

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom violations in Vietnam remained relatively the same as last year. Authorities continued to persecute independent religious communities—many of which officials designate as “strange, false, or heretical” religions—that did not comply with state control. The government maintained state-controlled alternatives—such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Cao Dai 1997 Sect, Hoa Hao Administration Council, and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam–South—and pressured independent groups to join them. Authorities interfered in the appointment of religious leaders, confiscated religious artifacts, and restricted access to houses of worship.

Authorities continued to persecute ethnoreligious minority groups, such as Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Khmer Krom Buddhists, and Hmong adherents of Duong Van Minh. Authorities actively restrict independent Montagnard Protestants’ religious activities, forcing them to renounce their faith and arresting and sentencing them on charges of “[undermining national unity](#)” and “[abusing democratic freedoms](#).” Authorities pressured Hmong and Montagnard Protestants to join state-controlled Protestant religious organizations, surveilled them, and prevented their access to churches. Following the June attack on local government offices in Dak Lak Province that [killed](#) nine people, civil society groups raised [concerns](#) that the government would use this incident to extend persecution of the local Montagnard Christian community. Authorities [deployed](#) security and military forces to the Central Highlands and detained, charged, and [convicted](#) 100 ethnic minorities in January 2024 after the reporting period.

In 2023, the government implemented Directive 78 to “eradicate the Duong Van Minh sect.” During its trip in May 2023, USCIRF saw videos allegedly showing authorities forcing members of Duong Van Minh to renounce their faith. Authorities also forced ethnic minorities to use Vietnamese, as opposed to their

own ethnic minority languages, in religious worship and literature. In November, nonuniformed Vietnamese authorities [disrupted](#) a Khmer language class at a Khmer Krom Buddhist temple, attacking the abbot and two Buddhist followers. Reports from independent religious groups noted that the government restricts the import of religious literature printed in certain Hmong alphabets to the Central Highlands.

Despite the Vatican-Vietnam [agreement](#) on appointing the resident papal representative in Vietnam in 2023, Vietnamese Catholics [expressed](#) concern that the government will maintain control over Catholic leaders, including during religious services. The government also continued to harass Catholic priests, including in ethnic minority areas. In April, authorities in Kon Tum Province [prevented](#) a Catholic priest from conducting religious activities. In August, authorities [prevented](#) two Hmong Catholic priests from publicly holding religious services.

The government pressured the independent Cao Dai, Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and Hoa Hao Buddhists to join their state-controlled counterparts, preventing them from practicing their faith freely. Authorities seized religious properties and gave them to state-controlled religious groups. In December, authorities in An Giang Province banned Hoa Hao Buddhists from celebrating their founder’s birthday.

The government continued to persecute other religious movements, [preventing](#) Falun Gong practitioners from disseminating religious materials and forcing members of the unregistered [World Mission Society Church of God](#) and [San Su Khe To](#) to renounce their faith. In early 2023, authorities in Long An Province [summoned](#) two of the five lawyers defending Peng Lei Buddhists who were sentenced in 2022 and accused them of “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the state.” In June, three of the five lawyers [fled](#) to the United States.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Engage with the Vietnamese government and relevant academic and civil society stakeholders to encourage amendments to the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion and its implementing decrees to comply with international human rights standards, including by making registration only necessary to maintain a legal personality;
- Assess whether Vietnam has violated the terms of the 2005 U.S.-Vietnam binding agreement and hold Vietnam accountable for religious freedom violations as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC);
- Press Vietnam to allow relevant United Nations (UN) special procedures and staff from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights unfettered access to the country to monitor and investigate religious freedom and other human rights violations; and
- Direct the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to highlight and monitor the conditions of religious prisoners of conscience and to advocate for their wellbeing in prison and for their release.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislative efforts to improve religious freedom in Vietnam, including the Vietnam Human Rights Act ([H.R. 3172](#)).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Vietnam](#)
- **Hearing:** [Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Vietnam](#)

Background

Vietnam's constitution states that citizens "can follow any religion or follow none" and that "all religions are equal before the law." It also mandates respect and protection for freedom of belief and religion. However, government authorities continue to monitor all religious activity closely, often harassing, detaining, or otherwise preventing unregistered faith communities from exercising their fundamental right to religious freedom. Of Vietnam's population of approximately 100 million, around 86.3 percent [identify](#) as nonreligious, 6.1 percent as Catholic, 5.8 percent as Buddhist, one percent as Protestant, and 0.8 percent as adherents of other religions. As of August, Vietnam recognized 46 religious organizations and 16 religions.

