's ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom is a nonvoting, ex officio Commissioner.

WHAT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads and to live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is America's first freedom, it also is a core human right that international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) uses state-controlled religious organizations to control religious life and to intimidate and pressure independent religious communities into submission. A state-controlled religious organization is a religious group or institution that operates under the direct influence, supervision, or control of the government. The government exercises significant authority over these organizations, including leadership appointments, property matters, religious practices, and even doctrinal interpretation. This research examines six state-controlled religious organizations:

1. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha;
2. The 1997 Cao Dai Sect;
3. The official Hoa Hao Buddhist Church;
4. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North;
5. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South; and
6. The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics.

This report documents how the CPV and the Vietnamese government utilize three key Party and government organizations, several laws, and three overarching strategies to control religious life through state-controlled religious organizations.

The key government organizations are:

1. The Fatherland Front of Vietnam;
2. The Government Committee for Religious Affairs; and
3. The Ministry of Public Security.

The key laws include:

1. 2016 Law on Belief and Religion;
2. 2013 Land Law;
3. 2015 Criminal Code; and
4. 2018 Law on Protection of State Secrets.

The three strategies are:

- **Substitution:** The government outlaws historically independent religious groups and creates state-controlled alternatives. These alternatives mimic the name, structure, and functions of the original religious institutions. However, they are directed by the CPV and government to serve the interests of the Party and state, not necessarily the religion and its followers. Examples include the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the 1997 Cao Dai Sect, and the official Hoa Hao Buddhist Church.
- **Co-opting:** The government incentivizes compliance with government policies by offering existing religious institutions legal recognition, easing restrictions on religious activities, providing permits to build religious facilities, and extending other benefits. Members and leaders of a religion may believe that operating within the strictly controlled government system is the best and/or only way to practice their faith. Examples include the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South.
- **Infiltration:** This strategy is used where the government cannot fully control a religious group due to its connection to an organization beyond the boundaries of Vietnam. The government therefore establishes and uses a pseudo-religious organization whose members are also members of the religious organization. These members can be used to interpret religious teachings and practices to suit the CPV's political agenda and policies. An example of infiltration is the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is an authoritarian state ruled by the CPV. In October 2023, the government reported that about 27 percent of Vietnam’s population, or about 26.5 million people, were religious followers.¹ However, it also noted that although the majority of the total population are not followers of a religion, around 95 percent of the population have a religious and belief-based life or maintain some form of religious belief.² Census data from 2019 indicate Catholics comprised 44.6 percent of all religious adherents, Buddhists 35 percent, and Protestants 7 percent, with Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and other smaller religious groups making up the remaining 13.4 percent.³

This report documents how the CPV and government use six state-controlled religious organizations to control ethnic and religious minority communities to the detriment of the internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The research for this report combined comprehensive document reviews, case studies, and qualitative interviews with key informants and communities to explore the Vietnamese government’s use of state-controlled religious organizations to control religious life in the country and its impact on religious freedom conditions.

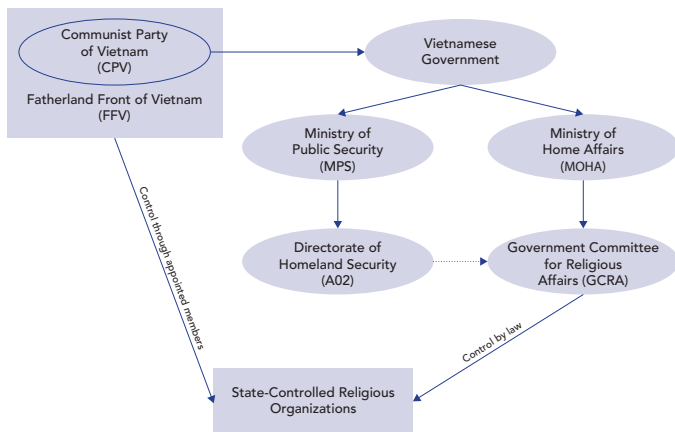
¹ 2023 report to the Human Rights Committee (CCPR).

² White Book “Religion and Religious Policy in Vietnam,” GCRA, 2023.

³ General Statistics Office (Vietnam), 2019.

KEY PARTY AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES THAT CONTROL RELIGION

Three key Party and government agencies are tasked with monitoring and controlling religion. The CPV's Fatherland Front of Vietnam (FFV) is responsible for contributing to the development of laws and determining the legitimacy of religious phenomena. It also influences religious organizations through state-appointed religious leaders. The Government Committee for Religious Affairs, which is under the Ministry of Home Affairs, is responsible for producing laws to regulate the practice of religion, approve and monitor the operations of government-sanctioned religious organizations, and direct the appointment of religious leaders. The Ministry of Public Security enforces laws and monitors religious communities through the Directorate of Homeland Security. The accompanying diagram shows these agencies and their roles and positions. Together, these Party and government agencies enable the control of state-controlled religious organizations through two approaches: 1) influencing through appointed religious leaders and 2) developing and enforcing laws that control religious organization and practice.



Hierarchical relationship among CPV and government agencies responsible for religious control.

THE FATHERLAND FRONT OF VIETNAM (FFV)

The CPV created the FFV in 1955 as its political appendage during the Vietnam War (1955–1975). In February 1977,⁴ it was reestablished to monitor and control the political and social lives of all citizens through affiliated organizations such as the Women’s Union, Youth Union, and the Farmers’ Union. Article 9 of Vietnam’s 2013 Constitution⁵ notes that “the Fatherland Front is a political alliance and a voluntary union of the political organizations, socio-political and social organizations, and prominent individuals representing their class, social strata, ethnicity or religion, and overseas Vietnamese.” Despite its description as “a voluntary union,” membership in the FFV is a de facto requirement for any religious organization wishing to be registered and recognized, with the Catholic Church being the only exception. Moreover, Article 4 of the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion stipulates that the FFV participates in the drafting of legal documents on belief and religion and oversees the government’s implementation of laws and policies on belief and religion.

Dr. Le Ba Trinh, vice president of the FFV’s highest body, the Central Committee, noted in 2016 that the FFV’s purpose in regard to religion is to propose religious policies to the CPV and government, supervise their implementation, and monitor religious activities, primarily through state-controlled religious organizations. He added that the FFV also monitors human rights-related issues in Vietnam’s foreign relations and prevents people from abusing religious, ethnic, and human rights issues to harm the unity of the country.⁶⁷ To pursue this end, the FFV was involved in the process of drafting the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion.

⁴ Military Region 4th Newspaper, 2022.

⁵ Vietnam’s 2013 Constitution.

⁶ ICLRS, 2016

⁷ Dr Le Ba Trinh, 2016

The FFV's specific involvement in the process of selecting religious leaders in Vietnam is unclear, since most its internal documents are labeled "secret" (discussed below). However, senior leadership of all recognized religions routinely participate in the FFV and some are active in the government. In 2021, the FFV nominated eight clergy members for the National Assembly. They were selected from different state-controlled religious organizations, and five were elected.⁸

The FFV also plays the role of a religious court. It works with the CPV's Committee for Mass Mobilization⁹ to decide whether a "new religious phenomenon" should be considered a "heresy" and whether a religious group should be eliminated.¹⁰ The FFV has led government efforts to dismantle certain independent religious organizations, such as the original Cao Dai Church and, more recently, the small ethnoreligious entities known as the Ha Mon group in the Central Highlands and the Duong Van Minh and Ba Co Do groups in the Northwestern Highlands.

THE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (GCRA)

The Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) was established on August 2, 1955, under the prime minister to oversee religious affairs. In 1993, Decree 37-CP further tasked the GCRA for managing religious activities, which included coordinating and drafting laws and policies on religion.¹¹ On August 8, 2007, the government issued Decree 08/ND-CP, transferring the GCRA from under the Prime Minister's Office to the Ministry of Home Affairs.¹²

While the GCRA purportedly does not carry out functions related to security or antiterrorism, its four recent heads have all been high-ranking police officers with a background working in the MPS' Directorate of Homeland Security. The current head of the GCRA, Vu Chien Thang, was a former police Brigadier General.^{13 14}

THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY (MPS) AND THE DIRECTORATE OF HOMELAND SECURITY (A02)

The Ministry of Public Security is the enforcement arm of the CPV and government. The MPS monitors and suppresses independent religious groups and interferes in their activities by detaining, interrogating, beating, and intimidating followers. It charges and prosecutes those who advocate for religious freedom with national security crimes.

Under the supervision of the MPS Directorate of Homeland Security in Hanoi, provincial Homeland Security offices implement the national policy of targeting independent religious groups to steer their members to state-controlled religious organizations. The A02 director for Dak Nong Province reported that his office's mandate is to ensure "people live as good citizens and good religious adherents" and to prevent "a number of strange and evil religions [that] have emerged."¹⁵

The MPS also targets individuals and groups who report human rights violations. In July 2021, the police in Dak Lak Province executed well-coordinated raids to arrest and detain individuals. All subsequent interrogation sessions at the police station focused on how and why these individuals reported human rights violations to the United Nations (UN).¹⁶ In March 2024, the MPS designated Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSFJ)—a human rights organization formed in 2018 by Montagnard Christians seeking refugee protection in Thailand—as a terrorist organization. MSFJ has produced almost 200 reports on violations of religious freedom in the Central Highlands. In January 2024, the government of Vietnam sentenced in absentia one of its cofounders, Y Quynh Bdap, to 10 years on terrorism charges. As of September 2024, Bdap faces extradition by the Thai government at the request of the Vietnamese government.¹⁷

⁸ MOHA, 2021.

⁹ The FFV and the Committee for Mass Mobilization were the same organization before 1981.

¹⁰ FFV, 2024.

¹¹ Government Decree No. 37-CP, 1993.

¹² State Organization Magazine - Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020.

¹³ MOHA, no date.

¹⁴ Some religious figures and civil society groups have questioned the GCRA's purported role in managing religious affairs. The placement of high-ranking police officials to lead the GCRA has led them to consider the GCRA as a de facto "religious police." Lang Mai, 2017.

¹⁵ Dak Nong News, 2024.

¹⁶ 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom.

¹⁷ RFA, 2024.

