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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Vietnam

Executive Summary

The constitution states that all individuals have the right to freedom of belief and religion. The law provides for significant government control over religious practices and includes vague provisions that permit restrictions on religious freedom in the stated interest of national security and social unity. The Law on Belief and Religion, which came into effect in January 2018, maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups. Religious leaders, particularly those representing groups without official recognition or certificates of registration, reported various forms of government harassment – including physical assaults, arrests, prosecutions, monitoring, travel restrictions, and property seizure or destruction – and denials or no response to requests for registration and/or other permissions. In August Rah Lan Hip was sentenced to seven years in prison after being convicted of “undermining the unity policy” when he encouraged ethnic minority Degar Protestants to resist government pressure to renounce their faith. Reports of harassment of religious adherents by authorities continued in the Central Highlands, specifically members of the Evangelical Church of Christ, and in the Northwest Highlands of H’mong Christians and Roman Catholics, as well as for Catholic and Protestant groups in Nghe An and Tuyen Quang Provinces. Religious group adherents reported local or provincial authorities committed most harassment incidents. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration were generally able to practice their beliefs with less government interference, although some recognized groups, including the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) (ECVN), reported more difficulty gathering in certain provinces, including Quang Binh, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Ha Giang, and Hoa Binh Provinces. Others seeking to officially register their groups, including the United Presbyterian Church and the Vietnam Baptist Convention, also reported difficulty gathering in some provinces. Members of religious groups said some local and provincial authorities used the local and national regulatory systems to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close government management of their leadership, training programs, assemblies, and other activities. During the year, the government registered The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). Although the Church of Jesus Christ coordinating committee was registered in 2016, the new registration of religious activities brought the Church into compliance with the new law and was the second step in the process towards official recognition.

The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha organized the 16th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, which attracted more than 1,650 international delegates and approximately 20,000 local Buddhist dignitaries, monks, nuns, and followers. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc attended the festival.

The Ambassador and other senior U.S. embassy and consulate general officials urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely. They sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups and urged an end to restrictions on and harassment of groups without recognition or registration. The Ambassador, Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, and other senior embassy officers advocated religious freedom in visits across the country, including to the Northern Highlands and the North Central and Central Coasts. The Ambassador and other officials met regularly and maintained recurring contact with religious leaders across the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 97.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to January 2018 statistics released by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA), 26.4 percent of the population is categorized as religious believers participating in registered activities: 14.9 percent Buddhist, 7.4 percent Roman Catholic, 1.5 percent Hoa Hao Buddhist, 1.2 percent Cao Dai, and 1.1 percent Protestant. The GCRA, however, estimates 90 percent of the population follows some sort of faith tradition, registered or otherwise. Within the Buddhist community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic majority, while approximately 1.2 percent of the total population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism. Smaller religious groups combined constitute less than 0.16 percent of the population and include Hinduism, mostly practiced by an estimated 70,000 ethnic Cham in the

south-central coastal area; approximately 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam); an estimated 3,000 members of the Baha'i Faith; and approximately 1,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Religious groups originating within the country (Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Phat Giao Hieu Nghia Ta Lon) comprise a total of 0.34 percent. A small, mostly foreign, Jewish population resides in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Others have no religious affiliation or practice animism or the veneration of ancestors, tutelary and protective saints, national heroes, or local, respected persons. Many individuals blend traditional practices with religious teachings, particularly Buddhism and Christianity.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the population. Based on adherents' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including groups in the Northwest Highlands (H'mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M'ngong, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that all individuals have the right to freedom of belief and religion, including the freedom to follow no religion. The constitution acknowledges the right to freedom of religion or belief of those whose rights are limited, including inmates or any foreigners and stateless persons. It states all religions are equal before the law, and the state must respect and protect freedom of belief and religion. The constitution prohibits citizens from violating the freedom of belief and religion or taking advantage of a belief or religion to violate the law.

The Law on Belief and Religion and implementing Decree 162, which came into effect in January 2018, serve as the primary documents governing religious groups and their activities. At year's end, the government still had not promulgated a decree prescribing penalties for noncompliance with the new law. The GCRA has stated, however, that the draft decree prescribing penalties is not vital as other laws mandate civil compliance with national law. The Law on Belief and Religion reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion and that individuals may not use the right of belief and religious freedom to undermine peace, national independence, and unification; incite violence or propagate wars; proselytize in contravention of the state's laws and policies; divide people, nationalities, or religions; cause public disorder; infringe upon the life, health, dignity, honor and/or property of others; impede the exercise of civic rights and performance of civic obligations; or conduct "superstitious activities" or otherwise violate the law.

A Cybersecurity Law that came into effect on January 1 allows authorities to monitor online user data and social media activity to "protect national security and social order." The law prohibits users from online acts of organizing for "antistate" purposes, "distorting history," destroying national solidarity, and conducting offenses against religion, gender, and race. The law also defines propaganda against the state as "causing hatred among ethnic groups, religions, and people of all countries."

