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Religious and ethnic minorities in Vietnam continued to experience restrictions on freedoms during 2010, a year in which authorities harassed and jailed activists and critics.

The Vietnamese government holds significant control over the activities of organized religions, and instances of harassment were reported throughout the year. Half the population is estimated to be Buddhist. Catholics make up the largest religious minority at 7 per cent, according to the US Department of State, which also noted that Vietnam had made slight improvements on the issues of religious freedom and practice. For example, the government has helped to build new churches, prayer houses and pagodas and facilitated the education of clergy. The year also saw the state officially sanction a new religious group and two Protestant denominations, according to the department's annual Religious Freedom Report, released in November.

Despite this progress, various religious groups reported facing harassment at the hands of local authorities. In the first half of the year, two Protestant churches in Hue reported incidents in which local police shut down services. There were various other reports throughout the country of local police interrupting religious services, with parishioners being accused of 'gathering illegally'. In May, police clashed with Catholic parishioners who were trying to bury the body of an elderly woman, according to RFA. Witnesses reported that 66 people were beaten. Tensions also flared in January, when police demolished a cross near a Catholic cemetery south of Hanoi. The Catholic website, AsiaNews.it, reported that police then shot tear gas at parishioners.

Ethnic minorities and indigenous people, who together comprise an estimated 14 per cent of Vietnam's population, continued to face difficulty throughout the year and activists from minority communities continued to be jailed. HRW estimated those currently in prison for their religious or political beliefs include 300 Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists and members of the Cao Dai religion. In January, two Montagnards – members of Vietnam's persecuted highland minority – were imprisoned on charges of 'violating the country's unity policy', according to HRW. In March, an activist from the Khmer Krom minority was sentenced on charges of 'abusing democratic rights'. Thach N Thach, president of the US-based advocacy group Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation, claimed Khmer Krom Buddhist monks are forced to learn communist ideology in state-sanctioned temples. The government must also approve all religious teachings beforehand, he said.

Statistics continued to show that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among Vietnam's poor. The government has pegged the poverty rate in ethnic minority communities at around 50 per cent – a drop of 36 percentage points since 1993, but still more than triple the national rate. Women from ethnic minority groups also have some of the country's highest maternal mortality rates.

After a visit to Vietnam, the UN's Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, offered praise to the government for what she said was an 'evident political will to address the sizeable socio-economic gap' between ethnic minorities and the majority Kinh. But she also said there were too few opportunities for ethnic minority students to be taught in their own language, and she highlighted instances that may constitute denial of religious freedoms and 'serious violations of civil rights'.

As elsewhere in South East Asia, hydropower dams continued to have significant negative effects on minorities. The first turbine for the massive Son La hydropower plant in north-western Vietnam was turned on in December. The project is expected to be South East Asia's largest power station when it becomes fully operational in 2012. But it has also been the cause of Vietnam's largest resettlement in history. An estimated 91,000 people, mostly from ethnic minorities in the region, were moved to make way for the project, according to the advocacy group International Rivers. Relocated villagers have already reported difficulty growing enough food to feed their families.

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