

Document #2077055

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Viet Nam: Treatment of Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, by society and authorities; state protection (2020–June 2022) [VNM201069.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

A report by Viet Nam's General Statistics Office on the results of the 2019 population and housing census indicates that Viet Nam's total population was 96,208,984 (Viet Nam 2020, Table 3). According to the same source 5,866,169 were Catholic and 960,558 were Protestant (Viet Nam 2020, Table 3).

In an interview with the Research Directorate, an advocacy manager for the International Christian Concern (ICC), a Christian non-profit organization based in Washington, DC that is focused on assistance, advocacy, and awareness of the "persecuted" Christians around the world (ICC n.d.), indicated that Catholics make up the "majority" of Christians in Viet Nam (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022).

A country information report on Viet Nam by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) notes that Catholics live in "most" districts, provinces, and cities with the "highest concentration" in central Viet Nam in "Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh Provinces" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.22).

1.1 Formosa Protests

According to sources, in 2016 a spill occurred at the Formosa Plastic Corporation causing Viet Nam's "worst" environmental "disaster" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.66; Reuters 6 Apr. 2017). A Reuters article reports that the spill from the Formosa steel plant contaminated "more than" 200 kilometers of Viet Nam's coast (Reuters 6 Apr. 2017). Radio Free Asia (RFA), "a private, nonprofit corporation, funded through the [US Agency for Global Media], an independent federal government agency" (RFA n.d.), states that the Formosa spill "killed an estimated 115 tons of fish and left fishermen and tourism industry workers jobless" (RFA 3 July 2017). According to the DFAT report, protests demanding compensation resulted in the arrests of protestors and online activists, including members of the Catholic clergy and their followers (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.66). An article by AsiaNews, a news agency of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions which reports on Asia with a focus on religious freedom (AsiaNews n.d.), states that in 2016 "[a]bout" 4,000 Catholics from Ky Anh town in Ha Tinh province, "were blocked and beaten by police" while protesting "against government inaction" in the fish deaths caused by the Formosa spill (AsiaNews 17 Aug. 2016). The Reuters article indicates that following months of rallies Formosa agreed to pay US\$500 million in compensation (Reuters 6 Apr. 2017). An article by Union of Catholic Asia News (UCA News), a Catholic media service in Asia (UCA News n.d.), reports that in February 2018 two Catholic environmental activists were imprisoned after assisting fishermen to sue the Formosa steel plant with one activist sentenced to 14 years in prison for "resisting officials on duty" and 'abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the state, the legitimate interest and rights of organizations and citizens'" and the other sentenced to 2 years in prison for "opposing official on duty" (UCA News 7 Feb. 2018). The DFAT report notes that Formosa "protests are no longer occurring, at least on a large scale," however, "[o]ther sources" indicated to DFAT that "some remain dissatisfied and have launched legal appeals against compensation, which they consider inadequate" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.66).

2. Legislation

The DFAT report states that "Vietnam is officially an atheist state" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.13).

Viet Nam's constitution provides the following regarding freedom of religion:

Article 24

Everyone shall enjoy freedom of belief and religion; he or she can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law.

The State respects and protects freedom of belief and of religion.

No one has the right to infringe on the freedom of belief and religion or to take advantage of belief and religion to violate the laws. (Viet Nam 2013)

The Law on Belief and Religion provides the following regarding freedom of religion:

Article 3. Responsibilities of the State for guaranteeing the right to freedom of belief and religion

1. The State shall respect and protect the right to freedom of belief and religion of everyone; shall guarantee that all religions are equal before law.
2. The State shall respect and protect the fine cultural values and moral qualities of beliefs and religions, the tradition of worshipping ancestors and glorifying and honoring people with meritorious services to the country and/or community to satisfy the People's spiritual needs.

...

Article 6. The right to freedom of belief and religion of everyone

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of belief and religion, to follow or not to follow a religion.
2. Everyone has the right to manifest his/her belief or religion; to practice belief or religious rites; to participate in festivals; to study and practice religious tenets and canon laws.
3. Everyone has the right to lead a religious life at a religious establishment, to study at a religious training institution or attend a refresher course of a religious organization. Minors, before leading a religious life at a religious establishment or studying at a religious training institution, shall obtain the consent of their parents or guardians.
4. Dignitaries, religious officers and clergypersons have the right to perform religious rites, preach and propagate their religions at religious establishments or other lawful places.
5. Persons held in custody or temporary detention in accordance with the law on custody and temporary detention; persons who are serving imprisonment sentences; persons who are serving the measure of consignment to a reformatory, compulsory education institution or compulsory detoxification establishment have the right to use religious books and to manifest their beliefs or religions.
6. The Government shall prescribe in detail the assurance of the exercise of the rights prescribed in Clause 5 of this Article. (Viet Nam 2016)