The government recognizes 38 religious organizations and one Dharma practice (a set of spiritual practices) that affiliate with 15 distinct religious traditions, as defined by the government. The 15 religious traditions are: Buddhism, Islam, Baha'i, Catholicism, Protestantism, Church of Jesus Christ, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Buu Son Ky Huong, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Phat Duong Nam Tong Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao Tam Tong Mieu, Khmer Brahmanism, and Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition. Four additional groups – the Assemblies of God, Ta Lon Dutiful and Loyal Buddhism, Vietnam Full Gospel Church, and Vietnam United Gospel Outreach Church – have "registration for religious operation," but they are not recognized as official organizations.

The law provides for government control over religious practices and permits restrictions on religious freedom in the interest of "national security" and "social unity" not otherwise defined.

The law specifies that recognized religious organizations and their affiliates are noncommercial legal entities. The law also stipulates that religious organizations be allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws.

The GCRA, one of 18 "ministerial units" under the Ministry of Home Affairs, is responsible for implementing religious laws and decrees, and it maintains offices at the central, provincial, and, in some areas, district levels. The law lays out specific responsibilities for central-, provincial-, and local-level GCRA offices and delegates certain religion-related management tasks to provincial- and local-level people's committees (i.e., local leaders). The central-level GCRA is charged with disseminating information to authorities and assuring uniform compliance with the legal framework on religion at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels.

By law, forcing others to follow or renounce a religion or belief is prohibited.

The law requires believers to register “religious activities” with communal authorities where the “lawful premises for the religious practice is based” and prescribes two stages of institutionalization for religious organizations seeking to gather at a specified location to “practice worship rituals, pray, or express their religious faith.” The first stage is “registration for religious operation” with the provincial- or national-level GCRA, depending on the geographic extent of the group’s activities. A registration for religious operation allows the group to organize religious ceremonies and religious practice; preach and conduct religious classes at approved locations; elect, appoint, or designate officials; repair or renovate the headquarters; engage in charitable or humanitarian activities; and organize congresses to approve its charter. To obtain this registration, the group must submit a detailed application package with information about its doctrine, history, bylaws, leaders, and members and proof it has a legal meeting location. The relevant provincial GCRA office or the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), depending on whether the group in question is operating in one or more provinces, is responsible for approving a valid application for registration within 60 days of receipt. The relevant provincial GCRA office or the MHA is required to provide any rejection in writing.

The second stage of institutionalization is recognition. A religious group may apply for recognition after it has operated continuously for at least five years since the date of receiving the “registration for religious operation.” The religious group is required to have a legal charter and bylaws, leaders in good standing without criminal records, and to have managed assets and conducted transactions autonomously. To obtain such recognition, the group must submit a detailed application package to the provincial or national level GCRA, depending on the geographic extent of the organization. The application dossier must include a written request specifying the group’s structure, membership, geographical scope of operation and headquarters location; summary of history, dogmas, canon laws and rites; list and resumes, judicial records, and summary of religious activities of the organization’s representative and tentative leaders; charter; declaration of the organization’s lawful assets; and proof of lawful premises to serve as a headquarters. The relevant provincial people’s committee or the MHA is responsible for approving a valid application for recognition within 60 days of receipt. The relevant provincial people’s committee or MHA is required to provide any rejection in writing. Recognition allows the religious group to conduct religious activities in accordance with the religious organization’s charter; organize religious practice; publish religious texts, books, and other publications; produce, export, and import religious cultural products and religious articles; renovate, upgrade, or construct new religious establishments; and receive lawful donations from domestic and foreign sources, among other rights.

The law states that religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and believers may file complaints or civil and administrative lawsuits or make formal complaints about government officials or agencies under the relevant laws and decrees. The law also states that organizations and individuals have the right to bring civil lawsuits in court regarding the actions of religious groups or believers. There were no specific analogous provisions in the previous laws.

Under the law, a religious organization is defined as “a religious group that has received legal recognition” by authorities. The law provides a separate process for unregistered, unrecognized religious groups to receive permission for specific religious activities by submitting an application package to the commune-level people’s committee. Regulations require the people’s committee to respond in writing to such an application within 20 working days of receipt. The law specifies that a wide variety of religious activities requires advance approval or registration from authorities at the central and/or local levels. These activities include “belief activities” (defined as traditional communal practices of ancestor, hero, or folk worship); “belief festivals” held for the first time; the establishment, division, or merger of religious affiliates; the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); establishment of a religious training facility; conducting religious training classes; holding major religious congresses; organizing religious events, preaching or evangelizing outside of approved locations; traveling abroad to conduct religious activities or training; and joining a foreign religious organization.