KEY LAWS FOR CONTROLLING RELIGION

While the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion (LBR)¹⁸ and Decree No. 162/2017/ND-CP¹⁹ provide a framework for government intervention in religious life, other legal documents impose additional regulations on religious activities and operations. These include the 2013 Land Law, the 2014 Construction Law, the 2015 Criminal Code, and the 2018 Law on Protection of State Secrets. The government also issues decrees to implement and supplement its laws and clarify its official positions. On December 31, 2008, then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed Decree 1940/CT-TTG affirming that those properties previously owned by religious organizations but used and managed by the state since before July 1, 1991, would be regulated at their current status. This “no return” policy essentially legalized the confiscation of all property taken by the government from religious organizations before July 1, 1991.²⁰

THE 2016 LAW ON BELIEF AND RELIGION (LBR)

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights broadly protects every individual’s right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, which “encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief.”²¹ In the 2016 LBR, the Vietnamese government chose the term *Tin Nguong* for belief, which conveys “beliefs in sacred and supernatural elements,” excluding thought and/or conscience. This narrow interpretation is more restrictive than the right outlined in Article 18, enabling the government to suppress any belief it deems harmful to the ruling party while portraying the 2016 LBR as the proper legal framework to implement FoRB.²²

The implementation of the 2016 LBR requires all religious organizations to undergo a process that allows the GCRA to unilaterally reject any “undesirable” individual from a key position in the organization or group applying for registration. Sections 1 and 2 of Article 33 stipulate that a recognized religious organization must provide the GCRA with a list of religious officials it appoints for approval within 20 days of the appointment. Article 36 empowers the GCRA to dismiss religious officials from their positions through state-controlled religious organizations.

Chapters IV and VI of the 2016 LBR obligate religious organizations to register their activities with local, provincial, and central governments, and must annually notify and seek approval from the government for conducting such religious activities. Articles 21 and 30 enable a religious organization to apply for legal personality after five years of continuous operation.²³

THE 2013 LAND LAW²⁴ AND THE 2014 CONSTRUCTION LAW²⁵

Article 159 of the 2013 Land Law defines what constitutes religious land and empowers the provincial government (known as the “People’s Committee”) to make such determinations. Article 103(2) of the 2014 Construction Law requires permission from the provincial government before the construction of a religious facility. These laws regulate land use for religious purposes.

¹⁸ The 2016 LBR.

¹⁹ The LBR was passed by the National Assembly on November 18, 2016. The government issued Decree No. 162/2017/ND-CP dated December 30, 2017, detailing a number of articles and measures to implement the LBR (Decree 162). The LBR and Decree 162 took effect on January 1, 2018.

²⁰ UPR info, 2013.

²¹ General Comment No. 22.

²² BPSOS, 2021.

²³ A group that is not part of a registered organization and that simply wants to practice its religion is required to apply with the commune government, not with the GCRA. The permit is valid for a year and the group must apply annually.

²⁴ 2013 Land Law.

²⁵ 2014 Construction Law (amended in 2020).

THE 2015 CRIMINAL CODE²⁶

The MPS uses various articles of the Criminal Code to target independent religious groups, including Article 113, which criminalizes the use of “terrorism to oppose the people’s government”; Article 116, which criminalizes “sabotaging the implementation of solidarity policies”; Article 117, which criminalizes “making, storing, and disseminating documents aimed at opposing the state”; and Article 331, which criminalizes “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, lawful rights and interests of organizations and/or citizens.” The government interprets these legal provisions broadly, enabling it to prosecute advocates of religious freedom and/or independent religious practice. The MPS has also used these provisions to target members of ethnoreligious minority communities in the Central Highlands, Northwestern Highlands, and Mekong Delta.

THE 2018 LAW ON PROTECTION OF STATE SECRETS²⁷

Articles 8 and 19 of the 2018 Law on Protection of State Secrets classifies state secrets into three levels that can be withheld from the public for specific lengths of time: top secret (30 years), secret (20 years), and confidential (10 years). The government maintains the right to extend secrecy indefinitely.

In November 2020, then Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc announced Decision 1722/QD-TTg,²⁸ confirming that the CPV has placed its agents in religious organizations. This decision determined that Party members “selected, arranged, and enlisted” by authorities in religious organizations is classified information.

²⁶ 2015 Criminal Code.

²⁷ 2018 Law on Protection of State Secrets.

²⁸ Decision 1722/QD-TTg 2020.

KEY STRATEGIES THE GOVERNMENT USES TO CONTROL RELIGION

The government pursues three strategies to develop state-controlled religious organizations: substitution, co-opting, and infiltration. In any given organization, any combination of strategies could occur concurrently.

STRATEGY OF SUBSTITUTION

The Vietnamese government implements the substitution strategy through the official Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), the 1997 Cao Dai Sect, and the official Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. The government has used this strategy to outlaw historically independent Vietnamese religious organizations and to establish state-controlled substitutes. The government seized properties belonging to independent religious organizations—often by force—and transferred them to state-controlled alternatives.

For example, in 1981, the government established the VBS and outlawed the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), which at the time represented most Vietnamese Buddhists throughout southern Vietnam. The government imprisoned the majority of UBCV leaders, some of whom died of torture while in detention. Buddhist monks refusing to join the state-controlled VBS were denied personal documents, and their freedom of movement was restricted. The authorities systematically seized temples and other properties belonging to the UBCV, destroying or transferring them to the state-controlled VBS or turning them into government facilities.

In 1978, the government started a five-year process to eliminate the original Cao Dai Church by substituting it with an interim governing body. In 1997, the Tay Ninh Provincial Party Committee created a Cao Dai sect through Directive No. 01-KH/TU.²⁹ The government used this new sect to control Cao Dai followers and transferred to it over 300 local temples and properties seized from the independent Cao Dai Church, including its central administrative seat in Tay Ninh.

In 1999, the government established the 11-member Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church Representatives, comprised of CPV members and government officials. In 2005, the government expanded this committee to the current state-controlled Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, which bears the same name but is different from the original, independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. The authorities transferred many of the religious sites of the independent church to the newly created one, including its headquarters in Hoa Hao Village of An Giang Province. The authorities have systematically prevented independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from conducting public religious practices at seized religious sites. The authorities have also imprisoned independent Hoa Hao Buddhists who do not support the official Hoa Hao Buddhist Church.

STRATEGY OF CO-OPTING

The Vietnamese government implements the strategy of co-opting on the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (EVCN-North) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (EVCN-South). This strategy involves what can be referred to as “hybrid” organizations, which were not created by the government but have, over time, acquiesced to government control. This acquiescence may have resulted from a sense that operating within the strictly controlled government system is the best and/or only way for members to practice their faith in Vietnam. Leaders of these organizations often collaborate with the government in locations deemed politically sensitive by the CPV, including the Northwestern and Central Highlands.

The EVCN-North and EVCN-South remain silent about violations against members of their religious community, including the functional statelessness of thousands of ethnic Hmong Christians and the ongoing, brutal crackdown on Montagnard house churches.

²⁹ Khoi Nhon Sanh, 2014.

STRATEGY OF INFILTRATION

The Vietnam government implements infiltration with respect to the Catholic Church, the only independent religious organization it legally recognizes. In 1955, the CPV established the National Catholic Liaison Committee, now known as the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics (CSVC)—which is a member of the Communist Party’s FFV—to undermine the influence of the Vatican in Vietnam.³⁰ Reformed in November 1983, this organization operates like a government-organized nongovernmental organization and has infiltrated Catholic congregations and hierarchy through priests and bishops who are close to the CPV. Members of this state-controlled pseudo-religious organization have attacked priests and parishioners who speak out against social and environmental injustices, defend religious freedom, or simply refuse to compromise with the government.

³⁰ The Vietnamese Magazine, 2023.

STATE-CONTROLLED RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

THE VIETNAM BUDDHIST SANGHA

This section covers the Vietnamese government's interference through the state-created Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) in Mahayana Buddhist organizations, unaffiliated Buddhist groups throughout Vietnam, and the predominantly Theravada Khmer Krom Buddhist community.³¹ Since the early 1980s, the Vietnamese government has pursued the substitution strategy, attempting to replace independent Buddhist organizations with the VBS. This strategy has involved appointing religious leaders; providing perquisites to those who acquiesce and join the VBS; targeting religious leaders who resist government control, including through defrocking, harassment, intimidation, and coercion; and seizing property from independent Buddhists and giving it to the VBS. The government has also placed Khmer Krom temples under the authority of the largely non-Khmer VBS leadership. This places a unique burden on ethnic minority Khmer Krom Buddhists, who witness the erosion of their religious traditions and the increasing replacement of the Khmer language with the Vietnamese language in their religious practices.

Background

Vietnam's 2019 population census shows five million Buddhists registered with the VBS, nearly 5 percent of the total population of over 96.2 million, whereas the GCRA estimates there are up to 10 million, including unregistered Buddhists.³²

In 1963, 13 different Mahayana Buddhist groups founded the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). By the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the UBCV represented the majority religion in South Vietnam. In 1981, the Vietnamese government created the VBS. While the government did not issue a formal decree to dissolve the UBCV, in the same year, it seized UBCV properties, including the An Quang Pagoda—the UBCV headquarters in Ho Chi Minh City—as well as temples, schools, orphanages, and other assets. Authorities imprisoned many prominent UBCV monks and tortured

some to death in detention. Others were forced into exile or held under “temple arrest,” unable to leave their temples. This crackdown on the independent UBCV led many of its leaders to join the VBS, even if they remained sympathetic to the UBCV. Nonetheless, some monks refused to join the VBS due to its membership in the FFV and ties to the CPV.

The ethnic minority Khmer Krom Buddhists are located primarily in the Mekong Delta and follow Theravada Buddhism. Since its establishment in 1981, the largely Mahayana VBS has officially absorbed Khmer Krom religious sites and clergy. The VBS enforces the use of Vietnamese to the detriment of the Khmer language, which has been used in religious practice and worship for centuries.

The VBS often advocates building majestic temples, and it profits from income generated from these temples. According to the Ministry of Finance, in March 2023 alone, the Ba Vang Temple received \$161,500 (4.1 billion Vietnamese dong [VND]) in donations from visitors. In the same year, the temple donated \$78,631.80 (2 billion VND) to the Central Committee of the FFV for charity purposes.³³ In addition, the VBS has established Thien Tai Joint Stock Company Limited to conduct spiritual tours and pilgrimages and publish Buddhist scriptures and documents.³⁴

Control of the VBS through State-Appointed Religious Leaders

The government maintains strict control of the VBS through the FFV and the GCRA. Many high-ranking VBS monks are involved in promoting CPV policies and the government's agenda through participation in the FFV and in positions at different government levels, including the National Assembly. In addition, VBS leaders are often seen working closely with high-ranking MPS officers. The current vice chairman of the Executive Council and head of the Central Dharma Propagation Committee of the VBS, the Venerable Thich Bao Nghiem, was a member of both the Central Committee of the FFV and the National Assembly (2016–2021). In 2019,

³¹ Only 1 percent of the total population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism, according to the 2022 U.S. State Department report.

³² U.S. State Department, 2019.

³³ Suckhoedoisong, 2023.

³⁴ GCRA, 2021.

he stated before the National Assembly that there were no pagodas in Vietnam outside the VBS.³⁵

The government uses VBS leaders for political purposes. In October 2023, the Venerable Thich Duc Thien, vice president and general secretary of the VBS' Executive Council and chair of the council's Central Committee on International Buddhism, took part in a delegation visit to the United States led by the GCRA. This delegation's mission was to convince the U.S. Department of State to remove Vietnam from its Special Watch List.

