



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Vietnam

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 2 July 2015

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Vietnam*, 2 July 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/55a4fa396.html> [accessed 17 March 2016]

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Vietnam made international news headlines in May 2014 after rare large-scale protests broke out across the country against China, sparked by the movement of an oil rig into disputed territory in the South China Sea. Initially the Communist government did not attempt to quash the protests, but it appealed for calm after mobs began to attack perceived Chinese nationals and Chinese-owned factories. Hundreds of factories were attacked in the central provinces and there were reports that more than 20 people had been killed. Over 600 Chinese nationals reportedly fled the country fearing further violence.

In February, Vietnam underwent its second Universal Periodic Review, accepting 182 out of 227 recommendations, including those concerning freedom of religion or belief as well as non-discrimination for minorities, but rejected key recommendations that would overhaul the state of human rights in the country. In addition, after a delay of 21 years, Vietnam submitted its State Report for the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The exile Vietnam Committee for Human Rights condemned the State Report as 'empty rhetoric' and highlighted the country's continuing human rights violations against much of its population, particularly religious and ethnic minorities. This point was reiterated in July when the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, made an official visit to the country. Concluding his visit, he expressed concern about serious restrictions on religious groups and made note of how the government's process of official registration, ostensibly to enable people to practise their beliefs freely, 'is no guarantee that freedom of religion or belief is fully respected'.

A number of incidents during the year also underlined the ongoing challenges religious minorities face in practising their faith. On 1 January, the head of the Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM), Le Cong Cau, was placed under house arrest in the north central province of Hue as he attempted to visit the leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) in Ho Chi Minh City. The UBCV is a banned religious organization in Vietnam, but authorities tolerate the related BYM organization for their social support activities. However, his arrest triggered a series of raids against BYM members, with 23 people reportedly arrested in Hue in subsequent weeks. A Memorial Day service on 10 January in Hue was stopped by authorities and over 300 UBCV invitees were intercepted or threatened. After being expelled from Hue, a prominent UBCV monk Thich Chon Tam was also assaulted by plainclothes police in Ho Chi Minh on 14 January. The crackdown is thought to have come on the heels of UBCV's announcement of a new executive committee.

In March, three Hmong Christians were sentenced to prison terms in the north-eastern province of Tuyen Quang under Article 258 of Vietnam's penal code, a broad provision used to prosecute those who 'infringe upon the interests of the State'. Hoang Van Sang, Ly Van Dinh and Duang Van Tu are part of a group of Hmong Christians who advocate for reformed burial and wedding practices, said to be less costly and less burdensome on families. The government is reportedly forcing the reformists to return to their traditional practices. The lawyer of Hoang Van Sang said that he had been charged for building a funeral home to accommodate the new practices, but also mentioned that the community's refusal to accept grain seed and other state development initiatives has angered the government.

Arbitrary sentencing and imprisonment on bogus charges is a common tactic to repress those defending the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, with imprisoned religious freedom defenders often subjected to serious mistreatment, including beatings and harassment, while in jail. In August, three human rights defenders were sentenced to prison in August for 'causing public disorder' for traffic violations in Dong Thap province. Bui Thi Minh Hang, Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh and Nguyen Van Minh, an independent Hoa Hao Buddhist, were arrested in February after 21 bloggers and Hoa Hao Buddhist activists rode motorbikes to the home of a former political prisoner, Nguyen Bac Truyen, and his fiancée, Bui Thi Kim Phuong, also an independent Hoa Hao Buddhist practitioner.

A new land law passed in late 2013 came into effect during the year. It will put more conditions and restrictions on how the government reclaims land for development purposes, in contrast to the previous provisions that facilitated indigenous and minority land alienation. The law still allows for land acquisition for development projects that are in the interest of 'the public and the nation', but they must be approved by the prime minister and the National Assembly.

Land rights remained a serious source of insecurity during the year, particularly for minorities. In the village of Con Dau, near Da Nang city in central Vietnam, the government expropriated land from Catholic community members to give to a resort investor. The UN Special Rapporteur on housing Raquel Rolnik called it 'a clear case of land grabbing for the benefit of private entrepreneurs and at the expense of local communities'. In October, the Thai Ha Redemptorist Church in Dong Da district, Hanoi, protested the filling of a lake that the church insists belongs to the parish, citing their increasing membership as the motivation for authorities to confiscate their land.

The majority of Vietnam's indigenous peoples still reside in rural areas, where poverty levels are higher than for their majority Kinh counterparts. According to 2009 government census data, only 13 per cent of 'ethnic minorities' live in cities, as compared to 32 per cent of ethnic Kinh. One contributing factor to the significant developmental gaps between minority and majority communities in Vietnam is the broader inequality between cities and the countryside, with poverty rates two and a half times higher in rural areas. Ethnic minorities are therefore more likely to be adversely affected by the limited development and lack of opportunities outside urban areas. However, Vietnam's ethnic disparities far exceed these differences. Over extended periods, ethnic minorities have fared much more poorly than their majority counterparts. In fact, urban poverty levels among ethnic minorities remain higher than rural poverty levels among majority Kinh. The only positive trend is that poverty levels among minorities in cities are markedly lower and have continued to fall over time, suggesting that further urbanization could improve outcomes if the process is well managed.

However, migration among ethnic minorities is less common than among majority Kinh and tends to be from rural to rural areas, many as part of government relocation or sedentarization programmes from previous decades. Nevertheless, an increasing number of younger minority community members are now migrating to the city, mostly in search of work as labour scouts have

recently advertised heavily in rural areas with large minority populations to engage factory workers, domestic maids and other areas. Lack of opportunity in rural areas is driving urbanization, and minorities are disproportionately vulnerable to food insecurity, price fluctuations, drought and other natural disasters.

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