Certain religious activities do not require advance approval, but instead require notification to the appropriate authorities. Activities requiring notification include recurring or periodic “belief festivals”; dismissal of clergy; conducting fundraising activities; notification of enrollment figures at a seminary or religious school; the repair or renovation of religious facilities not considered cultural-historical relics; ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious clergy (such as monks); transfers or dismissals of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); conducting operations at an approved religious training facility; routine religious activities (defined as “religious preaching, practicing religious tenets and rites, and management of a religious organization”); and internal conferences of a religious organization.

The law provides prisoners access to religious materials, with conditions, while in detention. It reserves authority for the government to restrict the “assurance” of that right. Decree 162 states detainees may use religious documents that are legally published and circulated, in line with legal provisions on custody, detention, prison, or other types of confinement. This use and/or practice must not affect rights to belief/religion or nonbelief/religion of others or contravene relevant laws.

The decree states the Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs shall be responsible for providing guidelines on the management of religious documents and the time and venue for the use of these documents.

The law specifies that religious organizations must follow numerous other laws for certain activities. Religious organizations are allowed to conduct educational, health, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws, but the law does not provide clarification as to which activities are permitted. In addition, construction or renovation of religious facilities must occur in accordance with relevant laws and regulations on construction, and foreigners participating in religious activities must abide by immigration law.

The law states that publishing, producing, exporting, or importing religious texts must occur in accordance with laws and regulations related to publishing. Legislation requires all publishers be licensed public entities or state-owned enterprises. Publishers must receive prior government approval to publish all documents, including religious texts. By decree, only the Religious Publishing House may publish religious books. Any bookstore may sell legally published religious texts and other religious materials.

The constitution states the government owns and manages all land on behalf of the people. According to the law, land use by religious organizations must conform to the land law and its related decrees. The land law recognizes that licensed religious institutions and schools may acquire land-use rights and be allocated or leased land. The law specifies religious institutions are eligible for state compensation if their land is seized under eminent domain. The law allows provincial-level people's committees to seize land via eminent domain to facilitate the construction of religious facilities.

Under the law, provincial-level people's committees may grant land-use certificates for a “long and stable term” to religious institutions if they have permission to operate, the land is dispute-free, and the land was not acquired via transfer or donation after July 1, 2004. Religious institutions are not permitted to exchange, transfer, lease, donate, or mortgage their land-use rights. In land disputes involving a religious institution, the chairperson of the provincial-level people's committee has authority to settle disputes. Those who disagree with the chairperson's decision may appeal to the minister of natural resources and environment or file a lawsuit in court.

In practice, if a religious organization has not obtained recognition, members of the congregation may acquire a land-use title individually, but not corporately, as a religious establishment.

The renovation or upgrade of facilities owned by religious groups requires notification to authorities, although it does not necessarily require a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public and private schools. Private schools are required to follow a government-approved curriculum that does not allow for religious instruction. There are private schools run by religious organizations, but they are prohibited from providing faith-based education.

There are separate provisions of the law for foreigners legally residing in the country to request permission to conduct religious activities, teach, attend local religious training, or preach in local religious institutions. The law requires religious organizations or citizens to receive government permission in advance of hosting or conducting any religious activities involving foreign organizations, foreign individuals, or travel abroad. Regulations also contain requirements for foreigners conducting religious activities within the country, including those involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership, to seek permission for their activities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In September members of various ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands stated that government officials continued to assault, monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily arrest, and discriminate against them, in part because of their religious practices. Local government officials stated that Degar Christians, a religious group which follows a form of evangelical Christianity not recognized by the government, incited violent separatism by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands from 2001 through 2008. State-run media published articles cautioning individuals that Degar Protestantism aimed to undertake antigovernment activities.

In some cases, ethnic minority individuals from the Central Highlands stated social and religious persecution drove them to flee to Cambodia and Thailand, where approximately 250-300 individuals have sought asylum since 2017 according to a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) focused on minority rights. Several of the asylum seekers in Thailand reported local-level (communal) Vietnamese authorities continued to harass them through social media, and in some cases threatened and physically assaulted family members back home.

On August 9, the People's Court of Gia Lai Province tried Degar Protestant Rah Lan Hip on charges of “undermining the unity policy” and sentenced him to seven years in prison, followed by three years of probation. According to the indictment, Rah Lan Hip used his Facebook account “Kieu Rah Lan” to share multiple posts about Degar Protestantism. According to articles appearing in state media, the government considers Degar Christianity not a religious group but rather a separatist political movement controlled by “hostile forces” aiming to undermine the country's policy of national unity. According to human rights activists, between June 2018 and March 2019, Rah Lan Hip and two other individuals used Facebook to contact 1,304 Degar Protestants, including two recently released from prison, to encourage them to resist authorities' efforts to persuade them to renounce their Degar Protestant faith.

