



Religious Freedom in Vietnam Remains Abysmal: A Report by the Office of David Anderson, MP

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Introduction

Vietnam's religious makeup is more than 50% percent Buddhist, 6.6% Catholic, 1.5–3% Hoa Hao, 1-4% Cao Dai, 1-2% Protestant, and 0.1% Muslim.¹

According to the head of Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Vu Chien Thang, the Vietnamese government always protects the right of its citizens to religious freedom and belief. He adds, however, that the government does not allow religious freedoms or the exploitation of religious freedoms to violate the law.² There is evidence to suggest that the Vietnamese government has often violated the religious freedom of its citizens in the name of maintaining law and order. In the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) 2018 report, Vietnam was listed as a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

USCIRF reports that there are some positive developments taking place in Vietnam, including greater economic openness and the expanding role peace activists and human rights defenders play in shaping public discourse. However, these positive developments are overshadowed by Vietnam's increasing control of the internet and media, and the government's willingness to repress – at times violently – its critics and dissenters.³

Various religious individuals and groups, as well as human rights activists, continue to be targets of the Vietnamese government. In addition to its direct involvement in religious persecution, it is suspected that the government hires plain-clothes assailants to harass and attack religious groups. USCIRF's 2018 report states that "extrajudicial

¹ "Vietnam: Tier 1 USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 2018 Annual Report, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_VIETNAM.pdf, 2.

² VNA, "Vietnam respects freedom of religion, belief: official," Vietnam Plus, last modified April 24, 2018, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-respects-freedom-of-religion-belief-official/130043.vnp>.

³ USCIRF, "Vietnam," 2.

actions by non-state actors have intensified in 2017, as has brutality and torture against civilians overall.”⁴

Prisoners of Conscience

Vietnamese authorities perceive rights activists to be pernicious to the ideals and objectives of the state. Amnesty International’s director of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, James Gomez, says that “Vietnam is one of Southeast Asia’s most prolific jailers of peaceful activists.”⁵ At the release of Amnesty International’s 2018 report, there were 97 known prisoners of conscience in Vietnamese prisons. There could be more, as the Vietnamese government operates with a high degree of secrecy. Of the 97 prisoners, 40 are social or political activists and 57 are religious followers.⁶

Thirty of the 57 religious followers imprisoned in Vietnam are Montagnard Christians, a predominately protestant ethnic group who live in the central highlands. Twenty–nine of the 30 were charged with “undermining the national unity” and are facing sentences of 8 to 12 years, many with an additional three years of house arrest.⁷ Pastor A Dao faces a lesser sentence of 5 years for “fleeing abroad or defecting to stay overseas in order to oppose the people’s administration.” Pastor Dao was arrested in 2016 after he returned from the ASEAN Civil Society Conference in Dili, Timor Leste.⁸

In June of 2017, well-known female blogger Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh was sentenced to 10 years in prison for “conducting propaganda.” Amnesty reports that her health is deteriorating as she has not been provided with health care in prison.⁹

In April of 2018, Vietnamese authorities jailed 6 human rights activists with sentences ranging from 7 to 15 years. The 6 men were connected to an activist group known as the Brotherhood of Democracy. Their supposed crimes were conducting human rights training, pushing for multiparty democracy, and receiving funding from overseas.¹⁰

After being arrested, activists are treated in appalling ways. They are often denied access to lawyers and family, and are regularly placed in solitary confinement. Amnesty International also reports that torture is commonplace in Vietnamese prisons. Prisoners

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ “Viet Nam: New research reveals almost 100 prisoners of conscience as crackdown on dissent intensifies,” Amnesty International, last modified 4 April 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/viet-nam-new-research-reveals-almost-100-prisoners-of-conscience-as-crackdown-on-dissent-intensifies/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Prisoners of Conscience in Viet Nam,” Amnesty International, last modified 4 April 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa41/8162/2018/en/>.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Amnesty International, “Viet Nam: New research.”

¹⁰ Agence France-Presse, “Vietnam jails six activists for up to 15 years for trying to ‘overthrow state,’” The Guardian, last modified 6 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/06/vietnam-jails-six-activists-for-up-to-15-years-for-trying-to-overthrow-state>.