In 2021, then Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc recognized the VBS' support for the CPV at a ceremony to mark the organization's 40-year anniversary. He awarded the VBS with the first-class Labor Medal and its leaders the third-class Labor Medal. Then FFV Chair Do Van Chien presented the FFV's Great Solidarity Medal to all VBS monks.³⁶

Differential Treatment of VBS Members

The government protects VBS leaders from criticism and wrongdoing. On April 26, 2024, the authorities arrested blogger Duong Hong Hieu for a Facebook post criticizing the Venerable Thich Chan Quang (secular name Vuong Tan Viet), deputy head of the VBS' Economic and Financial Department, for his interpretation of certain Buddhist precepts. The authorities charged Hieu under Article 331 of the Criminal Code.³⁷

Members of the VBS are not held accountable under the legal system, as religious leaders of independent Buddhist communities are. In 2019, the Venerable Thich Truc Thai Minh (secular name Vu Minh Hieu) was caught collecting money from followers with the promise of helping them pay debts to the spirits for their deceased relatives.³⁸ For this incident, the VBS disciplined the Venerable Thich Truc Thai Minh by making him repent for 49 days and dismissing him from all VBS positions. However, he retained his position as abbot of Ba Vang Temple, one of the largest Buddhist temples in Asia and a lucrative source of revenue. In January 2024, further allegations were made that the Venerable Thich Truc Thai Minh had defrauded tens of thousands of Buddhists who paid to see what he claimed was Buddha's hair but was later exposed on social media to be pili grass.³⁹ VBS leadership only

admonished him with a warning.⁴⁰ The MPS did not initiate any criminal investigation.

Targeting Independent Buddhist Organizations and Leaders

The government only considers those listed on the VBS's roster of clergy as Buddhist monks and uses the VBS to delegitimize Buddhist clerics who resist government control. Beginning in mid-2021, some VBS monks have become more open in targeting unaffiliated Buddhist groups and their leaders, including those affiliated with the UBCV and those in settings other than a temple.

The Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe in Long An Province is an independent group of approximately nine Buddhists who ran an orphanage caring for 10 children they raised as child monks. On February 24, 2022, the Most Venerable Thich Minh Thien, chair of the VBS of Long An Province, denounced the founder of Zen Hermitage for distorting Buddha's teachings and its members for misrepresenting themselves as Buddhist monks. Another VBS monk, the Venerable Thich Nhat Tu, requested that police investigate Zen Hermitage's 90-year-old founder and his disciples for blasphemy and other issues related to their independent worship. In July 2022, the authorities sentenced the founder and five disciples to a total of 23 years and six months in prison under Article 331 of the Criminal Code. During their multiple raids, the police seized the group's financial savings. In 2023, the police of Long An Province launched a criminal investigation under Article 331 against three lawyers who represented Zen Hermitage. The lawyers subsequently fled Vietnam.⁴¹

The government continues to force Khmer Krom Theravada Buddhist monks to join the VBS despite the prevalence of ethnic Kinh and Mahayana Buddhists in the VBS. Those claiming independence face both retaliation by VBS monks and harsh punishment from the government, including arrest and imprisonment. On December 3, 2023, the VBS expelled Monk Thach Chanh Da Ra, abbot of the Khmer Krom Buddhist Dai Tho Temple in Vinh Long Province,⁴² even though he had never registered with the VBS. The VBS accused him of being "uncooperative," "defaming local authorities," and "sabotaging the implementation of solidarity policies." Monk Thach Chanh Da Ra advocated on social

³⁵ Luat Khoa, 2020.

³⁶ Public Security Website, 2021.

³⁷ RFA, 2024.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Thanh Nien Newspaper, 2024.

⁴⁰ RFA, January 23, 2024.

⁴¹ The 88 Project, 2022.

⁴² VOA, 2024.

media for Khmer Khom indigenous and religious rights and for the independence of his temple. The VBS's website, Giac Ngo Online, publicly denounced him for violating the religious practices and charter of the VBS.⁴³ On March 26, 2024, the police arrested Monk Thach Chanh Da Ra and one of his disciples for violating Article 331 of the Criminal Code. The following day, the police arrested four more monks and one lay Buddhist member of Dai Tho Temple, also for violating Article 331.⁴⁴ Reportedly, the police defrocked the four monks before arresting them.⁴⁵

Vietnamese authorities also harass monks who have migrated to the United States but maintain ties to the UBCV in Vietnam. The Venerable Thich Minh Nguyen, a U.S. citizen from Modesto, California, reported that the Vietnamese authorities threatened to seize his historic Quang Duc Temple in Hue City unless he joined the VBS. The VBS previously attempted to appoint its own monk for the pagoda, but the local community rejected him. Local authorities reportedly have prevented the Venerable Thich Minh Nguyen from conducting religious activities at the temple on his annual visits.

Interfering in Religious Practice and Activities

The government interferes in religious practices conducted at non-VBS temples. In August 2019, the authorities in Ba Ria–Vung Tau Province disrupted a religious ceremony at the independent Dat Quang Temple led by a visiting monk, the Most Venerable Thich Khong Tanh. The authorities justified their intervention under the pretext that he was not a local monk and, therefore, needed government permission to conduct religious activities in the province.

Since the government views the VBS as the official representation of Buddhism in Vietnam, UBCV temples may not display signs on their gates that reveal their UBCV affiliation. Likewise, UBCV monks doing charity work may not claim their UBCV affiliation. The Most Venerable Thich Nguyen Ly, abbot of Giac Hoa Temple in Ho Chi Minh City and head of the UBCV's Operations Office, has reported that he and other monks cannot state their membership in the UBCV on trips they take to bring relief to the poor across multiple provinces. Local authorities have allegedly warned if they do so, they will be turned away.

Property Issues

The VBS benefits from the government's seizure of UBCV temples. According to Chapter VIII of the VBS's Regulations, when a temple joins or is transferred to the VBS, temple land and assets, as well as all personal assets in the name of the temple's abbot, become the property of the VBS.⁴⁶ Since 1975, the authorities have seized UBCV temples and other properties, many of which have been transferred to the VBS. The continuing practice of temple demolition is based primarily on the Law on Construction and the Land Law, which mandate construction permits to build religious structures. The VBS maintains the right to change the use of this land for other religious purposes or to buy and resell with the approval from provincial authorities.

The authorities also enable the construction of large VBS temples and pagodas, such as the 2003 Bai Dinh Pagoda in Ninh Binh Province, which spans a total area of 539 hectares.⁴⁷ However, reports from independent Buddhist groups indicate the authorities refuse to issue permits for anything ranging from simple repairs or expansion to construction of new structures for independent Buddhist communities. Some independent UBCV temples proceed with repairs and/or renovations without the proper construction permits, exposing them to seizure and demolition by the authorities.

Moreover, the government sometimes reclaims land occupied by UBCV temples in the name of public interest. In 2016, the authorities demolished the Most Venerable Thich Khong Tanh's Lien Tri Temple in Thu Thiem, Ho Chi Minh City, ostensibly for a development project. In 2018, the authorities demolished An Cu Pagoda in Son Tra, Da Nang City. Reportedly, the authorities confiscated Buddhist books, artifacts, and statues from the demolished temples and transferred them to VBS temples. Destruction and confiscation of temples of independent Buddhist groups have resulted in a number of monks having to seek temporary refuge at other independent temples—a phenomenon known as “pagoda-less monks.”

The government uses threats of temple seizure or demolition to pressure UBCV monks to join the VBS. According to reports from the community, clerics in the VBS and local government authorities have repeatedly advised the Venerable Thich Thien Thuan, abbot of Thien Quang Temple in Ba Ria–Vung Tau Province, to join the VBS or risk losing his temple.

⁴³ Giac Ngo Online, 2024.

⁴⁴ Public Security News, 2023.

⁴⁵ VOA, 2023.

⁴⁶ Ben Tre Provincial Court Verdict, 2018.

⁴⁷ Bai Dinh Pagoda laments... poverty, Dat Viet, 2021.



Abandoned in 2002, the quarry is now the site of the independent Thien Quang Buddhist Temple.



After nearly 20 years of work, the temple restored the environment.

The local government has ordered its demolition, citing the lack of construction permits. From mid-2022 to January 2023, the local government cited the lack of construction permits and demolished a wooden guest house, a wooden gate, and a recently renovated bamboo hut built for religious activities for the Lunar New Year. According to the monks at this temple, intense international attention, including frequent visits by foreign diplomats and embassy staff, have prevented the total demolition of the temple complex.

THE 1997 CAO DAI SECT

This section covers the Vietnamese government's interference in the Cao Dai religion through the state-created Cao Dai Sect the government formed in 1997 (the 1997 Sect). Since the establishment of the 1997 Sect, the Vietnamese government

has pursued a strategy of substitution for the Cao Dai religion. This strategy has involved taking over the name and identity of the Cao Dai Church, appointing leadership, targeting independent religious leaders who resist government control through “excommunication” and physical violence, providing perquisites to those who acquiesce and join the 1997 Sect, and transferring the property of the independent Cao Dai Church to the 1997 Sect.

Background

Estimates for Cao Dai followers of either sect range from 1.2 million (1.2 percent of the population) by some sources⁴⁸ to as many as four million, according to leaders of the banned 1926 Cao Dai Church. They are concentrated in southwestern provinces, including Tay Ninh, Tien Giang, and Vinh Long.

Cao Dai is a syncretic religion founded in 1926 in Tay Ninh Province and known officially as *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do* (The Great Way of the Third Universal Amnesty).⁴⁹ Its Holy See, based in Tay Ninh Province, had affiliated temples and offices throughout South Vietnam and in some other countries, including Cambodia, France, Canada, Australia, and the United States. The Cao Dai Church has a dual organizational structure, with a religious hierarchy and a bottom-up network of executive committees. Anticipating repression by the French colonial government, the Cao Dai Church stipulated that in the event the religious hierarchy was destroyed, local executive committees must act to rebuild it. This religious tenet has enabled independent Cao Dai to persist even after the government established the 1997 Sect.

After 1975, the Vietnamese government persecuted Cao Dai followers through imprisonment, torture, and even execution.⁵⁰ In 1978, the authorities disbanded the Cao Dai Church's entire administrative structure as the first act in a multiyear process intended to eliminate it. On June 4, 1980, the authorities issued Decision No. 124, confiscating all lands of the Tay Ninh Holy See, totaling over 2,355 hectares, and most of its religious properties, including its hospital, university, library, and schools. The only religious properties exempted from confiscation were the Tay Ninh Holy See Temple and nine other edifices within its environs that were placed under state management with the prospect—at least in principle—of return to their owner in the future. A secret document uncovered in 2014 revealed the CPV's strategy to “encircle the Cao Dai Religion and restrict it to Tay Ninh locality until its eventual death.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ GOV.UK, 2022.