Independent media sources continued to report tension and disputes – at times violent – between Catholics and authorities in the Vinh and Ha Tinh Dioceses in the central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. Media coverage of these incidents in many cases was inconsistent. For example, on May 9, media reported that Father Paul Nguyen Xuan Tinh, pastor of Khe San parish, Ha Tinh Diocese, was attacked by two men who beat him while he was on his way from the church to a parishioner's home in Son Lam Commune, Huong Son District, Ha Tinh Province. Some observers reported the attackers were plainclothes police who called him by name before assaulting him. Others, however, said an unidentified individual intentionally blocked the road with his motorbike, which led to an argument that turned violent when the priest reportedly threw the first punch.

On May 7, Nghe An police arrested Catholic activist and public school music teacher Nguyen Nang Tinh on charges of “making, storing, and spreading information, materials, and items for the purpose of opposing the State.” On November 15, Tinh was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

On April 19, social media users reported that individuals wearing masks and armed with farming implements and tear gas raided a house where seven Protestants attending a “registered” activity were staying in Tan Dinh Commune, Lang Giang District, Bac Giang Province. The individuals reportedly broke down the doors of the home and used tear gas before beating the occupants and destroying their personal property. Before departing, the intruders reportedly collected all religious materials, including Bibles and personal papers, and forced the worshipers to burn the items. Although eyewitnesses stated there was heavy uniformed police presence outside the home, no police intervened.

On February 5, hundreds of riot police armed with electric batons and automatic rifles reportedly surrounded Na Heng Hamlet, Nam Quang Commune, Bao Lam District, Cao Bang Province, where Duong Van Minh followers were celebrating the Lunar New Year festival. According to witnesses, police beat participants who refused to disperse. Duong Van Minh, patriarch and founder of the Duong Van Minh sect, stated that authorities set up checkpoints around the festival to prevent followers from attending and that they beat those who did not comply. The group, which international academics describe as a “H'mong millenarian (striving to transform society) movement,” continued to resist general government pressure to seek formal recognition.

Throughout the year, authorities reportedly cited the Cybersecurity Law when arresting and questioning ethnic and religious minorities. The Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF) reported several instances in which Khmer Krom Buddhists were arrested, interrogated, and detained for visiting the KKF website and Facebook page. According to KKF members, the government stated the organization was an “antistate” separatist group, but KKF members said it was an ethnic heritage, religious freedom, and human rights organization. According to an international human rights NGO, in December authorities issued death threats, seized cell phones, and arrested and questioned Degar Christians in Mdrak District, Dak Lak Province for creating a Facebook page for the International Degar Church (IDC) and for posting on Facebook about the church and religious activities. IDC members said authorities forced them to pledge in writing to stop posting information about the IDC and warned them that using cell phones for religious activities and human rights advocacy was prohibited under the Cybersecurity Law. Also in December in Cu Mgar District, Dak Lak Province, an NGO reported authorities arrested a member of the Evangelical Church of Christ for “violating the Cybersecurity Law” by disseminating information about church leaders. The member said authorities forced him to renounce his faith, sign a confession, and pledge in writing not to contact the international community, continue church activities, or celebrate Christmas.

The Vietnam Baptist Convention, an unregistered religious group, reported that local authorities in Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, and Hai Duong continued to prevent and/or disrupt gatherings at unregistered house churches during the year.

According to multiple Catholic bishops and priests, authorities also continued to harass outspoken Catholic priests and prevented or disrupted Catholic services in remote areas by blocking parishioners' access to unregistered home churches or threatening the hosts of such gatherings.

According to local Catholics, in April authorities of Tan Uyen District, Lai Chau Province denied the Catholic community in Ho Mit Commune permission to celebrate Easter Mass. Local authorities stated that the Catholics in the commune were recent converts who had not yet properly registered as adherents of the Catholic faith in their community and therefore had not met their obligations under the law.

Reports continued of harassment of Catholics by the progovernment Red Flag Association, although the group reportedly dissolved itself in March 2018. Catholic leaders also reported internet-based harassment by Force 47, a group tasked with rebutting government critics on social media that takes its name from a Vietnam People's Army cyber security unit; Catholic leaders were uncertain if the harassment was state-sponsored.

The Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC) reported that Quang Ninh and Ha Long provincial police made repeated requests to meet with local VBC pastors. VBC sources stated police demanded that the VBC not publicize incidents of harassment against VBC congregations and that the VBC share with the provincial authorities the identities of other unregistered Protestant congregations.

From July to September, commune members and district police officials in Krong Pac District and Buon Ma Thuot City, Dak Lak Province, publicly denounced Evangelical Church of Christ members Ksor Sun, Pastor Y Nuen Ayun, Y Jon Ayun, Y Nguyet Bkrong, and Y Kuo Bya, according to an international human rights NGO. Police accused the individuals of acting against the government and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Police reportedly said these persons should be imprisoned and that they must leave the Church of Christ and stop meeting with foreign diplomats if they wanted to remain in the community.

