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2021 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 (LBR) maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups. Some religious leaders, particularly those representing groups that either did not request or receive official recognition or certificates of registration, reported various forms of government harassment, including physical assaults, detentions, prosecutions, monitoring, and denials of, or no response to, requests for registration and other permissions. Some civil society organizations reported severe crackdowns on members of unregistered groups, particularly in the Central Highlands. Religious freedom activists said local authorities approved registration applications based more on religious groups' perspective on politics than on religious doctrine. Authorities did not recognize any new religious organizations during the year. Many religious leaders across the country reported improving conditions compared with prior years, such as better relations between unregistered religious groups and local authorities and a reduction in aggressive forms of harassment. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration said they were generally able to practice their beliefs with less government interference. Members of some religious groups continued to report that some local and provincial authorities used noncompliance with the required registration procedures to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close government management of their leadership, training programs, assemblies, and other activities. The government did not hold any government official accountable for failure to follow legal deadlines and written registration notification requirements as stated in the LBR.

There were reports of conflicts, at times violent, between members of unregistered and registered or recognized religious groups or between believers and nonbelievers. Religious activists blamed authorities for “manipulating” recognized religious groups and accused their agents or proxies of causing conflicts in order to suppress the activities of unregistered groups.

The U.S. Ambassador and other senior embassy and consulate general officials regularly urged authorities to allow members of all religious groups to operate freely. They sought reduced levels of government intervention in the affairs of recognized and registered religious groups and urged an end to restrictions on, and harassment of, groups without recognition or registration. They stressed to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship. The Ambassador, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, and other senior U.S. government and embassy officers advocated for religious freedom in visits across the country, including to the Mekong River Delta and Central Vietnam. With the Government Committee on Religious Affairs (GCRA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial and local authorities, embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases of abuses, as well as of government harassment, against Catholics; Protestant groups, including independent Pentecostal groups; the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV); independent Hoa Hao groups; independent Cao Dai groups; and ethnic minority house churches such as the Duong Van Minh group. 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, and they urged the government to peacefully resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious groups. U.S. government officials also called for unfettered access to religious materials by prisoners. 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102 million (midyear 2021). The government's 2019 National Population and Housing Census reported approximately 13 million religious adherents, accounting for 14 percent of the total population. The census noted Roman Catholics represented the largest number of adherents, with six million followers, accounting for 45 percent of the total number of believers nationwide and 6 percent of the overall

population. The census, which recorded only Buddhists formally registered with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) showed them as the second largest religious group, accounting for five million followers, or 35 percent of the total number of religious adherents nationwide, and 5 percent of the overall population.

According to the census data, VBS membership decreased from nearly seven million in 2009 to approximately five million in 2019. The VBS noted that this number did not account for potentially tens of millions of others who believe in and observe Buddhist practices to various degrees without formal participation in a registered Buddhist religious group. The GCRA estimates the number of Buddhist followers is more than 10 million. Within the Buddhist community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic majority, while approximately 1 percent of the total population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism.

According to the census, Protestants were the third largest group, with nearly one million followers, accounting for 7 percent of the total number of believers nationwide and 1 percent of the overall population. The census results contrast with January 2018 statistics released by the GCRA in which 26 percent of the population was categorized as religious believers participating in registered activities, with 15 percent of the population Buddhist, 7 percent Catholic, 2 percent Hoa Hao Buddhist, 1 percent Cao Dai, and 1 percent Protestant. GCRA officials, however, estimated 90 percent of the population followed some sort of faith tradition, registered or otherwise. According to observers, many religious adherents chose not to make their religious affiliation public for fear of adverse consequences, resulting in substantial discrepancies among various estimates.

According to government statistics, the total number of religious adherents reportedly decreased by roughly 2.5 million and the ratio of religious adherents dropped from more than 18 percent to 14 percent of the total population between the 2009 and 2019 censuses. Catholics and Protestants saw increases in membership, while Buddhists and religious groups based on local traditions saw a declining number of adherents, according to census data. Anecdotal reporting from provincial VBS, Catholic, and Protestant leaders, however, indicated membership in all religious traditions continued to grow.