⁴⁹ Burns, Luke, 2020.

⁵⁰ Tom Farrell, 2005.

⁵¹ Plan 01-KH/TU, 1996.

After their Cao Dai Church was replaced by a government-appointed interim governing body in the early 1980s, Cao Dai followers persisted in practicing their religion in the privacy of their homes. In 1997, the CPV ordered the government to create a state-controlled religious organization to control and manage Cao Dai followers. To the international community, the government presents the 1997 Sect as the authentic Cao Dai Church and declares that it fully enjoys religious freedom. The CPV portrays the struggle between independent Cao Dai and the 1997 Sect as “a conflict” between two different groups of Cao Dai followers.⁵²

Control and Appointment of Leadership

On May 9, 1997, the government approved through Decision No. 10/QD/TGCP the charter of the newly created 1997 Sect and accorded it legal status. In appointing individuals to the 1997 Sect’s leadership, the CPV instructed the FFV and GCRA to “ensure the strict leadership of the Communist Party ... [and] build core forces and positive elements to meet the need of forming the [CPV’s] base for the near and long terms.”⁵³

Although the original Cao Dai religion expressly requires clergy members to resign from all religious positions before taking on a government position, appointed leaders of the 1997 Sect often simultaneously occupy government positions and have had political involvement throughout their career. The 1997 Sect’s first Governing Council included at least three high-ranking officers of the FFV of Tay Ninh Province, the same body that in 1978 issued the verdict to eliminate the Cao Dai religion. The current chair of that Governing Council, Nguyen Thanh Tam, was a member of the Central Committee of FFV from 2004 to 2024. He also previously served as a member of the National Assembly (1997–2002).

In order to hand-pick leaders of the 1997 Sect, the CPV ensured that the sect’s official charter dropped a fundamental precept of the Cao Dai religion, that of spiritism. This precept stipulates that worshipers rely on séances, or direct communication with God and other divinities, in the appointment and promotion of clergy members. Instead, the 1997 Sect selects its clergy members through a raffle using balls whose colors match the three colors representing the three teachings underlying the Cao Dai religion: Saint, Sage, and Buddha.⁵⁴

Since 2019, independent Cao Dai followers have elected executive committees and registered followers. By the end of 2023, there are at least 318 executive committees along with 1,114 executive officers at village to provincial levels with a total of around 22,000 registered believers. However, the 1997 Sect prevents these independent Cao Dai from fulfilling their religious obligation to elect clergy through divine confirmation ceremonies that must be performed at their Tay Ninh Holy See. Due to this restriction, reports from the community indicate the clergy of the independent Cao Dai have dwindled to fewer than 30 members, all in their 70s or 80s, compared to about 3,275 in 1974. In 2008 and 2015, groups of independent Cao Dai gathered on the grounds of their Tay Ninh Holy See to pray for the revival of their Cao Dai Church and/or attempt to conduct divine confirmation ceremonies. The 1997 Sect’s internal quarters security and the police responded with force to prevent them.⁵⁵

In addition, the MPS has placed under travel bans numerous Cao Dai lay leaders who participated in international fora to advocate for the reestablishment of their church, the return of their temples, and the right of all Cao Dai to freely practice their faith. These include Tran Ngoc Suong, Nguyen Xuan Mai, Nguyen Ngoc Dien, Tran Thanh Tuyet, Nguyen Anh Phung, Le Van Mot, Tran Quoc Tien, Luong Thi No, and Nguyen Hong Phuong, among others. On the other hand, 1997 Sect leaders are free to go abroad, including to meet with U.S. government officials.⁵⁶

Interfering in Home Worship Practices and “Excommunications”

Since they do not have access to their religious sites, independent Cao Dai primarily practice their faith in their homes. Members of the 1997 Sect have broken into independent Cao Dai members’ homes, trashed their altars, destroyed furniture, and physically assaulted those in attendance.⁵⁷ Many victims have filed police reports without receiving any response.

Members of the 1997 Sect have hindered funerals and burials and/or desecrated the graves of deceased independent Cao Dai followers, often in an attempt to force their families to submit to the 1997 Sect.⁵⁸ In November 2022, several U.S. citizens held a memorial service in Tien Giang Province for their deceased father, an independent Cao Dai follower.

⁵² Nhan Dan News, 2023.

⁵³ Announcement No. 319/TB.BDV of the Mass Mobilization Committee of the Communist Party’s Central Executive Committee, September 30, 1996.

⁵⁴ BPSOS, 2018.

⁵⁵ RFA, September 11, 2008; BPSOS, 2018.

⁵⁶ Cao Dai website, 2016.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, 2020 report.

⁵⁸ USCIRE, 2019.

The local police ordered their family to perform the rites with the 1997 Sect, contrary to the deceased's wish to follow the customs of the original Cao Dai religion. The family ultimately relented and permitted 1997 Sect clergy members to officiate the memorial service.

The 1997 Sect has “excommunicated” many independent Cao Dai followers for their insistence on independence and for their work toward rebuilding the independent Cao Dai Church. Excommunicated Cao Dai lay leaders include, among others, Lam Hua Phi (excommunicated on June 5, 2014),⁵⁹ Nguyen Van Thiet (July 25, 2015),⁶⁰ Tran Ngoc Suong (April 7, 2020),⁶¹ and Tran Van Duc (November 3, 2023).⁶²



On November 16, 2005, the 1997 Sect seized the Cao Dai Temple in Ho Chi Minh City. As a result, independent Cao Dai followers conducted prayer services on the street outside.

Transnational Repression

The 1997 Cao Dai Sect has attempted to infiltrate and subjugate Cao Dai followers among the Vietnamese diaspora, including in Canada, France, Belgium, South Korea, and Taiwan. In 2011, the 1997 Sect established the Cao Dai Overseas Missionary, based in Orange County, California.⁶³ The CPV's Politburo admitted it founded this organization to implement Resolution 36-NQ/TW, which mandated the government reach out to the Vietnamese diaspora to spread the Party's propaganda, shape favorable opinion, and garner support for the CPV.⁶⁴ In 2014, this state-controlled entity registered the official name of the Cao Dai religion as its own trademark. In 2018, the independent Cao Dai

Tay Ninh Temples of Texas in Dallas, Texas, petitioned the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board, resulting in the 1997 Sect's registered trademark being canceled.⁶⁵ Allegedly, the 1997 Sect through its agents in the United States pressured leaders and supporters of the Cao Dai Tay Ninh Temples of Texas to drop the petition, using defamation, intimidation, and threats. This temple and two victims then filed a civil lawsuit against the 1997 Sect, its leader, and one of its agents in the United States. On August 16, 2023, the District Court of Dallas County, Texas, entered a default judgment finding that the 1997 Sect and its head, Nguyen Thanh Tam, engaged in activities that “affect interstate or foreign commerce” and operated the enterprise through a pattern of racketeering activities in violation of the U.S. Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. The court ordered the defendants to pay compensation to the plaintiffs for damages and attorneys' fees.⁶⁶

Property Issues

Immediately after the 1997 Sect was established, the government transferred facilities of the Cao Dai religion previously placed under state management to the 1997 Sect, including the Tay Ninh Holy See as well as other properties that up to that point were in principle still under the possession of the Cao Dai Church. Members of the 1997 Sect then proceeded—often using violence or threats of violence and with the support of the local police—to seize some 300 local temples and other assets from Cao Dai followers. According to reports from independent Cao Dai, all but some 15 of their temples are now under the 1997 Sect's possession.⁶⁷

The 1997 Sect maintains a security team to keep the Tay Ninh Holy See off-limits to independent Cao Dai unless they officially convert to the 1997 Sect. Attempts by independent Cao Dai to gather on the grounds of their Holy See have been met with force, often with the aid of the police. On March 17, 2008, some 120 Cao Dai followers gathered in front of the sacred Pagoda Tree at the Tay Ninh Holy See to pray for the banned Cao Dai Church. The 1997 Sect security personnel quickly dispersed the crowd. In the following days, CPV-run *Tay Ninh Newspaper* published three back-to-back articles denouncing these Cao Dai followers as being unlawful and disrespectful to God.⁶⁸ On May 27, 2015, some 200 Cao Dai

⁵⁹ Lam Hua Phi's report.

⁶⁰ Nguyen Van Thiet's report.

⁶¹ Tran Ngoc Suong's report.

⁶² Tran Van Duc's report.

⁶³ Caodai.com, 2010.

⁶⁴ Resolution 36-NQ/TW, 2004.

⁶⁵ Democratic Voice of Vietnam, 2019.

⁶⁶ District Court of Dallas County, Texas, 298th Judicial District, Cause No. DC-19-08591.

⁶⁷ List of Cao Dai temples, 2024.

⁶⁸ Congressional hearing June 7, 2018.

followers gathered at their Tay Ninh Holy See to elect leaders of the independent Cao Dai Church. The 1997 Sect security in conjunction with the local police attacked and dispersed the gathering. About 10 members of the 1997 Sect security unit physically assaulted and detained Tran Van Hap, a local Cao Dai leader.⁶⁹

The Hoa Hao Buddhist Church

This section covers the Vietnamese government's interference in the Hoa Hao Buddhist community through the state-created Hoa Hao Buddhist Church (HHBC), which shares the name of the original Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. Since the government established the state-controlled Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism Representatives in 1999, which it expanded in 2005 to form the HHBC, it has pursued a strategy of substitution to control the Hoa Hao religion. This strategy has involved maintaining control over the HHBC's leadership, interfering in the interpretation and publication of Hoa Hao scriptures, targeting and cracking down on independent Hoa Hao church and its members who resist government control, and transferring control of Hoa Hao property to the recognized HHBC.

Background

According to 2021 government statistics, approximately 1.5 million Vietnamese (1.5 percent of Vietnam's population) were registered as Hoa Hao Buddhists. This population is concentrated mainly in the provinces of An Giang, Can Tho, Dong Thap, Vinh Long, Ben Tre, Hau Giang, Tien Giang, Long An, and Kien Giang in southern Vietnam.⁷⁰ Different sources suggest there are at least an equal number of unregistered Hoa Hao Buddhists, which would bring the total account to around three million.⁷¹

The Hoa Hao religion was founded in 1939 by Huynh Phu So, known to his followers as The Prophet and Teacher. The religion was named after his birthplace: Hoa Hao Village in An Giang Province, which followers refer to as the Hoa Hao Holy Land. Hoa Hao Buddhism expanded from an initial 18,000 followers to at least two million followers by 1965.⁷² It appealed mostly to the peasantry in the Mekong Delta region.⁷³ The religion does not emphasize clergy and/or physical houses of worship such as temples; instead, it emphasizes daily worship at home, community activities, and charity work. Wealthy Hoa Hao Buddhists set up religious pavilions

as gathering places for group study or meditation, religious events, and social activities. In villages with a large following of Hoa Hao Buddhists, the community erected recital minarets where lecturers spoke to large outdoor gatherings.