Chang A Do, a local leader and member of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam from Doan Ket Village, Dak Ngo Commune, Tuy Duc District, Dak Nong Province, reported that local authorities continued to harass him.

Some religious leaders faced travel restrictions, and leaders and followers of certain religious groups faced other restrictions on their movements by government authorities. The Catholic Redemptorist Order stated authorities still held passports confiscated in 2018 of at least two priests of the order. Some pastors who were outspoken and critical of authorities expressed concerns about traveling abroad for fear of being stopped at the border or being detained upon return to the country.

Several independent and religious leaders from unrecognized religious organizations who participated in the 2018 Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference (SEAFORB) in Thailand reported they faced harassment upon their return to Vietnam. Cao Dai adherent Nguyen Van Thiet reported that provincial authorities in Tay Ninh Province prevented his travel outside of the country, thereby denying him the opportunity to participate in the 2019 SEAFORB conference.

In December more than one dozen government officials of My Phuoc Tay Commune, Tien Giang Province entered the home of an unrecognized Cao Dai church adherent and cited her for participating in a ritual to install a Cao Dai “Divine Eye” banner on her home altar without preregistration. The adherent said she had notified authorities the day before. The woman said authorities also established a traffic checkpoint where they stopped and recorded the identities of co-adherents on the way to her home for the ritual.

On September 12, local officials and police prevented Phan Van Dung, a resident of Hung Quoi Village, Hung Thanh Commune, Tan Phuoc District, Tien Giang Province, from hosting a traditional ceremony for a friend whose mother had passed away. The officials told Dung the ceremony violated the Law on Belief and Religion, as the sect of Cao Dai to which he belonged was not recognized under the law.

According to local observers, authorities in northern mountainous areas continued destroying “Nha Don” (a sacred structure to store human remains and funeral items for Duong Van Minh followers). Duong Van Minh adherents described the continuing slow destruction of these sites by authorities as a means of “inflicting psychological pain.” During the year, in Ha Quang District, Cao Bang Province alone, local authorities demolished 13 such structures. Members of this group reported that authorities destroyed more than 130 structures during the last several years. State media and progovernment websites at times reported that the structures were built illegally on agricultural land.

Provincial and local authorities continued many social and economic development projects that required the revocation of land rights and demolition of properties of religious organizations or individuals across the country. Authorities also reportedly did not intervene effectively in many land disputes that involved religious organizations or believers; in most of these cases the religious organizations or believers were unsuccessful in retaining land use rights.

State media and progovernment websites stated that Catholic priests in many parishes occupied – or urged their parishioners to use or illegally occupy – land legally used by other nonbelievers or authorities. There were also cases in which Catholics were alleged to have “misused” their land, for example, by turning an agricultural plot into a soccer field without the approval of the proper authorities. However, Catholic priests pointed to examples of land confiscated from the Catholic Church by the government being subdivided and sold for commercial purposes.

On December 31, the Ho Chi Minh City government awarded city-level “Artistic Architectural Heritage” status to the Thu Thiem Church and Holy Cross Lovers Convent. The designation ended a multiyear standoff between the church and local authorities over plans to demolish the church complex. Thu Thiem is the first church to be awarded historic preservation status in the southern part of the country.

Religious leaders continued to say existing laws and regulations on education, health, publishing, and construction were restrictive toward religious groups and needed to be revised to allow religious groups greater freedom to conduct such activities.

On October 23, the GCRA granted a “certificate of recognizing religious organization” to the Vietnam Assemblies of Gods in Ho Chi Minh City under the Law on Religion and Belief. During the year, the government registered the Church of Jesus Christ. Although the Church of Jesus Christ coordinating committee was registered in 2016, the new registration of religious activities brought the Church into compliance with the new law and was the second step in the three-step process towards recognition.

Registered and unregistered religious groups continued to state that government agencies sometimes did not respond to registration applications or approval requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often did not specify reasons for refusals as required by law. Some local authorities reportedly requested documents or information beyond what was stipulated by law. Several religious leaders said authorities sometimes asked for bribes to facilitate approvals. Authorities attributed the delays and denials to the applicants’ failure to complete forms correctly or provide complete information. Religious groups said the process of registering groups or notifying authorities of activities in new or remote locations was particularly difficult.

The ECVN reported continued difficulties in registering their local congregations and meeting points with local authorities in Quang Binh, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, and Hoa Binh Provinces. According to ECVN, authorities recognized 23 local congregations and granted registration to approximately 500 meeting points out of approximately 1,200 local congregations and houses of worship – referred to locally as “meeting points.”

The VBC stated that local authorities in Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, and Hai Duong denied registration requests for their meeting points. The most common justification for denial was that the application package was incomplete. Local authorities often required information and documents not required by law, while not providing clear instructions of how to correct an incomplete application, according to the VBC. In many cases, authorities continued to refuse subsequent submissions, citing different justifications for doing so. In some cases, local authorities required a list of congregation members, which many churches said they refused to provide out of fear of harassment of their members.