Smaller religious groups combined constitute less than 0.16 percent of the population and include Hindus (mostly an estimated 70,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area); approximately 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunni, and 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 of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). Religious groups originating in the country (Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, and Phat Giao Hieu Nghia Ta Lon) comprise a total of 0.34 percent of the population. A small, mostly foreign, Jewish population resides in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. National statistics on religious adherents from the GCRA and the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella group for government-affiliated organizations under the guidance of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), are considered less comprehensive, as they do not account for members of unregistered religious groups.

Other individuals 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. Research institutions, including the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, estimate there are approximately 100 “new religions,” mostly in the North and Central Highlands.

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'nong, 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 LBR and implementing Decree 162 serve as the primary documents governing religious groups and their activities. The LBR reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion and states 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, or property of others; impede the exercise of civic rights and performance of civic obligations; or conduct “superstitious activities” or otherwise violate the law.

The government recognizes 38 religious organizations that affiliate with 16 distinct religious “traditions,” as defined by the government: Buddhism, Islam, the Baha’i Faith, Catholicism, Protestantism, 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, Cham Brahmanism, Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition. Five additional groups – the Assemblies of God, Ta Lon Dutiful and Loyal Buddhism, Vietnam Full Gospel Church, Vietnam United Gospel Outreach Church, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Vietnam – have “registrations for religious operation” but are not recognized as official organizations.

The law specifies that recognized religious organizations and their affiliates are noncommercial legal entities. The law also stipulates that religious organizations are allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with relevant laws. The government does not allow unauthorized organizations to raise funds or distribute aid without seeking approval and registration from authorities.

The GCRA, one of 18 “ministerial units” under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), is responsible for implementing religious laws and decrees; 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.

The law prohibits forcing others to follow or renounce a religion or belief.

Military conscription is universal and mandatory for males between 18 and 25 years of age, although there are exceptions. None of the exceptions is related to religious belief.

The law requires individuals to register religious activities with communal authorities where the “lawful premises for the religious practice is based,” and it 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. Registration for religious operation allows a group to organize religious ceremonies and religious practice; preach and conduct religious classes at approved locations; elect, appoint, or designate officials; repair or renovate headquarters; engage in charitable or humanitarian activities; and organize congresses to approve its charter. To obtain registration, the group must submit a detailed application with information about its doctrine, history, bylaws, leaders, and members, as well as proof it has a legal meeting location. The relevant provincial GCRA office or the 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 law requires the relevant provincial GCRA office or the MHA 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 following the date it received approval of its “registration for religious operation.” A 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 recognition, a group must submit a detailed application to the provincial- or national-level GCRA, depending on the geographic extent of the organization. The application must include a written request specifying the group’s structure, membership, geographical scope of operation and headquarters location; a summary of its history, dogmas, canon laws, and rites; a list and the resumes, judicial records, and summaries of the religious activities of the organization’s representative and tentative leaders; the group’s charter; a 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 law requires the relevant provincial people’s committee or MHA to provide any rejection in writing. Recognition allows the religious group to conduct religious activities in accordance with the 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 religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and believers may file complaints or civil and administrative lawsuits against government officials or agencies under the relevant laws and decrees. The law also states religious organizations and individuals have the right to bring civil lawsuits in court regarding the actions of religious groups or believers. There were no analogous provisions in 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 applying to the commune-level people’s committee. Regulations require the people’s committee to respond in writing to 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 religious training facilities; 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 need advance approval but instead require notification to the appropriate authorities. Activities requiring notification include recurring or periodic “belief festivals”; dismissing clergy; conducting fundraising activities; reporting enrollment figures at a seminary or religious school; repairing or renovating religious facilities not considered cultural-historical relics; ordaining, appointing, or assigning religious clergy (such as monks); transferring or dismissing religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); conducting operations at an approved religious training facility; conducting routine religious activities (defined as “religious preaching, practicing religious tenets and rites, and management of a religious organization”); and holding the internal conferences of a religious organization.

The law provides prisoners access to religious counsel as well as 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, and other types of confinement. Prisoner access to religious counsel and materials must not, however, affect the rights of others to freedom of religion and belief or nonbelief or contravene other relevant laws. The decree states the Ministries of Public Security, Defense, and 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 may conduct educational, health, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the law, 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 laws and regulations on construction, and foreigners participating in religious activities must abide by immigration laws.

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, although this is not enforced in all cases. 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 lease or be allocated 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. Parties may dispute the chairperson’s decision by appealing to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment or filing 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.