However, the DFAT report indicates that "[i]n practice, religious groups are required to register with the [g]overnment" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.13). *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2022*, which "assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries," states that "[i]n the past few years" Viet Nam's government has permitted "more" religious freedoms "as long as religious practices pose no threat" to the Communist Party of Viet Nam's rule (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022, 2, 7). However, the same source notes that religious groups that are not registered or recognized by the government "are prohibited from operating" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022, 7). The 2022 annual report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), covering the events of 2021, indicates that religious groups in Viet Nam must register with the government "and operate under government-controlled management boards" (HRW 13 Jan. 2022, 746).

The Law on Belief and Religion provides the following on registration of religious activities:

Article 12. Registration of belief activities

1. Belief activities of a belief establishment shall be registered, except for lineal ancestor worship houses.
2. At least 30 days before starting belief activities, the representative or management board of a belief establishment shall send a written registration to the commune-level People's Committee of the place where the belief establishment is located, except the case prescribed in Article 14 of this Law.
A written registration must specify the name of the belief establishment, its belief activities and their contents, scope, time and places.
The commune-level People's Committee shall issue a written reply within 15 days after receiving a valid registration document; in case of refusal, it shall clearly state the reason.
3. For a belief activity not yet stated in the registered document, within 20 days before it takes place, the representative or management board of a belief establishment shall make additional registration for it in accordance with Clause 2 of this Article. (Viet Nam 2016)

According to the DFAT report, the Law on Belief and Religion came into effect on 1 January 2018 and requires that religious groups and religious practices, including worship, festival, and conferences, are registered with the government (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.14). The 2022 annual report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) indicates that the Law on Belief and Religion has "notable improvements" when compared to a 2004 ordinance, including lowering the waiting period for the registration of religious groups (US 25 Apr. 2022, 41).

The DFAT report states that 38 religious organizations related to 16 religious traditions are recognized by the government, including Catholicism (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.16). The same source notes that Protestantism "is broadly" recognized and "some international Christian organisations such as Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter[-]Day Saints (Mormons) are specifically recognised" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.16).

The USCIRF report indicates that the registration requirements for religious groups are "burdensome and complex" and further states that the Law on Belief and Religion is applied in an "uneven and inconsistent" manner across Viet Nam (US 25 Apr. 2022, 41). The Advocacy Manager noted that the process to register according to the law is "lengthy" and that groups have reported that the registration standards are a form of "discrimination and persecution" (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022).

3. Treatment of Christians by Society

Information on the treatment of Christians by society was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The DFAT report indicates that "[s]everal in-country sources" reported that "religious intolerance between people of different faiths is not an everyday problem in Vietnam" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.20). The same source notes that according to "[i]n-country sources" "Catholics generally do not experience societal discrimination" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.30).

The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2021* indicates that "[m]ost representatives of religious groups" reported 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" (US 2 June 2022, 21).

The Advocacy Manager noted that there used to be mistreatment between Catholics and Buddhists, however there are attempts to build a better relationship between the two, and they are not aware of any instances of Buddhists harassing Catholics (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). The same source also noted that there is "more social discrimination" towards smaller religious groups (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). According to the same source, there is "some social discrimination" within the church and those who are aligned with the government "push out" those who are not (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Treatment of Christians by Authorities

The *BTI 2022* states that freedom to practice religion can be "constrained" and that

[m]embers of the Evangelical Church of Christ, and in the northwest of the Highlands, Hmong Christians, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North ... and many Catholic priests have all been harassed and arrested because of their religious practices, or on charges of undermining the unity policy of the party-state. (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022, 13)

The HRW report notes that "[p]olice monitor, harass, and sometimes violently crackdown on religious groups operating outside government-controlled institutions" and that unrecognized religious groups, including Christians, "face constant surveillance, harassment, and intimidation" (HRW 13 Jan. 2022, 747). Freedom House's 2022 report indicates that "[u]nregistered and unrecognized religious groups face routine harassment, including violence, criminal charges and property damage" (Freedom House 28 Feb. 2022, Sec. D2). The Advocacy Manager noted that the government "comes down harder" on unregistered groups (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2021* indicates that there were reports that authorities "continued monitoring, preventing or disrupting the gatherings of some unregistered groups and harassed their members in different ways" noting that "[i]n most cases, members of these religious groups were also involved in human rights advocacy activities or had links to individuals and organizations that were critical of the government" (US 2 June 2022, 15).