According to several Catholic bishops, parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations continued to face difficulty registering with provincial authorities due to an inconsistent application of national laws. Catholic leaders reported that the most problematic regions were in the Central Highlands (Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Kon Tum, and Lam Dong Provinces), and the Northwest Highlands, including Hoa Binh, Son La, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai Provinces.

Hoa Binh authorities continued to deny Luong Son Parish’s application to become a parish affiliate of Hoa Binh Diocese and did not respond to a similar request from Vu Ban Parish, Catholic representatives reported. Authorities reportedly deemed the Lang Son application incomplete and stated that Vu Ban was a new parish, which the Church continued to dispute.

Some Buddhist, Protestant, and Cao Dai groups stated they chose not to affiliate with any government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations, nor did they seek their own registration or recognition, because they believed that recognized and registered groups were manipulated by or at least cooperated closely with authorities. They said they could not tolerate such manipulation and cooperation.

State-run media and progovernment blogs continued to accuse priests and parishioners who were vocal in their opposition to the government of exploiting religion for personal gain or “colluding with hostile forces with the purpose of inciting public disorder and acting against the Communist Party and State.” Progovernment blogs and, at times, state-run media, continued publishing stories about Catholic clergy allegedly involved in inappropriate sexual situations and parishioners misappropriating donations for personal use, allegations that two Catholic bishops stated were

totally false and designed to discredit the Church. Catholic leaders in the central part of the country said digitally manipulated social media posts falsely portrayed Bishop Nguyen Thai Hop of the Ha Tinh Diocese in compromising sexual situations. Progovernment blogs also made repeated references to sex scandals involving priests outside of the country.

State-run media and progovernment websites sometimes equated particular Christian denominations and other religious groups, notably Falun Gong, with separatist movements, blaming them for political, economic, and social problems, particularly in remote areas in the Northwest and Central Highlands where there was a high concentration of ethnic minorities. According to Degar Christians, authorities repeatedly accused Degar Christian groups of belonging to the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO), a defunct group the government considers an insurgency militia; Degar Christian members and leaders said they were not associated with FULRO.

State media reported local and provincial authorities in the northern mountainous provinces, including Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen, continued to call the Duong Van Minh religious group a threat to national security, political stability, and social order. State media and progovernment websites continued referring to the group as “an evil-way religion” or “an illegal religious group.” The provincial and local authorities reportedly considered breaking up this group to be a priority.

Some progovernment websites associated Falun Gong with acts against the party and state or other hostile political agendas. Following the discovery in Binh Duong of two bodies of Falun Gong practitioners, reportedly killed by fellow Falun Gong adherents, state media and progovernment websites reiterated previous statements reminding the public that the practice of Falun Gong and dissemination of related material is illegal. State media reported that authorities dispersed Falun Gong gatherings and confiscated Falun Gong literature.

During the year, the Catholic Church reassigned a number of priests who were vocal in their opposition to the government or engaged in human rights activities to less restive areas. According to social media and activists, authorities intervened with the relevant Catholic dioceses to have perceived “problematic” priests removed, although both the priests and Catholic Church leaders denied these reports. Among those transferred were Fathers Dinh Huu Thoai, Tran Dinh Long, and Le Ngoc Thanh, who ran the Justice and Peace Committee of the Saigon Redemptorist Order, which provided assistance to former army officials of the former Republic of Vietnam and victims of injustice; Father Nguyen Ngoc Nam Phong of Thai Ha Church in Hanoi; and Father Nguyen Duy Tan of Tho Hoa parish, Dong Nai Province.

In May authorities in Thua Thien Hue Province reportedly requested that the leadership of the International Benedictine Order and Vietnamese Benedictine Order assign Nguyen Huyen Duc to a parish in Thua Thien Hue rather than the Thien An monastery; a senior Catholic official stated this request was likely due to the priest’s efforts to highlight issues of land reform and land rights.

Many ordained pastors conducted pastoral work despite not having completed paperwork mandated by law to be recognized as clergy by the government. For example, ECVN reported that only approximately one fifth of its pastors were officially recognized by the government.

Some pastors of unregistered groups stated that authorities did not interfere with their clerical training, despite their lack of legal authorization.

Some Catholic leaders stated authorities did not approve their requests to establish new parishes and more than 20 such requests were pending at year’s end.

According to pastors from the unregistered VBC, government officials urged unregistered groups to affiliate with registered or recognized organizations. Some stated authorities did so knowing unregistered groups would never accept affiliation, while others said authorities sought increased control over the groups through affiliation with other organizations.