A Hoa Hao recital minaret.

After the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975, the Vietnamese government targeted Hoa Hao Buddhism, immediately occupying the Hoa Hao Village. In 1979, the government laid out a campaign for the extermination of the religion within 10 to 15 years.⁷⁴ The government restricted religious and worship activities by destroying Hoa Hao sacred books, altars, and images of the Prophet; banning the celebration of major religious days and the term "Hoa Hao Holy Land"; and publishing literature to slander Hoa Hao leaders and teachings.⁷⁵

A leaked 1993 document authored by Major General Huynh Huu Chien, then deputy director of the MPS' General Department of Security, revealed that the government replaced this initial extermination campaign with a long-term plan to control Hoa Hao Buddhists through a state-

⁶⁹ BPSOS publication, 2018.

⁷⁰ Government Committee on Religious Affairs, 2021.

⁷¹ Gov.uk, 2024.

⁷² BPSOS, 2013.

⁷³ tuoitrephatgiaohao.com, 2012.

⁷⁴ Ban Dân vận và Mật trận Trung Ương, 1979; Việt Báo, 2016.

⁷⁵ Việt Báo, 2006.

controlled organization and by suppressing those resisting this organization.⁷⁶

Control and Appointment of Religious Leaders

Independent Hoa Hao Buddhism comprises a network of tightly connected, self-governing autonomous communities with minimal hierarchy. It also does not have a central authority empowered to dictate its will or impose its controls on followers. In 1999, the government established the Committee of Hoa Hao Representatives, in which nine of the 11 members were CPV members.⁷⁷ In 2005, the government expanded this committee into the official HHBC.

Many leaders of the official HHBC have also held positions in the government and the FFV. For example, the current Central Administrative Committee chair of the official HHBC, Nguyen Tan Dat, the deputy chair, Bui Van Duong, and committee member Nguyen Van Thuan are all members of the Dong Thap Province government. This is in violation of the religion's original charter, which forbade members of the church's Administrative Committee from occupying a government position simultaneously.⁷⁸

The government uses the official HHBC and its leadership to portray an image abroad of religious freedom. For example, Central Administrative Committee Chair Nguyen Tan Dat joined the 2023 GCRA delegation visit to the United States to advocate for the removal of Vietnam from the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List. Dat was previously a member of Vietnam's 13th National Assembly (2011–2016).⁷⁹

Interfering in Religious Interpretations

The charter of the independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Church includes specific tenets of the religion, such as designating the Prophet's birthplace as the Hoa Hao Holy Land and the organization's leadership structure.⁸⁰ It also mandates that Hoa Hao followers study and propagate the Prophet's *Books of Oracles and Sermons through Poetry – Collected Work* in their entirety, restricts engaging in political or military activities, and requires administrators who take up political positions to resign from the church's Central Administrative Committee.

The charter of the government-created HHBC, however, excludes these key religious tenets, including the prohibition

on active Administrative Committee members from assuming political or government positions.⁸¹ It also does not mention the Hoa Hao Holy Land and excludes the annual commemoration of the Prophet's disappearance.⁸² Furthermore, the charter mandates the use of only government-approved scriptures, which exclude the Prophet's writings produced in the period from 1943 to 1947 that the government considers "sensitive." The government prohibits the circulation of the unabridged version of the most sacred scripture of the Hoa Hao Religion—Prophet Huynh Phu So's *Books of Oracles and Sermons through Poetry – Collected Work*—confiscating copies of these books when found and arresting anyone who disseminates these materials.

Interfering in Hoa Hao Buddhist Activities

Only the government-recognized HHBC can freely organize large public events. In 1999, the government permitted the Committee of Hoa Hao Representatives to organize the first commemoration of the Prophet's birthday since 1975 at the Hoa Hao Village. Over one million Hoa Hao Buddhists participated. In subsequent months, the government arrested 16 Hoa Hao Buddhists it accused of masterminding this public demonstration and sentenced them from six to 11 years in prison.

Hoa Hao Buddhists who refuse to join the official HHBC face restrictions and threats from local authorities. The police often summon independent Hoa Hao leaders for "work sessions" and, in some instances, arrest and imprison them. In May 2017, the police of Vinh Long Province arrested independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Huu Tan on charges of anti-state propaganda. Ten hours later, police claimed he had committed suicide with a knife inadvertently left in the interrogation room by a police investigator. Family members reported multiple injuries that indicated he had been tortured and killed.⁸³

Gatherings by independent Hoa Hao on special occasions are often banned or hampered. On June 25, 2023, the security police blocked the leadership of an independent Hoa Hao Buddhist community from accessing its headquarters in preparation for the 84th anniversary of the religion's founding. Then on July 3, the authorities cordoned off the

⁷⁶ University of Security, Ministry of Home Affairs, 1993; Việt Báo, 2006.

⁷⁷ Nguyen Huynh Mai and Dr. Sergei Blagov.

⁷⁸ Hoa-Hao Buddhist Church Charter, October 1966.

⁷⁹ Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương PGHH, 2016; GCRA, 2022; National Assembly.

⁸⁰ BPSOS, 2002.

⁸¹ Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương PGHH, 2015.

⁸² Huynh Phu So disappeared in 1947 after attending a gathering convened by the communist-led anticolonial front Viet Minh. Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2001.

⁸³ USCIRF report, 2018.

entire location where the commemoration event took place.⁸⁴ In December 2023, the Public Security Department of An Giang Province banned independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from commemorating the birthday of Prophet Huynh Phu So.⁸⁵ On April 3, 2024, the police blocked access to the temporary office of the “Pure Hoa Hao Buddhists” group so that followers would not be able to commemorate the day of the disappearance of their religion’s founder.⁸⁶

Local authorities block independent Hoa Hao from attending events in the country or even leaving their residences. In 2017, local police in An Giang Province prevented independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from visiting the family of Bui Van Trung for a memorial service for Trung’s deceased mother. Members of the family and other Hoa Hao Buddhists protested these actions. In February 2018, the People’s Court in An Phu District, An Giang Province, sentenced Trung, members of his family, and two fellow Hoa Hao Buddhists to one to six years in prison for “causing public disturbance.”⁸⁷ In July 2014, the authorities blocked Nguyen Bac Truyen, a Hoa Hao jurist and human rights defender, from returning to his home in Dong Thap Province with then UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt during the special rapporteur’s visit to Vietnam.⁸⁸ On July 30, 2017, Truyen was abducted by the police. On April 5, 2018, the authorities sentenced him to 11 years’ imprisonment and three years of house arrest for “carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the People’s Administration.” On September 8, 2023, the authorities released Truyen and sent him into exile in Germany with his wife.⁸⁹

Property Issues

In 1975, the government confiscated Hoa Hao Buddhist property, including over 800 recital minarets and around 50 temples.⁹⁰ The authorities have transferred many of these facilities to the official HHBC, including the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church’s Headquarters Office at Hoa Hao Village. In addition, some Hoa Hao Buddhist facilities were repurposed for use as government offices.⁹¹ Without their temples, administrative offices, and access to their Holy Land, independent Hoa Hao Buddhists cannot fully manifest their faith. They are limited to practicing their religion in their homes unless they join the official HHBC.



Commemoration of the Day of the Prophet’s Disappearance at Quang Minh Tu Pagoda, March 30, 2019.

One pagoda that remains independent is Quang Minh Tu Pagoda in An Giang Province, which is privately owned by Vo Van Thanh Liem, an independent Hoa Hao leader. According to reports from the community, the authorities have targeted Liem and his family members after failing to seize his temple. Authorities have imprisoned him and his nephew, Vo Van Thanh Long, for 20 years and five years, respectively.⁹² The government does not permit renovations of the pagoda and prevents its congregation from gathering on major religious days. The authorities also prevent outside access. In July 2014, the police blocked access, preventing a meeting between Hoa Hao Buddhists and Heiner Bielefeldt.⁹³ In March 2024, local authorities reportedly threatened Hoa Hao Buddhists who frequented Quang Minh Tu Pagoda to prevent them from attending the commemoration of the Day of the Prophet’s Disappearance.

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF VIETNAM-NORTH

This section covers the Vietnamese government’s interference in religious practice by Hmong Protestants in northern Vietnam through the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (EVCN-North), a state-controlled religious organization. The history of Vietnamese Protestantism is linked to the history of ethnic minority communities such as the Hmong, primarily in Vietnam’s Northwestern Highlands and the Montagnard in the Central Highlands. Since 1958, the

⁸⁴ Thông Luận, 2023.

⁸⁵ RFA, 2023.

⁸⁶ RFA, 2024.

⁸⁷ UPR submission, 2019.

⁸⁸ OHCHR, A VNM 11/2014.

⁸⁹ RFA, 2023.

⁹⁰ BPSOS, 2013.

⁹¹ Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, 1988.

⁹² Information from an independent Hoa Hao Buddhist who requested anonymity.

⁹³ OHCHR, A VNM 11/2014.

Vietnamese government has pursued a strategy of co-opting Protestantism in northern Vietnam through the ECVN-North. This strategy has involved appointing religious leaders and using the ECVN-North to enable its policies, such as forcing Hmong Protestants to renounce their faith, targeting missionaries, and restricting the Hmong from accessing the Bible in their language.

Background

The EVCN-North is the largest Protestant religious organization in northern Vietnam (from Quang Binh Province to the northern border with China), with currently 160,000 followers,⁹⁴ the majority of whom are ethnic Hmong. The total number of Protestants in both northern and southern Vietnam is about 1.2 million registered adherents (1.2 percent of the total population).⁹⁵ The ECVN-North is governed by its General Executive Committee in Hanoi, which in 2019 had 15 branches in 27 provinces and about 1,200 churches/worship sites.⁹⁶

During the French colonial period, the authorities restricted foreign Protestant missionary activities. In 1911, it permitted an American and Canadian missionary group known as the Christian and Missionary Alliance.⁹⁷ At the time of partition of Vietnam in 1954, the country had about 60,000 Protestants with nearly 100 pastors.⁹⁸ Following the division, most Protestants in North Vietnam migrated to South Vietnam. In 1958, the communist government in North Vietnam established the ECVN-North, with approximately 1,000 Protestants and 10 pastors who remained.⁹⁹

Hmong conversion to Protestantism largely began in 1989, encouraged by a Hmong-language evangelical radio program broadcast from the Philippines.¹⁰⁰ The unanticipated growth of Christianity among the Hmong population

from nearly nonexistent to more than 70,000 (out of a total population of over one million Hmong) by 2012 sparked concern in the CPV, which has an unfavorable view of the religion.¹⁰¹ At least until 2004, the GCRA did not recognize Hmong Protestants.¹⁰²

The CPV has long portrayed the spreading of Protestantism as a tactic the U.S. government uses to undermine the communist regime.¹⁰³ In the 1990s, the GCRA labeled anyone proselytizing for Protestant Christianity—even in some instances through the ECVN-North—in the northwestern provinces as a national security threat.¹⁰⁴ The government used diverse tactics to suppress the spread of Protestantism,¹⁰⁵ including using “contracted thugs” to harass, threaten, or beat Hmong Protestant leaders;¹⁰⁶ forcing church gatherings to cease, closing house churches, and confiscating property;¹⁰⁷ and instructing local officials to “encourage the return to traditional beliefs,”¹⁰⁸ essentially condoning forced renunciation of faith. Those who refused to renounce their new Christian faith faced expulsion from their ancestral villages and/or confiscation of farmlands, destruction of homes, and seizure of personal documents.