Enforcement of the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion and Policy Development

Vietnam's 2018 Law on Belief and Religion restricts religious freedom and requires religious groups to register with the government in order to function legally. Additionally, religious groups must register and receive approval for all activities for the coming year. Throughout 2023, authorities used this law to shut down religious services of unregistered independent groups. Groups wishing to register continued to experience difficulty, and many unregistered groups complained that authorities have rejected or ignored their registration applications without explanation.

Enforcement of the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion is plagued by uneven and inconsistent application throughout the country. While religious groups experience relatively greater freedom in urban areas, regardless of their registration or recognition status, serious challenges are pervasive in rural areas and provinces with significant ethnic minority communities, such as those in the Central Highlands and An Giang Province. As of December 2023, the Vietnamese government had not released drafts of the law's two implementing decrees, which would clarify how the government interprets and enforces it.

In March, Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs [released](#) a "white book" on religious policies—its first such document in 16 years—to detail the state of religious communities within Vietnam as well as governmental attitudes and current laws on religious freedom. However, reports from independent religious groups indicate that this document fails to reflect the government's persistent violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and that it instead demonstrates how the country's [trajectory](#) is similar to China in terms of its regulation and control of religion.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Conditions for religious prisoners of conscience remained dire in 2023, despite some high-profile releases. In April, the UN special rapporteurs on arbitrary detention [requested](#) a response from Vietnam

on Y Khiu Nie and Y Si Eban, who were detained in part due to their participation in the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference in November 2022. In May, authorities [arrested](#) [Nay Y Blang](#), a member of the Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ, for allegedly proselytizing and organizing illegal religious activities. In July, authorities arrested Khmer Krom Buddhists [Danh Minh Quang](#) and [Thach Cuong](#)—with whom USCIRF had met during its May visit to Vietnam—and in August they arrested [To Hoang Chuong](#), charging all three for violating Article 331 of the Vietnam Criminal Code. In August, authorities in An Giang Province arrested Nguyen Hoang Nam, a member of the independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, for posts on social media, charging him with disturbing public order and undermining religious and national unity. In September, a court in Gia Lai Province [sentenced](#) religious freedom advocate Rian Thih to eight years' imprisonment for "undermining unity policy," a charge authorities often use to suppress religious freedom activists in ethnic minority communities. In a positive development, the government in September released Hoa Hao Buddhist and religious freedom advocate Nguyen Bac Truyen, who was serving an 11-year sentence while suffering from health conditions. It also released An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist Le Duc Dong, who [completed](#) his 12-year sentence in February.

Key U.S. Policy

In April 2023, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [celebrated](#) 28 years of diplomatic relations and 10 years of comprehensive partnership with Vietnam, noting human rights as a feature in the growing bilateral relationship in addition to other areas of mutual concern, such as security cooperation and climate issues. Also in April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken visited Vietnam and [held](#) a press conference to celebrate U.S.-Vietnam relations, emphasizing human rights as a core feature in the ongoing dialogue between the two countries. In September, President Biden [visited](#) Vietnam and signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the country. The Biden administration released a statement underscoring the importance of bilateral cooperation to advance human rights and enhancing commitment to meaningful human rights dialogue, including on freedom of religion or belief. In November, the United States [hosted](#) the 27th U.S.-Vietnam human rights dialogue in Washington, DC.

In May, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) reintroduced the Vietnam Human Rights Act ([H.R. 3172](#)), which prioritizes the protection of human rights and the development of the rule of law in bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [maintained](#) Vietnam on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom, pursuant to IRFA. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) approximately \$174 million for programs in Vietnam.