From June to October, independent Hoa Hao followers in An Giang reported that local authorities and state-recognized Hoa Hao Buddhists groups in Phu Tan District, An Giang Province, advocated tearing down the 100-year-old An Hoa Pagoda, one of the first independent Hoa Hao pagodas founded by Prophet Huynh Phu So, citing a purported need to build a new pagoda. Independent Hoa Hao followers opposed the pagoda’s demolition due to its religious importance and proposed it be renovated instead. Plainclothes police reportedly assaulted independent Hoa Hao Buddhists who tried to prevent the pagoda’s demolition. The government temporarily halted demolition of the pagoda, and it remained intact at year’s end.

There were multiple reports of discrimination against believers and religious groups across the country. Members of some religious groups that did not enjoy the support of the government and whose members were poor or ethnic minorities reported that authorities denied some of the legal benefits to which the members were entitled. In August local and provincial police reportedly disrupted a Buddhist ritual at Dat Quang temple, where monks from Phuroc Buu Temple and

approximately 30 worshippers were celebrating Vu Lan Day. Authorities said Thich Khong Tanh, who was leading the ceremony, did not have permission to conduct religious activities at Dat Quang Temple because he was not a local monk. According to a U.S.-based human rights organization, authorities continued to harass UBCV communities in an effort to seize their temples and facilities and force the UBCV to join the government-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Church.

On July 24, public security officials in Kmleo Village, Hoa Thang Commune, Buon Ma Thuot City, Dak Lak Province, temporarily detained and interrogated Pastor Y Nguyet Bkrong of the unregistered Vietnam Evangelical Church of Christ for holding a worship ceremony in his home church to which he invited a U.S. pastor. A human rights NGO said officials ordered Y Nguyet to list the attendees of the meeting. After six hours of interrogation, the public security officials escorted him home, which they searched and confiscated religious documents.

Also on July 24, four public security officers in Jung Village, Ea Yong Commune, Krong Pac District, Dak Lak Province, reportedly detained Pastor Ksor Sun of the unregistered Vietnam Evangelical Church of Christ without an arrest warrant, interrogated him for three days regarding his relationship with a U.S.-based pastor, and ordered him to recant his faith.

In June and July public security officials in Hoa Dong Commune, Krong Pac District, and in Buon Ho Town, Ea Drong Commune, Cu Mgar District, Dak Lak Province, reportedly monitored suspected followers and pastors of the Vietnam Evangelical Church of Christ, interrogated them about their religious activities, and told them to recant their faith.

On January 11, authorities in Plei Kan Town, Ngoc Hoi District, Kon Tum Province, demolished the UBCV Linh Tu Pagoda after Abbot Thich Dong Quang left for medical treatment. Officials reportedly demolished the pagoda because the abbot did not align himself with the local state-sponsored Buddhist pagoda and local authorities. No state media outlets reported the demolition.

On March 26, local authorities in Xuyen Moc District, Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province issued a declaration that the Six-Harmony Tower and the Pavilion of Overlooking Water of the Thien Quang Pagoda were constructed without authorization and therefore must be demolished. At year's end, there were no indications authorities had demolished the structure.

Catholic leaders said some local authorities in Quang Binh Province provided families with four kilograms (nine pounds) of rice if they agreed to replace images of Jesus Christ in their homes with pictures of Ho Chi Minh.

According to religious leaders of multiple faiths, the government did not permit members of the military to practice religious rites at any time while on active duty; military members were required to take personal leave to do so. There were no clear regulations for religious expression in the military, leaving individual unit commanders to exercise significant discretion.

While religious believers could serve in the enlisted ranks (including during temporary mandatory military service), commissioned officers were not permitted to be religious believers. Religious adherents continued to be customarily excluded through the process to recruit permanent military staff.

Khmer Krom Buddhists, whose males traditionally enter the monastery for a period of training when they come of age, reported faced forced conscription into the military with no alternative service, despite no active conflict in the country, preventing males in the community from receiving their religious rite of passage.

According to family members of some imprisoned religious believers, authorities continued to deny some prisoners and detainees the right to religious practice. Detention officers continued to deny visits by priests to Catholic prisoners, including Ho Duc Hoa and Le Dinh Luong. Prison authorities stated this was due to the lack of appropriate facilities inside the prison for Catholic services. Other prisoners reported they were allowed to read the Bible or other religious materials and practice their beliefs while incarcerated. According to an international NGO, independent Hoa Hao adherent Bui Van Trung was able to have a censored version of the Hoa Hao scripture in prison.

Protestant and Catholic groups continued to report that legal restrictions and lack of legal clarity on operating faith-based medical and educational facilities made them wary of attempting to open hospitals or parochial schools, despite government statements welcoming religious groups expanding participation in health, education, and charitable activities. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools seized from the Catholic Church in past decades.

In several instances, local authorities permitted religious organizations to operate social services and to gather for training. For example, in Hanoi and surrounding areas, city officials continued to allow Protestant house churches to operate drug rehabilitation centers.