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. This prohibition extends to private schools run by religious organizations.

There are separate provisions of the law that permit 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

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported cases of government officials physically abusing individuals from religious minority groups, particularly ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and Northern Highlands, although it was not clear the reported cases were related to religious affiliation. In the Northwest and Northern Highlands, leaders representing both registered and unregistered religious groups said authorities increasingly used nonviolent or less aggressive means, for example, inviting representatives to tea or offering to pay for property repairs, to pressure them to comply with government demands, including seeking registration and ceasing illegal gatherings. Because religion, ethnicity, and politics were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In December, authorities in Tuyen Quang Province detained at least 56 members of the ethnic Hmong Duong Van Minh group when they gathered to pay respects following the death of their founder and leader, Duong Van Minh. Due to what authorities said was the mourners’ failure to comply with COVID-19 mitigation requirements and undergo testing following likely COVID-19 exposure, police raided Duong Van Minh’s home on December 12, where Hmong members had gathered. Police, who had arrived in support of local health authorities, allegedly beat and arrested those who failed to comply with testing protocols. According to government officials, however, the government worked with Duong Van Minh’s family to ensure COVID-19 testing of children who were present and to facilitate the funeral service in a relatively timely manner. Government officials also said the mourners gathering at Duong Van Minh’s home exceeded the number of persons permitted to gather under COVID-19 mitigation restrictions and refused to submit to testing following the detection of confirmed COVID-19 cases. Police reportedly forcibly held more than 36 followers incommunicado in several quarantine centers, where those detained reported police interrogated them for hours on their religious activities and threatened them to force them to renounce their faith, including through what some described as torture and beatings. Others reported being held and beaten at police stations in Ham Yen District. Several persons reported police “tortured” them until they signed confessions and other documents renouncing their faith and threatened them with extended detention in a quarantine center without the ability to communicate with family or friends if they refused. At year’s end, 21 Duong Van Minh followers remained in detention.

Local authorities in some parts 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 these groups’ members to recant their faith or join a registered religious organization. Vietnamese security officers arrested and detained at least 21 individuals in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak on July 16. All were released by July 18. Many of those detained had participated in civil society training organized by a U.S.-based human rights NGO and were members of two ethnic minority Protestant churches, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam and the Vietnam Good News Mission Church, which had long been targeted by authorities. At least one victim reported that police officers beat him during interrogations and threatened to kill him. Some detainees also reported authorities told them that studying their rights under the LBR and constitution was illegal, and they reported that authorities threatened them in order to make them renounce their faith.

Government officials in different parts of the country reportedly continued to monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily detain, and discriminate against some individuals, at least in part because of their religious beliefs or affiliation. The majority of the victims of the reported incidents were members of unregistered groups engaged in political or human rights advocacy activities or with ties to overseas individuals and organizations that were outspoken and critical of authorities. There were several reports of local authorities banning, disrupting gatherings, and confiscating publications of new religious movements, such as Dang hoang thien cach mang the gioi dai dong (The Party of God’s Revolution for the Great Unity) in Dong Nai and Binh Phuoc Provinces, Tam Linh Ho Chi Minh (The Spirit of Ho Chi Minh) and Long Hoa Di Lac I (Followers of Maitreya Buddha) in Vinh Phuc Province, and in a number of cases arresting leaders and followers of other religious groups, such as Phap mon can khai vung tru luat lam chinh tam (The Dharma Door of Enlightening Universal Law and Unified Consciousness) in Kinh Mon town, Hai Duong Province.

According to reports from the NGO Boat People SOS (BPSOS), during the year local police in Dak Lak and Phu Yen Provinces questioned at least 30 members of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ, Good News Mission Church, and International Degar Church at local police stations or their residences. BPSOS stated that in some cases, local police forced individuals to report to police stations and then interrogated them for hours before releasing them without charges. Authorities reportedly demanded those detained to cease affiliation with unregistered religious groups and refrain from providing “negative” reports to international organizations. Local police in some cases demanded some religious adherents request permission from authorities prior to traveling outside of their communes. Independent Cao Dai adherents similarly reported police harassed them to prevent them from participating in civil society events, including during a virtual Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief conference in December.

In September, Tien Giang Province authorities arrested three independent Cao Dai leaders and detained them for hours while questioning them about their religious activities.