“are beaten with sticks, rubber tubes, punches and kicks; electrocuted; and subjected to stress positions.”¹¹

Harassment and Violence against Religious Groups

There are a number of groups that desire to remain independent of state control and have therefore become targets of state oppression. One group that has been a victim of state-sanctioned abuse is the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). In April and May of 2017, authorities interrupted UBCV religious festivities that led up to the commemoration of Buddha’s birthday. Authorities also interrogated UBCV leaders associated with the Buddhist Youth Movement and warned local Buddhists about attending UBCV ceremonies.¹²

After the in-custody death of Mr. Nguyen Huu Tan, a member of the independent Buddhist group Hoa Hao, Mr. Nguyen’s family was repeatedly harassed and threatened in order to accept that the death was a result of suicide.¹³ Another member of Hoa Hao, Mr. Nguyen Bac Truyen, was arrested in July of 2017 and accused of acting to overthrow the government. Mr. Nguyen was not given access to a lawyer and had not been released at the end of USCIRF’s reporting period.¹⁴

There are reports of Catholics being harassed and threatened by a pro-government group known as “Red Flag”. A Catholic priest was confronted by armed members of the group for posts on Facebook that were apparently critical of the government. Another two priests were threatened for criticizing the government’s response to an environmental disaster.¹⁵

Montagnard Christians are regularly pressured to renounce their faith through threats and harassment by police. Throughout 2017, police harassed and interrogated Montagnards – who belonged to the Evangelical Church of Christ – about their distribution of religious materials and their connection to human rights activists. It was also reported that officials in Kon Tum province confiscated land belonging to Montagnards. Many Montagnard Christians have fled or attempted to flee Vietnam to or through Cambodia. In 2017, the Cambodian government denied asylum to 29 Montagnards, even though the United Nations High Commission for Refugees assured Cambodia that they were real refugees.¹⁶

¹¹ Amnesty International, “Viet Nam: New research.”

¹² USCIRF, “Vietnam,” 3.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

On May 8th of this year, a group of nuns was attacked and one was beaten unconscious after they had tried to stop construction workers from building a house next to their convent. The attack was carried out by gangsters hired to guard the property, while police nearby reportedly did nothing. The nuns claim that their congregation had taken ownership of the property – where the construction was taking place – in 1949, but the government had confiscated it and sold it off. The nuns have made many requests to the government for the return of their property and are determined to continue to petition the government for the rightful return of their land.¹⁷

In March of this year, Hmong Christians from the northwestern highlands of Vietnam were attacked by a mob. Four members were hospitalized with injuries to their heads and arms. The attack followed threats by local authorities that, if the Hmong Christians did not renounce their faith, they would be expelled from the village.¹⁸

The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) says that these types of attacks are becoming more frequent despite the new Law on Belief and Religion that was introduced in January 2018.¹⁹

Law on Belief and Religion

The Law is the first law affecting religious activities since Vietnamese reunification in 1975. Having taken effect on New Year's Day 2018, the Law "regulates legal procedures and conditions regarding people's beliefs."²⁰ Certain parts of the new Law seem intended to grant greater religious freedom. Prisoners and detainees are allowed access to scriptures and to demonstrate their faith. Religious organizations are permitted to educate and carry out vocational training, the provision of health care, charitable work, and publishing.²¹ However, the Law also requires religious organizations to register with the government and request approval for activities, to which the authorities can easily refuse. Additionally, religious activities must be conducted at designated "legal places".²² This stipulation makes it more difficult for religious groups to operate and easier for the government to monitor their activities.

A religious researcher in Hanoi, who wanted to remain anonymous, said that the new Law emphasizes state control over religious freedom.²³ The ambiguity of some of the

¹⁷ "Nun beaten unconscious by Vietnamese gangsters," UCA News, last modified 9 May 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/nun-beaten-unconscious-by-vietnamese-gangsters/82259>.

¹⁸ "Attack on Hmong Christians Underscores Vietnam Religious Freedom Shortcomings," Radio Free Asia, last modified 20 March 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/hmong-attack-03202018165023.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Vietnam passes controversial Law on religion," UCA News, last modified 25 November 2016, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-passes-controversial-law-on-religion/77714>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

articles allows the state to interpret them in its favour. Clause five of article six of the Law prohibits the use of freedom of religion to interfere with “the national great unity, harm state defense, national security, public order, and social morale.”²⁴

It was in response to the ambiguous and potentially harmful language in the Law that 15% of the Vietnamese National Assembly opposed the legislation. Such opposition is unprecedented. It is encouraging to see that there are those within the legislature standing up for the religious freedoms of Vietnam’s citizens.

Conclusion

Despite some positive news, the situation for religious freedom in Vietnam remains abysmal and there are some indicators that it is getting worse. The Vietnamese government continues to harass, abuse, arrest and imprison its citizens for holding to and/or promoting particular religious or political ideas.

We call on the Vietnamese government to:

- Adhere to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

- Eliminate or amend all existing laws that permit the violation of religious freedoms and freedom of conscience or belief.
- Release all prisoners of conscience.
- Cease all forms of harassment and abuse of religious practitioners, as well as social and political activists.
- Return all unjustly-confiscated land.
- Cease the unjust arrest and imprisonment of religious practitioners, social activists, and political activists.
- Allow religious institutions to freely operate without registration or government approval of religious activities.

²⁴ Luke Hunt, “Vietnam’s Religious Law: Testing the Faithful,” The Diplomat, last modified 12 January 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/vietnams-religious-law-testing-the-faithful/>.