The ongoing crackdown has driven tens of thousands of Hmong Christians, the majority of whom are former ECVN-North members,¹⁰⁹ to migrate to the Central Highlands where provincial governments deny them national identification documents, rendering them practically stateless.¹¹⁰ Without national identification cards and household registrations, they are unable to legally work, attend school, or receive social services in Vietnam.¹¹¹ Faced with severe persecution, hundreds of Hmong Christians have fled to Thailand to seek refugee protection. The ECVN-North has kept silent on these instances of oppression.

⁹⁴ GCRA, 2021.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ GCRA, 2013.

⁹⁷ Barker, M.

⁹⁸ Ho Thanh Tam, 2014; GCRA, 2013.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Jim Lewis, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Worldwatch Monitor, 2012.

¹⁰² GCRA, 2013.

¹⁰³ James Lewis, 2002; Tam T.T. Ngo, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Jim Lewis, 2019 cited Reimer, 1995.

¹⁰⁵ Handbook of the GCRA in 2006; Jim Lewis, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Hmong National Development Inc., 2014.

¹⁰⁷ USCIRF Annual Report, 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Tam T.T. Ngo, 2015.

¹¹⁰ BPSOS, 2021.

¹¹¹ GOV.UK, February 2022.

Control and Appointment of Religious Leaders

The government vets and approves the ECVN-North's central and local leaders, who collaborate with the FFV, police, and government officials. Due to the high number of ethnic Hmong who constitute 92 percent of ECVN-North members,¹¹² some observers have interpreted the government's control of the ECVN-North as a means for it to ensure surveillance and subjugation of Hmong Protestants. The ECVN-North leadership is skewed toward the ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) majority. Its head has always been of Kinh ethnicity. Its general secretary, Pastor Bui Van San, and first vice secretary, Pastor Nguyen Huu Mac, are both ethnic Kinh and maintain a close relationship with the MPS. According to publicly available information, Pastor Bui Van San has had regular meetings with the MPS since 2013. Pastor Nguyen Huu Mac is a member of the FFV.¹¹³ The current second president, Pastor Thao A Pao, is an ethnic Hmong. Reports from ECVN-North pastors, however, indicate that he wields no real authority; he appears at ordination ceremonies for Hmong pastors to showcase diversity. ECVN-North leaders defend and legitimize government violations of religious freedom against Hmong Protestants, including those who are members of the ECVN-North.

Although the ECVN-North sends missionaries to actively proselytize to ethnic Hmong in northern Vietnam and to those who have migrated to the Central Highlands, some Hmong missionaries allege that the ECVN-North abandons them when the government objects to their missionary activities. Accounts from individual missionaries affiliated with the ECVN-North indicate that receiving permission from the ECVN-North does not protect missionaries from the authorities. If the authorities arrest or detain missionaries, these accounts claim the ECVN-North will deny authorizing their missionary activities and side with the government.



Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Thanh Xuan, deputy head of the Religious Security Department, Directorate of Homeland Security, MPS (fourth from left). Pastor Bui Van San, general secretary of the ECVN-North, and Pastor Nguyen Huu Mac, first vice president of the ECVN-North (fifth and sixth from left; [Source: ECVN-North Website](#)).

The ECVN-North and Government Persecution of Ethnic Hmong Protestants

Reports from Hmong Protestants who have fled Vietnam indicate suspicion that the government uses membership rosters submitted to authorities for registering religious activities to identify Christians. From 2004 to 2007, nongovernmental organization Boat People SOS assisted 671 Hmong house churches affiliated with the ECVN-North in registering their activities under the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion and Decree 22/2005/ND-CP, which was rescinded in 2009. Only a small number of these applications were reportedly approved.¹¹⁴

Reports from the community suggest that from 2007, provincial authorities proceeded to use these membership rosters to identify and force members of Hmong house churches to renounce their faith. The authorities responded to those who resisted by evicting them from their villages, confiscating their personal documents, and expropriating their farmland in an attempt to stamp out independent Protestant groups in northern provinces.¹¹⁵ This practice has not changed with the implementation of the 2016 LBR.

¹¹² Bao Tin Tuc, 2021.

¹¹³ FFV website, 2019.

¹¹⁴ BPSOS, 2006.

¹¹⁵ Persecution of Hmong Christians and the Muong Nhe Incident, BPSOS, 2012; Propaganda Department of Lao Cai Province, 2023.



Hmong families holding prayer service near their makeshift tent after being evicted from their ancestral village in Son La Province, May 2017 (Source: Hmong Human Rights Coalition).

The ECVN-North does not defend targeted members. In May 2011, the MPS dispersed a peaceful mass prayer meeting of around 7,000 Hmong in Muong Nhe District, Dien Bien Province, resulting in 63 deaths,¹¹⁶ numerous injuries, the detention and arrest of many participants, and hundreds of Hmong Christians fleeing into the jungle and/or escaping to Thailand.¹¹⁷ Although many of those affected were its members, the ECVN-North defended the MPS's actions. Pastor Nguyen Huu Mac, then head of the ECVN-North, claimed the demonstrators were following “Vang Chu,” which he described as a fake Protestant movement. Many survivors, however, claimed they were registered with the ECVN-North.¹¹⁸

If some ECVN-North leaders do speak out, they are silenced internally and punished by the government. In 2022, a Hmong ECVN-North pastor raised concern on his Facebook page about violations of religious freedom against Hmong members of the ECVN-North in Ky Son District, Nghe An Province. According to his testimony, his superior ordered him to cease contact with the persecuted ECVN-North members. Ly A Cha, an ECVN-North member in Van Ho District, Son La Province, reported ongoing religious persecution in Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, to the UN special rapporteur on FoRB in May and June 2022. The authorities interrogated him and forced him to admit to having fabricated the report. In further retaliation, after he refused to renounce Protestantism, the authorities seized his rice field, buffalo, and pig. He subsequently fled Vietnam with his entire family.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ America Magazine, 2011.

¹¹⁷ This crackdown was led by then MPS Deputy Minister To Lam, who now assumes the position as general secretary of the CPV. Persecution of Hmong Christians and the Muong Nhe Incident, BPSOS, 2012.

¹¹⁸ BBC, 2011.

¹¹⁹ BPSOS, 2023.

¹²⁰ Morning Star News, July 25, 2022.

Forced Renunciation of Faith

Without legal registration, Hmong Christians in many northern provinces may not legally conduct group religious activities even in their private homes, and they face government harassment and threats. Instead of providing protection, the ECVN-North expels Hmong members who are forced by the government to renounce their faith.

For example, in December 2021, Lau Y Tong in Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, converted to Protestantism and joined the ECVN-North. In 2022, local authorities in Nghe An Province discovered her conversion and ordered her to renounce Protestantism. When she refused, the authorities coerced her into signing a divorce application, relinquishing her civil rights, and leaving her village without her children. A pastor of the unrecognized, independent Protestant organization Good News Mission Church petitioned the GCRA and the FFV to intervene on Tong's behalf. They did not respond. Her two sisters later faced similar treatment by the government of Ky Son District. The ECVN-North refused to assist all three and informed Tong's two sisters that they were expelled from the organization. The authorities continued to pressure them to renounce their faith after they joined the independent Good News Mission Church. Ultimately, all three fled Vietnam.

Reports from some Hmong Protestants indicate that the authorities responded to their refusal to abandon their faith with threats to demolish their homes, seize their farms, and/or expel their families from their home villages. In a few instances involving their members, some ECVN-North leaders quietly appealed to local authorities for reconsideration but did not pursue any further actions when the authorities ignored their appeals.¹²⁰ There are no reports of meaningful or successful intervention by the ECVN-North on behalf of its members when they are under government coercion to abandon their Christian faith.

Using Other State-Controlled Religious Organizations to Control Ethnic Hmong

The Vietnamese government also uses representatives of state-controlled religious organizations of other religions to lure Hmong people away from Protestantism. According to Hmong Pastor Vang Chi Minh, a refugee from Vietnam who resettled in the United States, the Vietnamese government encourages Protestant Christians to become Buddhists or

Catholics instead. For example, in 2017, the government brought a group of VBS monks from Hanoi to Dien Bien and Tuyen Quang provinces to do charity work and call on Hmong (both animist and Christian) to convert to Buddhism. In another instance reported, the government sent a Catholic priest affiliated with the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics to Lao Cai and Yen Bai provinces to recruit Hmong people to become Catholic rather than Protestant.

Access to Religious Literature

Despite the prevalence of Hmong members, the ECVN-North complies with the prohibition enforced by the authorities to limit access to religious materials printed in the Hmong language. The Religious Publishing House, an institution managed by the GCRA,¹²¹ has ignored persistent requests from the Hmong Christian community to authorize the printing of the Bible in the contemporary Hmong language. The government only recognizes an outdated Hmong dialect no longer commonly spoken and which is written in an alphabet not commonplace today. It is reported that many Hmong were arrested when carrying copies of the Bible printed in the contemporary Romanized Hmong language because law enforcement deemed them “illegal materials.”

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF VIETNAM-SOUTH

The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (ECVN-South) is the ECVN-North’s counterpart for southern Vietnam, an area that includes the Central Highlands. Since recognizing the ECVN-South in 2001, the Vietnamese government has pursued a co-opting strategy of controlling the appointment of ECVN-South religious leaders, outlawing and cracking down on independent Montagnard house churches, interfering in their worship practices, and forcing Montagnard Christians to leave their house churches and join the ECVN-South.

Background

With 700,000 followers, the ECVN-South is the largest Protestant organization in Vietnam.¹²² The Evangelical Church of Vietnam was founded in 1927 when Vietnam was a French colony. The country’s partition in 1954 permanently separated the ECVN into northern and southern

organizations. In 2001, the government granted legal recognition to the ECVN-South. Like other state-controlled religious organizations, its government-approved charter contains language about serving the fatherland and the nation, represented by the FFV and the state. The ECVN-South has two administrative levels: the General Alliance at the central level overseeing a network of 2,281 branches at the local level, as of April 2024.