There were multiple reports of government discrimination against individual religious believers and religious groups across the country. Members of some religious groups whose members were poor or ethnic minorities continued to report that authorities denied them some of the legal benefits to which they were entitled. The Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC), an unregistered group, reported that few of its members received any pandemic-related assistance from government authorities, and a number reported difficulties obtaining COVID-19 vaccines when such

assistance would have been routinely administered to local communities. A VBC pastor in Hanoi reported difficulty acquiring a “land use right certificate” from local officials and said that his neighbors, who were not affiliated with a religious group, had no difficulty receiving a certificate.

Protestant and Catholic groups continued to say 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 group participation in health, education, and charitable activities. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools it seized in 1954 and 1975.

On September 6, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh signed a decision assigning the portfolio of religious affairs and human rights issues to Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh, the senior of four Deputy Prime Ministers.

According to the GCRA, in northern mountainous provinces, local authorities cumulatively granted registrations to nearly 800 local congregations, known as “meeting points,” and they recognized 14 local congregations, out of more than 1,600 local congregations. The registrations and recognitions affected approximately 250,000 congregation members in total (of which 95 percent were ethnic minorities, mostly H’mong). In the Central Highlands, local authorities granted registration to more than 1,400 local congregations and recognized 311 local congregations, together affecting nearly 584,000 congregation members.

The Ministry of Public Security estimated approximately 70 Protestant groups comprising nearly 200,000 members operated outside of the legal framework mandated by the LBR. These groups neither sought nor received registration certificates or recognition during the year.

Authorities did not recognize any new religious organizations during the year. The GCRA registered approximately 70 local congregations in 2020, to include four Protestant local congregations, approximately 50 Catholic parishes, and 12 Cao Dai local congregations. Many unregistered religious groups continued to report that the registration of religious activities with local authorities remained difficult. Some well-established and recognized religious groups such as the Catholic Church reported challenges in their efforts to establish new parishes in the Northwest Highlands. 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. In other cases, religious groups were unaware they had been granted local approval of religious activities. Some local authorities reportedly requested documents or information beyond what was stipulated by law. Several religious leaders said authorities sometimes solicited 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. Some religious groups reported that authorities urged them to register as affiliates of recognized religious groups instead of as new groups.

GCRA officials stated that government officials assisted unregistered religious groups to navigate the bureaucratic procedures required for registration, using features such as an interactive portal on the GCRA website that allowed religious organizations to track the status of their document submissions. The GCRA, however, acknowledged the web portal was not useful for remote religious groups that often lacked the technical skills to utilize the digital forms provided by the government. The GCRA continued to provide provincial-level training to facilitate local registration of religious groups.

Local authorities continued to obstruct the assignment and transfer of religious leaders to unregistered local congregations, particularly those who were from other localities. In several cases, local authorities harassed members of these unregistered local congregations. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN) reported the recognition of its local congregations was still time consuming, although many of them had been operating stably for many years without official confirmation of their registration and, from their perspective, had fully met the registration requirements. According to the ECVN, authorities recognized 23 local congregations and granted registration to approximately 500 out of 1,200 local congregations and houses of worship (meeting points). The ECVN reported it continued to experience difficulties obtaining registration of its meeting points with local authorities in Quang Binh and Nghe An Provinces.

At year’s end, the VBC was still awaiting the final results of a new approach, initiated in 2020, to register local congregations, in coordination with the GCRA. Unlike earlier applications, in which representatives of local congregations completed the relevant paperwork for local authorities in relative isolation, the VBC chief pastor completed multiple registration packages under his name for submission to the GCRA. The VBC said it submitted approximately 30-40 registration applications for local congregations in the Northwest Highlands in recent years under the old approach but was unable to verify the number of registration requests still pending.

Authorities required most, if not all, applicants seeking the registration of their religious operation or recognition of their organization to include in their applications language stating the religious organization would be in harmony with the nation and would serve the Vietnamese people. For example, the Catholic Church used the slogan “Live the gospel amidst the nation,” while the VBS used “dharma, nation, and socialism.” Religious groups continued to publicize the slogans after their registration and recognition.

According to local religious leaders, authorities continued to impose a rigid upper management structure on religious organizations. According to religious community representatives, authorities preferred a two-level, top-down hierarchy to better control the religious organization and its affiliates through the religious group’s internal administrative structure.