The DFAT report notes that the "extent of difficulty that a religious group could expect to face from authorities ... can depend on where they are located" and that "[m]any claims of [g]overnment interference are at the hands of local and provincial authorities rather than national authorities" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.17).

The Advocacy Manager stated that ethnic minority religious groups such as the Hmong face discrimination and that "a lot" of this discrimination comes from local authorities rather than the central government (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). According to the same source, while religion is systemically regulated, "harassment" occurs more at the local level (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). The same source also indicated that Montagnards face discrimination from local authorities (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). The USCIRF report states that "[a]uthorities continued to persecute independent religious communities, including Protestant Hmong and Montagnard Christians" and "Hmong and Montagnard Christian groups remain particularly vulnerable to persecution" (US 25 Apr. 2022, 40).

The DFAT report also notes that "[m]any incidents" are associated with religious groups that are politically active in land or environmental disputes (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.18). The Advocacy Manager indicated that the situation is "more political" in rural areas where there is more overlap between religion and politics (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022).

4.1 Treatment of Catholics by Authorities

The Advocacy Manager noted that the situation for Roman Catholics is improving (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). Sources report that the Vatican was recently in talks with Viet Nam's government to improve their relationship (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022; Vatican News 22 Apr. 2022).

The information in the following two paragraphs was provided in the DFAT report:

"In general," relations are "cordial" between the government and the Catholic church. Authorities "may" limit the activities of some communities, typically those outside of the city, who worship in homes of believers. "In general," however, Catholics can "worship freely" in churches in the city, or, as "[i]n-country sources" reported, in "registered churches, particularly in areas with larger Catholic populations."

Catholic movements that are "political" have at times "attract[ed] negative attention from authorities" and land disputes have also been reported, including "the seizure of Catholic land and buildings." In a prominent incident in 2019 "a number of homes and a Catholic church" were demolished, and the land was sold. However, there has also been a process of the return of land that was seized from the Catholic church following the Vietnam War and this process "continues" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.22, 3.23, 3.24, 3.26, 3.28).

The Advocacy Manager indicated that the government has "come after" the property of Catholics, but it is "situationally dependent" and "not necessarily religiously driven" (Advocacy Manager 26 May 2022). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of Safeguard Defenders [1], who consulted with their partners and network within the Vietnamese human rights community, stated that "land disputes between Catholics and the [g]overnment continue, especially in Da Nang, where the [g]overnment resettled Catholic parishes and repurposed the land" (Safeguard Defenders 30 May 2022).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2021* indicates that "the Catholic Church reported challenges in their efforts to establish new parishes in the Northwest Highlands" (US 2 June 2022, 12). The same source notes that "several" Catholic bishops reported that "parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations" experience "difficulty" registering with authorities because of the "inconsistent application of national laws" at the provincial level (US 2 June 2022, 14). The source further notes that 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 Son La, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai Provinces" (US 2 June 2022, 14).

4.2. Treatment of Protestants by Authorities

The information in the following paragraph was provided in the DFAT report:

Protestant churches that are registered with the government "are generally" able to organize and operate "relatively freely." [S]ome unregistered churches "operate but it is "difficult to assess" if they have the "tacit agreement" of authorities. Churches that are involved in political activism "are likely to attract the attention of authorities." "Protestant groups can face bureaucratic difficulties." There are reports that Protestant ministers in "remote areas" have had their assets seized or "premises raided"; however, DFAT notes in relation to these reports that "religious and political issues tend to overlap." According to "[i]n-country sources," Protestant activities including conferences and meetings "are generally unrestricted in large cities" (Australia 11 Jan. 2022, para. 3.32, 3.33, 3.34, 3.35).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2021* notes that local authorities in "some" regions of the Central Highlands "reportedly intimidated and threatened violence against members of certain unregistered Protestant groups that had reported human rights violations to international bodies or had attempted to force" members of these groups to renounce their faith or to "join a registered religious organization" (US 2 June 2022, 10). The same source indicates that in July 2021 security officials arrested and detained "at least" 21 individuals in the province of Dak Lak in the Central Highlands and that "[m]any" of those who were arrested were members of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam and the Vietnam Good News Mission Church, two "ethnic minority Protestant churches" "which had long been targeted by authorities" (US 2 June 2022, 10). According to the source, all the individuals were later released (US 2 June 2022, 10).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2021* indicates that local religious leaders reported that Protestant groups "experienced authorities' inconsistent interpretation and enforcement of the law when attempting to register their local congregations" (US 2 June 2022, 14). The same source reports that central authorities "continued to deny" applications for "several Protestant groups – Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC), United Presbyterian Church in Vietnam, and the Full Gospel Church of Vietnam led by Pastor Ly Xuan Hoa" (US 2 June 2022, 15).