Around 2000, a movement emerged in the Central Highlands called “Dega Protestantism.”¹²³ This movement sought increased religious and political freedom, protection of ancestral lands, and greater autonomy.¹²⁴ In February 2001, peaceful protests by thousands of Montagnards broke out in the Central Highlands in support of this movement. The government used violence to disperse protesters, arresting and imprisoning more than 180 Montagnard Christians, including Dega church activists, pastors, house church leaders, evangelists, and Bible teachers.¹²⁵

This mass crackdown started a protracted campaign by the government to curtail the spread of Protestant house churches in the Central Highlands.¹²⁶ In 2002, 2004, and 2008, eyewitnesses reported that government responses to protests—including those demonstrating for religious freedom—led to multiple injuries, deaths, and people seeking refugee status in Cambodia and Thailand.¹²⁷ According to a religious freedom advocate, the death toll in 10 years of protest could be as high as 700 people. As of 2011, there were more than 300 Montagnard demonstrators in prison.¹²⁸

Some Montagnard house churches refrained from joining the ECVN-South following this crackdown. Others who were members of the ECVN-South decided to form new, independent house churches or join unregistered churches such as the Good News Mission Church. Among the independent house churches formed in the Central Highlands, the Dega Protestant Church and Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands (ECCCH) attracted the most followers. The government has worked in concert with the ECVN-South in an attempt to force unregistered Montagnard Christians to abandon their house churches and either join or rejoin the ECVN-South.

¹²¹ GCRA, 2019.

¹²² GCRA, 2021.

¹²³ Dega is another word for Montagnard.

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2011.

¹²⁵ UNPO, 2004.

¹²⁶ Vietnam’s Christians: A Century of Growth in Adversity, p. 105, 2011; Vietnam FORB Roundtable, 2024.

¹²⁷ Human Rights Watch, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2008.

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2011.

Control of Religious Leadership

The Vietnamese government has co-opted the ECVN-South by controlling the appointment of its top leaders and silencing or forcing out those who do not comply with government policies or who speak against human rights violations. Many ECVN-South leaders, including those of Montagnard ethnicity, occupy government positions and are sent abroad to defend the government's record toward religious groups.

Some Montagnard pastors in the ECVN-South have denied the occurrence of religious oppression in the Central Highlands. An ethnic Ede Montagnard pastor, Y Ky Eban, who was in charge of the Ea Tul branch of the ECVN-South in Cu Mgar District, Dak Lak Province, publicly insisted that there was no crackdown on Montagnard Christians from 2001 to 2008.¹²⁹ Another ethnic Ede Montagnard pastor and the current head of the ECVN-South's representative board in Dak Lak Province, Pastor Y Tuan Mlo, has served in various positions in the provincial government. He has publicly supported the government's policy toward Montagnards, including the ongoing crackdown against Montagnard house churches. In October 2023, Mlo joined the GCRA delegation to the United States to advocate for the removal of Vietnam from the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List.¹³⁰

ECVN-South members suspected of being independent-minded or advocating for religious freedom are denied leadership positions. An ECVN-South preacher in Dak Lak Province was allegedly denied ordination because of his participation in a 2002 demonstration and subsequent imprisonment.

Intimidation and Harassment of Independent Religious Practice and Advocacy

Local government authorities closely monitor independent Christian communities and harass and intimidate their leaders. According to information provided by the community, if the authorities find members of an unregistered house church gathering for prayer service, undercover police officers disrupt the service, seize the cell phones of participants, and threaten further actions against them. In cases of repeated offenses, the police summon group leaders for interrogation and/or impose administrative fines.¹³¹ Occasionally, the local police deny independent religious leaders freedom of movement to attend religious

activities outside of their home villages, force house church members to sign pledges to leave their house churches, arrest and imprison those who publicly protest, and even allegedly resort to extrajudicial killing.¹³²

Authorities force independent Montagnard Protestants to join the ECVN-South and threaten them with punishment if they refuse to comply. In 2022, several Montagnard evangelists requested clarification from authorities on a provision in the 2016 LBR that they interpreted as authorizing unaffiliated religious groups to practice their religion without prior registration or approval by the commune government. Instead of offering guidance, the authorities responded with notifications of fines for unclear "administrative violations" followed by threats of further reprisals. Local authorities informed them they could avoid these punishments if they joined the ECVN-South.¹³³

The government cracks down on advocacy for religious freedom by independent Montagnard Christian leaders and followers. On December 8, 2023, the police confiscated the smartphone of Y Bum Bya, an evangelist of the independent ECCCH, while he was documenting government violations for a report to UN Special Procedures. The government then subjected him to public denunciation in front of his fellow villagers for not disbanding his house church. According to the testimony that Y Bum Bya shared with a fellow church member in February 2024, the authorities threatened to kill him if he stayed with his house church. On March 8, 2024, he was found dead, hanging at a cemetery near his home.¹³⁴

The ECVN-South defends government positions and targets independent Protestant groups. On February 4, 2023, ECVN-South Pastor Nay Sia appeared on the television program of the Police Department of Dak Lak Province to accuse ECCCH leaders of "taking advantage of religion for political purposes, to disturb the lives of citizens, [and] to undermine beliefs" and claimed "their goal is to overthrow the government and establish a Dega state."¹³⁵ On March 26, 2024, Pastor Y Cuah Hdok of the ECVN-South declared in a video broadcast on the Public Security website of the Dak Lak provincial police that "freedom of belief and religions must be within the framework of the Party, the State. We must obey whatever the State allows."¹³⁶ He also denounced Evangelist Y Krec Bya and Pastor A Ga of the ECCCH and declared that its

¹²⁹ Dak Lak Provincial Government.

¹³⁰ GCRA, 2023.

¹³¹ U.S. Department of State, 2022.

¹³² U.S. State Department, 2021; Morning Star News, 2024.

¹³³ UN Special Procedures, 2022.

¹³⁴ RFA, 2024.

¹³⁵ An Ninh Trật Tự Đắk Lắk, 2023.

¹³⁶ An Ninh Trật Tự Đắk Lắk, 2024.

members were guilty of disobeying God and would not go to Heaven because they refused to join the ECVN-South.¹³⁷ Two days later, the People's Court of Dak Lak Province sentenced Y Krec Bya to 13 years in prison followed by five years of house arrest on charges of violating Article 116 of the Criminal Code.

Property Issues

Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands designate a house in their local community as a house church for group religious activities. In the early 2000s, the authorities closed, burned, destroyed, or seized hundreds of houses of worship of Montagnard Christians, including those affiliated with the ECVN-South.¹³⁸ Some religious sites were confiscated for other purposes. In March 2009, the authorities demolished an Ede church affiliated with the ECVN-South in Buon Ma Thuot City to construct a public kindergarten.¹³⁹ Previously, this church provided education for the Montagnard people who could not afford schooling fees.

Following the 2004 U.S. designation of Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom, the government gradually allowed ECVN-South's house churches to reopen¹⁴⁰ and occasionally supplied the ECVN-South with lands to build new churches. The state has allocated land to 32 branches of the ECVN-South in the Central Highlands to build religious facilities from 2005 to the present.¹⁴¹

To further restrict religious activities of unaffiliated house churches, the police reportedly confiscate Bibles, hymn books, technology products such as cell phones and computers and, at times, cash owned by house church leaders. In May 2023, police officers seized three cell phones from three different victims in Dak Lak Province to prevent them from reporting rights violations and/or attending training on UN human rights conventions. On December 21, 2020, the Gia Lai provincial police restricted access to Papet Village and prevented the believers of the unregistered First Christian Church from celebrating Christmas. As this church proceeded with the Christmas celebration, the police arrested 11 church members and leaders and confiscated copies of the Bible, hymn books, and \$2,200 (56,000,000 VND).¹⁴²

THE COMMITTEE FOR SOLIDARITY OF VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS

This section covers the Vietnamese government's interference with Roman Catholic religious practice through the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics (CSVC), a state-controlled pseudo-religious organization. Unlike the other five organizations identified in this report, the CSVC does not formally or directly control the religious denomination to which it pertains. Rather, it operates through infiltration of the laity and various ranks of the clergy. Its members often hold titles and positions in the government or the Communist Party's FFV. The strategy of infiltration includes the appointment of religious leaders, differential treatment of CSVC members, the publication of religious material, and the seizure and control of property. Through the CSVC, the government also interferes in communications between Catholic clergy and believers as well as between believers and Catholic institutions around the world, including the Vatican. Finally, the government engages in the suppression of Vietnamese Catholics who oppose or are critical of the CSVC.

Background

According to government statistics, there are seven million Catholics in Vietnam.¹⁴³ From 1954 to 1955, the CPV controlled the Catholic community in the country through the organization known as the Vietnam Catholic Association for National Salvation. From 1955 to 1983, this organization was called the Liaison Committee of Patriotic and Peace-Loving Vietnamese Catholics. In 1983, the name changed to the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics (CSVC).

¹³⁷ Report from Y Krêc Byã to UN Special Rapporteur, 2022.

¹³⁸ UNHCR report, 2006; USCIRF report, 2008.

¹³⁹ UNPO, 2009.

¹⁴⁰ USCIRF report, 2008.

¹⁴¹ Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences' Institute for Religious Studies, 2023.

¹⁴² Incident report submitted to the UN in 2021.

¹⁴³ Catholic World Report, 2023.

Initially, the communist government in North Vietnam attempted to create a separate Vietnamese Catholic denomination independent from the Roman Catholic Church and the authority of the Pope. This effort failed as North Vietnamese Catholics remained loyal to the Vatican despite persecution. After the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975, the CPV targeted Catholics in the South who resisted state encroachment, detaining and arresting influential Catholic clergy for several years or decades.¹⁴⁴ The government also seized Catholic-operated schools, orphanages, convents, hospitals, and other facilities. Simultaneously, the FFV worked with a group of Catholic priests sympathetic to the CPV and government to promote “Catholic patriotism” to infiltrate and control the Church.

According to the CSVC’s original charter, its budget derives from two sources: “resources donated by localities” and “legal sources of revenue.” However, during the 2002–2007 term, the CSVC’s charter referred to a third revenue stream: the state-sponsored budget.¹⁴⁵ The government has publicly recognized the work of the CSVC and its leaders with awards, including the First-Class Independence Medal in 1983 and the Ho Chi Minh Medal in 2005. The government funds each of the 39 provincial CSVC committees at between \$1,180 and \$5,900 (30 million and 150 million VND)¹⁴⁶ per year.¹⁴⁷ The CSVC’s *Vietnamese Catholic Newspaper* receives approximately \$24,000 (600 million VND) in government funding annually.

