

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam generally trended the same as the previous year. The government continued to enforce the Law on Belief and Religion, which requires religious organizations to register with the state, and to harass unregistered religious groups. During USCIRF's September 2019 visit, multiple religious groups applying for registration reported that local officials regularly exceeded their authority by demanding information—such as congregants' names—not explicitly required by the law. Applications were often pending with no formal decision for months or even years. Throughout the year, authorities interrogated, harassed, or physically assaulted individuals affiliated with unregistered religious groups—including the independent Cao Dai, Khmer Krom Buddhists, and Duong Van Minh—when they attempted to attend religious ceremonies.

Ethnic minority communities faced especially egregious persecution for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, including physical assault, detention, or banishment. An estimated 10,000 Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands remain effectively stateless because local authorities have refused to issue identity cards, in many instances in retaliation against Christians who refuse to renounce their faith. During USCIRF's 2019 visit, multiple pastors reported that authorities in the Central Highlands regularly raided or closed down house churches. In October, authorities initiated a campaign to limit the length and scale of [traditional funerals](#), effectively prohibiting Hmong funeral practices, which typically last several days to a week. In addition, USCIRF received reports during the year that police interrogated and detained Montagnard

Christians for participating in religious freedom conferences overseas and for meeting with U.S. government officials.

Local authorities continued to expropriate or destroy property belonging to religious communities. For example, in January, authorities in Kontum Province demolished Son Linh Tu Pagoda, which had been affiliated with the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. In October, plainclothes police [beat up](#) six independent Hoa Hao Buddhists protesting plans by the state-recognized Hoa Hao Buddhist Church to demolish and rebuild An Hoa Tu temple in An Giang Province. In several northeastern provinces, authorities burned at least 35 funeral sheds central to the Duong Van Minh's core practices. Local authorities also [expropriated land](#) claimed by the Catholic Church in Loc Hung Garden in Ho Chi Minh City and Con Dau parish in Danang. In some instances, the national government encouraged local officials to reach a settlement with victims of expropriation, but it generally failed to hold local authorities accountable for such abuses.

In 2019, the Vietnamese government continued to arrest and imprison peaceful religious leaders and religious freedom advocates. [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#)—a Hoa Hao Buddhist advocate sentenced to 11 years in April 2018—remained imprisoned at the end of the reporting period and is reportedly in poor health. In some cases, authorities physically assaulted prisoners of conscience who protested prison conditions. During its visit, USCIRF learned that authorities at Ba Sao prison, Nam Ha Province, refused to provide a Bible or a priest to Le Dinh Luong, a Catholic environmental activist and prisoner of conscience since 2017.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a binding agreement with the government, as authorized under Section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth commitments to improve religious freedom;
- Prioritize funding for programs that build the capacity of local authorities to respect and protect religious freedom

- and related human rights, focusing on programs that help officials manage interreligious disputes; and
- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City to track applications to register religious organizations and religious activities to monitor authorities' compliance with the Law on Belief and Religion, and to develop a list of houses of worship or religious sites of unique spiritual, cultural, or historical importance and work with Vietnamese

authorities to ensure that they receive special protection from land grabbing or development projects.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Send regular delegations focused on religious freedom and related human rights to Vietnam and request to visit areas impacted by restrictions on religious freedom, such as the Central Highlands, Northern Highlands, and Mekong Delta, as well as request to visit prisoners of conscience, such as Nguyen Bac Truyen.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in September 2019
- **Country Update:** [An Assessment of Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#)

## Background

Vietnam's constitution permits citizens to "follow any religion or follow none" and requires the government to respect and protect freedom of religion. However, the constitution also authorizes authorities to override human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of "national security, social order and security, social morality, and community well-being." Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion, which went into effect on January 1, 2018, requires religious communities to register their organizations, activities, and places of worship with the government. The law requires religious organizations to have operated for at least five years before applying for registration. It also grants registered religious organizations status as legal entities.

According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), a quarter of Vietnam's estimated 97 million citizens identify with a formal religion, while many more partake in traditional folk practices. Approximately 15 percent of the population follow Buddhism, while 7 percent belong to the Catholic Church. Other religious traditions with a significant presence include Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Evangelical Protestantism, and Islam. By the end of 2019, the government officially recognized 16 religions. However, many religious groups refused to register due to fear of persecution or concern for their independence, leading to both government-sponsored and independent organizations competing to represent the religion.

## Positive Developments

Religious followers in urban, economically developed areas usually are able to exercise their religion or belief freely, openly, and without fear. For example, in September 2019, members of the recognized Cao Dai church held an outdoor festival with more than 250,000 people. In August, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc attended a conference of religious dignitaries in Danang and praised the contributions of religious groups to Vietnam's social welfare. In May, the government released the Venerable Thach Thuol, a Khmer Krom Buddhist monk imprisoned in 2013 for teaching the Khmer language in his temple. In December, authorities in Ho Chi Minh City listed the historic [Thu Thiem](#) church and convent as a "heritage site," which protects it from anticipated urban development. There were no reports of Red Flag Associations—state-affiliated militant groups—engaging in open attacks against religious groups in 2019. Finally, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs has taken proactive steps to investigate complaints against local authorities who allegedly abuse their authority under the Law on Belief and Religion.

## United Nations Human Rights Reviews

In January 2019, at Vietnam's third Universal Periodic Review before the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, several country delegations, including the United States, [advised](#) the government of Vietnam to remove the mandatory registration requirements from the Law on Belief and Religion to comply with international human rights standards. In March, the UN Human Rights Committee's [concluding observations](#) in its review of Vietnam's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) expressed concern

that unregistered and unrecognized religious groups face harassment, surveillance, pressure to renounce their faith, and seizure or destruction of property and houses of worship. The Committee also [recommended](#) that the government prosecute members of the Red Flag Associations involved in attacks against Catholics and other religious minorities. In September, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc [announced](#) that his government would study the Committee's recommendations and take steps to improve implementation of the ICCPR. In addition, the UN Secretary General's [report](#) about intimidation and reprisals highlighted incidents from Vietnam, including the imposition of a travel ban on Bui Thi Kim Phuong, wife of Nguyen Bac Truyen, before her planned departure to Germany and the United States to advocate on her husband's behalf.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Vietnam have close economic and defense relationships and regularly cooperate on maritime security and humanitarian aid. In May 2019, during the 23rd U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi, U.S. diplomats [raised concerns](#) with Vietnamese officials about religious freedom conditions and individual prisoners of conscience. Vietnamese authorities [prevented](#) Hua Phi—subdignitary of the independent Cao Dai—from meeting with the U.S. delegation. In July, as part of the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by the State Department, President Donald J. Trump [met](#) with two victims of religious persecution from Vietnam: [Luong Xuan Duong](#), a Cao Dai practitioner, and [A Ga](#), a Montagnard Evangelical pastor. Also in July, the U.S. Trademark Trial and Appeal Board [cancelled](#) the state-affiliated Cao Dai Overseas Missionary's trademark registration for the official name of the Cao Dai religion, which had undermined temples affiliated with the independent Cao Dai.

USCIRF has recommended that Vietnam be designated as a CPC every year since 2002. The U.S. Department of State had designated Vietnam as a CPC in 2004 and entered into a binding agreement with the government under IRFA. When the State Department lifted the CPC designation in 2006, USCIRF [concluded](#) it was too soon to determine if progress on religious freedom would endure.