5. State Protection for Christians

Information on state protection for Christians could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] Safeguard Defenders is a Spain-based human rights NGO that "undertakes and supports local field activities" in Asia (Safeguard Defenders n.d.).

References

Advocacy Manager, International Christian Concern (ICC). 26 May 2022. Interview with the Research Directorate.

AsiaNews. 17 August 2016. "[Ky Anh, 4 Thousand Catholics Beaten by Police for Protesting Against Environmental Disaster](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

[AsiaNews](#). N.d. "[About Us](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

Australia. 11 January 2022. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). [DFAT Country Information Report: Vietnam](#). [Accessed 8 June 2022]

Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2022. "[Vietnam Country Report](#)." *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2022*. [Accessed 8 June 2022]

Freedom House. 28 February 2022. "Vietnam." [Freedom in the World 2022](#). [Accessed 12 May 2022]

Human Rights Watch (HRW). 13 January 2022. "Vietnam." [World Report 2022: Events of 2021](#). [Accessed 12 May 2022]

International Christian Concern (ICC). N.d. "[Understanding ICC](#)." [Accessed 13 June 2022]

Radio Free Asia (RFA). 3 July 2017. Roseanne Gerin. "[Catholic Villagers in Vietnam Protest Lack of Compensation for Formosa Disaster](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

Radio Free Asia (RFA). N.d. "[About Radio Free Asia](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

Reuters. 6 April 2017. "[Vietnamese Protest One Year After Formosa Spill](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

Safeguard Defenders. 30 May 2022. Correspondence from the Director to the Research Directorate.

[Safeguard Defenders](#). N.d. "[About Us](#)." [Accessed 13 June 2022]

Union of Catholic Asia News (UCA News). 7 February 2018. "[Catholic Activists Get Harsh Sentences in Vietnam](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

[Union of Catholic Asian News \(UCA News\)](#). N.d. "[About Us](#)." [Accessed 21 June 2022]

United States (US). 2 June 2022. Department of State. "Vietnam." [International Religious Freedom Report for 2021](#). [Accessed 8 June 2022]

United States (US). 25 April 2022. US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). "Vietnam." [Annual Report 2022](#). [Accessed 8 June 2022]

Vatican News. 22 April 2022. "[Holy See and Vietnam Consolidate Good and Fruitful Relations](#)." [Accessed 16 June 2022]

Viet Nam. 2020. General Statistics Office. [Completed Results of the 2019 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census](#). [Accessed 9 June 2022]

Viet Nam. 2016. [Law on Belief and Religion](#). [Accessed 13 June 2022]

Viet Nam. 2013. [The Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam](#). Unofficial translation by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). [Accessed 9 June 2022]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Associate professor of history at a university in the US who studies Vietnam and has written on Catholics in Vietnam; associate professor of religious studies at a university in the US who studies Christianity in Asia; Bible Society Vietnam; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam; Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics; PhD student in religious studies at a university in the Netherlands who studies Vietnamese Catholicism; researcher at a university in Viet Nam who studies religion in Viet Nam; Tổng Giáo Phận Hà Nội; Tổng Giáo Phận Huế; Vietnam Human Rights Network; World Evangelical Alliance.

Internet sites, including: The 88 Project; Amnesty International; Asian Human Rights Commission; Asia Society; Austrian Red Cross – ecoi.net; BBC; Boat People SOS; *Le Courrier du Vietnam*; *The Diplomat*; EU – EU Agency for Asylum; Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences; *The*

Guardian; Minority Rights Group International; *The New York Times*; *Nhân Dân*; Open Doors – Open Doors UK & Ireland; Radio Free Asia; *Tuổi Trẻ*; UK – Home Office; UN – Human Rights Council, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; Viet Nam – Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs; The Vietnamese; Vietnam Human Rights Network; Vietnam National University, Hanoi – University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Center for Contemporary Religious Studies; VietNamNet Bridge; *Việt Nam News*; Vietnam Television; The Voice of Vietnam; *The Washington Post*.

ecoi.net summary:

Query response on Vietnam:
Treatment of Christians (2020 -
June 2022)

Country:

Vietnam

Source:

[IRB – Immigration and Refugee
Board of Canada](#)

Original link:

[https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-
information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?
doc=458634&pls=1](https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=458634&pls=1)

Document type:

Response

Language:

English

Published:

22 June 2022

Document ID:

2077055

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T (Telephone) +43 1 589 00 583
F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
Imprint & Disclaimer
F.A.Q.
Data Protection Notice

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