Diplomatic relations between the Catholic Church’s Holy See and Vietnam have never been officially established, but in 2023 the two sides upgraded the Vatican’s presence in Vietnam to the level of “Resident Representation.” As a concession to the Vietnamese government, the Vatican has refrained from publicly raising concerns about the government’s interference with Church affairs, its mass confiscation of the properties of the Vietnamese Catholic Church, and its persecution of Catholics.

Appointment of Religious Leaders

The GCRA’s 2021 training manual for government officials emphasized that the Vatican must report the selection of bishops or higher clergymen for approval by the government.¹⁴⁸ The Vatican has agreed to this process for the sake of bilateral relations.¹⁴⁹



Le Dinh Thao, Deputy Chair of the FFV of Dong Nai Province, presented 100 million VND each to Father Nguyen Kim Doan, deputy chair of the CSVC of Dong Nai Province, and to the chief of staff of VBS–Dong Nai Province (Source: Dong Nai News, 2017).

Catholic priests typically refrain from criticizing the CSVC out of fear of official reprisal. In 1990, the bishop of the Diocese of Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands spoke out against the state-controlled Catholic organization. The government then prevented him from attending a gathering of Catholic leaders even though he occupied a leadership position. The government continues to target this diocese, harassing priests and interrupting religious services. Learning from this experience, reports from the community indicate most bishops hesitate to criticize or confront the CSVC. The independent Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam does not officially acknowledge the CSVC nor authorize its activities within the Catholic Church.¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, it refrains from openly confronting the state-controlled CSVC.

The CSVC operates in most of the 24 dioceses and three archdioceses throughout Vietnam, with the Archdiocese of Hue and the Diocese of Ban Me Thuot¹⁵¹ among the few exceptions. Reports from Vietnamese Catholics indicate that even some priests and bishops who are not officially members of the CSVC nonetheless collaborate closely with the organization and quietly implement the CPV’s

¹⁴⁴ Vietbao, 2001.

¹⁴⁵ Ha, Thanh (2008).

¹⁴⁶ For comparison, the average annual household income in Vietnam was \$2,409 in December 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Bao Dong Nai, 2017.

¹⁴⁸ GCRA, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ BBC, 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Attorney Manh Dang’s Interview (27 February 2024).

¹⁵¹ Official name of the diocese as approved by the Vatican, versus the widely used name “Buon Ma Thuot” City.

directives within the Church.¹⁵² In 2019, the CSVC reported that 123 priests attended its 6th National Congress held in 2013 and that 402 priests participated in its affiliates at provincial and city levels.¹⁵³ Only a small fraction of these priests overtly declared membership in the CSVC. In 2023, the membership of the CSVC included 352 priests and 180 monks.¹⁵⁴ Officials from the GCRA, the MPS,¹⁵⁵ and the FFV maintain an active presence at the CSVC's conferences and important meetings. The current CSVC chair is also the vice chairman of the FFV.¹⁵⁶

Some CSVC members occupy important positions within the Church, government, and Party. For example, while serving as general representative of the Archdiocese of Saigon from 1975 to 2014, Father Huynh Cong Minh was also CSVC vice chair and a member of the National Assembly from 1976 to 1981. From 1997 to 2014, Father Nguyen Cong Danh was the general spiritual director of Legio Maria, an international movement of the Catholic Church; he was also the CSCV chair from 2008 to 2022 and vice chair of both the FFV and the local Fatherland Front of Ho Chi Minh City as well as a member of the People's Council of Ho Chi Minh City from 1995 to 2004.

Differential Treatment of CSVC Members

Reports from Catholics in Vietnam indicate that the government uses its power to approve religious activities or the construction of religious sites to encourage membership in or collaboration with the CSVC. Those who are affiliated with the CSVC, in turn, receive favorable treatment. For example, the government of Xuan Loc District, Dong Nai Province, refused to approve the construction of the Nui Cui Pilgrimage Center unless Catholic leaders in the diocese agreed to join or support the CSVC. By 2018, the authorities had approved only about 4.43 of the 22 hectares planned for the project. Bishop Do Van Ngan of Xuan Loc Diocese used his strong ties to the FFV to seek its chairman's intervention. Do Van Chien, the FFV's chairman, made a personal visit to the bishop during Christmas and extolled Xuan Loc Diocese as a beacon of cooperation between the Church and the

communist government. Among all dioceses, the Xuan Loc Diocese by then had the highest number of priests and clergy joining the CSVC. At the same time, the government praised Xuan Loc Diocese for its large contributions to government projects. Soon afterward, the local authorities allowed the full construction of the Pilgrimage Center.

The government provides preferential treatment for religious leaders in the CSVC. The CSVC's chair enjoys perquisites from public funds equivalent to those of a government minister¹⁵⁷ including free healthcare,¹⁵⁸ a blue license plate of type 31A (reserved for government officials from the national capital), a driver, fuel allowance, and funding for all official travel expenses. Members of the CSVC's Central Committee enjoy free flights and are provided with a government car and a driver for up to a month for each visit to their respective hometowns. In the event of an important CSVC member's passing, the government pays for funeral services at the national funeral home—the Reunification Palace.¹⁵⁹

While CSVC-linked priests are free to travel abroad, including to raise funds among the Vietnamese diaspora, the MPS imposes travel bans on Catholic priests and followers who advocate for religious freedom, speak out against environmental injustice, or protest land grabs. The CSVC publicly condemns Catholics, including priests, who oppose the government's seizure of church properties, characterizing them as “people of malicious intent of provoking the public.”¹⁶⁰ In 2016, Father Dang Huu Nam, a priest from Vinh Diocese who openly opposed the CSVC, led protests against a Taiwanese company, Formosa, for ecological damages it caused that impacted the livelihood of thousands of families in fishing villages, including his religious community. The government responded to this activism by requiring the diocese to transfer him to a desk job in a diocesan office.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the CSVC social media accused Father Nam of disrespecting Father Nguyen Dang Dien, president of the Nghe An branch of the CSVC.¹⁶² Moreover, the government often punishes targeted priests with travel bans, and no justification is given by the government other than “national security.”

¹⁵² The Vietnamese Magazine, 2023.

¹⁵³ Report on the protection and promotion of human rights in Vietnam under the third cycle of UPR review from CSVS, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Công giáo và Dân tộc, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Popularly known as “religious police,” A02 is the Directorate of Homeland Security of the Ministry of Public Security. See the Introduction.

¹⁵⁶ Government Newspaper, 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Ha, Thanh, 2008.

¹⁵⁸ According to the CSVC, “the Standing Committee of National Assembly created financial conditions for His treatment.” CSVC Website, 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Bui, Duc Sinh (2001). *Giáo Hội Công Giáo ở Việt Nam 1975–2000*. Westminster, California.

¹⁶⁰ VCSC submission to UPR, 2019.

¹⁶¹ RFA, 2020.

¹⁶² Facebook Page “A Catholic,” 2017; BBC, 2018.

Interfering in Religious Publications

While the government does not allow the Catholic Church to distribute its own publications in Vietnam, the CSVC runs an official newspaper in northern Vietnam, *The Catholics*, and two official publications in southern Vietnam, *Vietnamese Catholic Newspaper* and the weekly *Catholicism and the Nation*.¹⁶³ Funding comes directly from the FFV. Although never recognized by the Catholic Church as its media outlets, their publishers portray themselves as the voice of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. The CSVC uses these publications to propagate its own doctrinal interpretations that align with CPV policies. The CSVC selectively cites and purposely misinterprets messages of Church authorities. For example, the CSVC continues to misrepresent a 1980 pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam to support communist-style socialism.¹⁶⁴

At times, the CSVC's publications have criticized both the Holy See and the Vietnamese Catholic Church. The contributions of prominent CSVC-linked priests, such as Bishop Bui Tuan, Father Thien Cam, and Father Nguyen Hong Giao, to these publications have further reinforced the perception that they represent the Catholic Church's views and voice. Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet once expressed his opinion in an interview in 2008, stating,¹⁶⁵ "Writing for that magazine [*Catholicism and the Nation*] is bad for both the individual and the Catholic label, which is being counterfeited."¹⁶⁶

Property Issues

Since 1954, the government has seized and continues to maintain thousands of properties formerly owned by the Catholic Church. These include charity, healthcare, and educational facilities as well as land.¹⁶⁷ The government has converted many confiscated churches, seminaries, schools, and other buildings into meeting places, cooperative workplaces, office buildings, or residences for government officials. This practice has continued even as the government deepened its relationship with the Vatican. In 2009, then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung said his government would not accept demands from the Vatican to return confiscated properties to the Catholic Church in Vietnam.¹⁶⁸

Since 1976, the government has increasingly encroached on the land of Thien An Abbey in Thua Thien Hue Province, and it currently occupies 80 percent of the abbey's 108 hectares. In 2010, it seized a large swath of land of Con Dau Parish in Da Nang City.¹⁶⁹ In 2015, the government took land from Dong Yen Parish in Ha Tinh Province in the name of relocation.¹⁷⁰ In 2019, it took the entire 11-acre Loc Hung Vegetable Garden belonging to a local Catholic community in Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁷¹ In 1959, the authorities took the residence of the papal nuncio. In 2008, the government bulldozed the site and built a public library.¹⁷² In early 2024, the government welcomed the first resident papal nuncio in 65 years but continued to withhold the land from original residence.¹⁷³

¹⁶³ Online edition: [https://www.cgvdt.vn/Cong Gia Va Dan](https://www.cgvdt.vn/Cong-Gia-Va-Dan)

¹⁶⁴ CSVC leader Father Vo Thanh Trinh called on Catholics to be loyal to and support the CPV. CSVC, 2013.

¹⁶⁵ Tin Mừng Cho Người Nghèo, 2008.

¹⁶⁶ Viet Catholic News, 2018; Luong Tam Cong Giao, 2011.

¹⁶⁷ BBC, 2009.

¹⁶⁸ VOA, 2009; AsiaNews, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ UN News, 2014.

¹⁷⁰ BPSOS, 2018.

¹⁷¹ The Vietnamese, 2024.

¹⁷² Catholic News Agency, September 19, 2008.

¹⁷³ UCA News, January 29, 2024.

CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese government uses the six state-controlled religious organizations included in this report as tools to showcase its purported compliance with international human rights standards on the freedom of religion or belief. In practice, these organizations infringe on the independent worship and other activities of the religious communities they claim to represent.

Through official organizations such as the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Public

Security, and the Fatherland Front of Vietnam, as well as laws and the three strategies of substitution, co-opting, and infiltration, the government ensures that the state-controlled religious organizations discussed in this report align with its objectives and obey its will. This negatively affects religious freedom throughout Vietnam and weakens independent religious organizations and expression.

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