Most representatives of religious groups continued to report that adherence to a registered religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernmental civil, economic, and secular life, but that adherence to an unregistered group was more disadvantageous. Practitioners of various registered religious groups served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Many nationally recognized religious organizations, such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, as well as other clergy and religious followers, were members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella group for government-affiliated organizations under the guidance of the CPV. High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter and attended Vesak activities commemorating the birth of the Buddha. The official resumes of the top three CPV leaders stated they followed no religion; however, while many senior CPV leaders were reported to hold strong religious beliefs, particularly Buddhism, they generally did not publicly discuss their religious affiliation.

On December 18, 2018, Joseph Vu Van Thien was installed as the new Archbishop of Hanoi at a ceremony attended by Catholic leaders from the country, the Vatican, and members of the diplomatic corps. The prime minister received the high-level Vatican delegation later the same day.

Since January 2018, the GCRA has conducted more than 2,000 training sessions nationwide to assist with the continued implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion, according to the Director General of the GCRA. The GCRA created a website with an interactive portal to provide access to forms required for registration of religious activities. By the end of the year, 13 religious organizations had established accounts on the website. The portal also allowed religious organizations to track the status of their document submissions. During the year, the GCRA conducted inspections in 12 cities to monitor implementation of the law and trained provincial government officials to conduct their own local inspections.

Although the law prohibits publishing of all materials, including religious materials, without government approval, some private, unlicensed publishing houses continued to unofficially print and distribute religious texts without active government interference. Other licensed publishers printed books on religion. Publishers had permission to print the Bible in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ngong, H'mong, C'ho, and English. Other published texts included works pertaining to ancestor worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai.

The Church of Jesus Christ reported it was able to import sufficient copies of The Book of Mormon, although the Church was still working with the GCRA to import additional faith based periodicals. The president of the Church of Jesus Christ traveled to the country for the first time in November, where he met with senior CPV and religious affairs officials and held a devotional session for believers.

Authorities permitted Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Baha'i, and Buddhist groups to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities, and religious leaders noted increased enrollment in recent years. Students continued to participate in training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy organized at pagodas nationwide during summer holidays.

On October 22, in Ho Chi Minh City, the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church celebrated the 90th Anniversary of its foundation. The event drew 300 guests, including representatives of local and central governments.

On October 27, in Hanoi, the Vietnamese Baha'i community celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Bab, the organization's founder. The event planners hosted approximately 100 guests, including representatives of other faith organizations and senior officials of the Fatherland Front.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Authorities in Binh Duong reported that four women stating they were Falun Gong adherents admitted to killing a practitioner of Falun Gong. The women said a second Falun Gong follower committed suicide. The women encased both bodies in a concrete barrel. Following the discovery of the bodies, state media and progovernment websites reiterated previous statements reminding the public that the practice of Falun Gong and dissemination of related material is illegal.

The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha organized the 16th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, an international observation of Buddha's birthday. The festival attracted more than 1,650 delegates from 112 countries and territories, along with approximately 20,000 Vietnamese Buddhist dignitaries, monks, nuns, and followers. Among the dignitaries in attendance was Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Representatives of the Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of government officials and CPV leaders, including the president, prime minister, and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the CRA, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and in various provinces and cities. They stressed to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship.

The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the UBCV, Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent Cao Dai and Hoa Hao groups; sought greater freedom for recognized and registered religious groups; advocated access to religious materials and clergy for those incarcerated; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. Embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases of abuse, as well as government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups, and ethnic minority house churches, with the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial- and local-level authorities. U.S. government officials called for the increased registration of church congregations around the country and for improvement in registration policies by making them more uniform and transparent. U.S. government officials also urged the government to resolve peacefully outstanding land-rights disputes with religious organizations.

A senior official of the Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor raised issues of religious freedom during the annual U.S. Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi in May and raised specific concerns about implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion, the status of religious believers detained or imprisoned, and the situation of ethnic religious minority groups.

In September embassy officials met with government officials of the Ministry of Public Security, MFA, and the GCRA, as well as with registered and unregistered religious groups, to discuss implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion and advocate for increased religious freedom, including allowing both registered and unregistered groups to exercise their rights freely, seeking accountability for reports of government harassment, and resolving lands-rights issues.

The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials met with religious leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups and attended religious ceremonies to demonstrate support for religious freedom. On April 18, the Ambassador visited Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in Tu Hieu Pagoda in Thua Thien, Hue. On September 13, a senior official of the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City addressed an estimated 100,000 attendees at the registered Cao Dai Holy Mother Goddess Festival in Tay Ninh Province and underscored the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

Embassy and consulate officials at every level traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, to monitor religious liberty and meet with religious leaders. Representatives of the embassy and consulate general maintained frequent contact with many leaders of religious communities, including recognized, registered, and unregistered organizations.

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