For example, the Catholic Church reported that the authorities no longer recognized “sub-parishes,” as they had in the past. As a result, the Church was required to establish full parishes, a lengthy and challenging process, or to register local congregations; the authorities did not recognize anything in between. Under the old approach, sub-parish status gave a religious community more leeway than a local congregation on some issues. A local congregation did not have the right to submit paperwork for the construction of religious facilities or for religious practice, example, but a sub-parish could submit that paperwork.

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 their 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 Son La, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai Provinces.

According to local religious leaders, Protestant groups also experienced authorities’ inconsistent interpretation and enforcement of the law when attempting to register their local congregations. Local authorities in Dien Bien Province, for example, continued to deny the registration applications of an independent Pentecostal congregation in Noong Luong commune, Dien Bien District, Dien Bien Province, stating that the congregation was affiliated with an unrecognized religious group. The Pentecostal group’s religious leader, however, said the law did not require a local congregation to be affiliated with a recognized organization to receive registration. The leader also noted that members had practiced their faith at the local congregation for nearly 30 years before filing registration applications in April 2017. Dien Bien authorities continued to deny registration of a group called Assembly of God of Vietnamese People (Hoi Thanh Phuc Am Ngu Tuan Nguoi Viet), reasoning that the applicant’s dogma was indistinguishable from that of the recognized Assembly of God of Vietnam (Giao hoi Phuc Am Ngu Tuan Viet Nam).

The VBC reported authorities did not register new local congregations in Thanh Hoa, Hanoi, Hai Phong, Quang Ninh, Hai Duong, and the Northwest Highlands.

Religious leaders reported that the central authorities continued to deny applications for the religious operation of 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. Religious freedom advocates stated that the determining factor as to whether local authorities approved registration applications was more closely linked to the religious groups’ perspective on politics than on religious dogma. The GCRA continued to deny public access to pending registration actions.

There were reports that local authorities denied new ID applications in which applicants identified their religion and that authorities ignored applicants’ expressed faith and labeled them “nonbelievers” or members of another religion. VBS, however, reported that despite initial difficulties, it had resolved its ID problems by coordinating with authorities and was able to provide the relevant documentation to its members.

During the year, most religious ceremonies and services were cancelled or were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were reports of authorities disrupting gatherings that violated pandemic restrictions, including religious gatherings. Authorities continued monitoring, preventing, or disrupting the gatherings of some unregistered groups and harassed their members in different ways, including bringing Christian leaders into police stations for questioning and threatening that they could not celebrate Christmas. In 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. Religious leaders in urban areas and the ethnic-majority Kinh largely reported authorities permitted them to practice without significant restrictions as long as they acted transparently and facilitated or allowed official oversight. This remained true for both officially registered and unregistered religious groups. Unrecognized religious denominations operating in the Central and Northwest Highlands and in certain parts of the Mekong Delta – especially those that had a predominantly ethnic minority following – were more likely to report harassment from government officials. Recognized religious denominations in these areas reported rapid growth and generally fewer problems with officials.

There were no clear regulations for religious expression in the military, leaving individual unit commanders to exercise significant discretion. 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. State-run media, however, reported military officials praying for peace and happiness while visiting pagodas.

Male Khmer Krom Buddhists traditionally enter the monastery for a period of at least one month before the age of 20. Adherents reported that mandatory conscription into the military with no possibility of alternative service interfered with this traditional religious rite of passage.

In March, authorities permitted the display of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen Buddhism calligraphy works for the first time at a Ho Chi Minh City exhibition.

According to the monks of Thien An Monastery in Thua Thien in Hue Province, senior provincial leaders visited the monastery on September 22 and discussed land-related issues. At the meeting, authorities committed to establishing a working group to resolve land issues and to help the monastery obtain “stable and harmonious development.”

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

According to family members, unlike in previous years, prisoners, including Catholics Le Dinh Luong, Ho Duc Hoa, Nguyen Nang Tinh, and Protestant Nguyen Trung Ton, had access to the Bible and other religious materials.

Media sources continued to report tension and disputes between Catholics and authorities in Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Thua Thien Hue, and Binh Thuan Provinces, mostly regarding land disputes or relating to the activities of human and environmental rights advocacy groups. In March and April, local authorities of Ky Khang commune, Ky Anh District, Ha Tinh Province prevented Du Thanh parishioners from building a fishpond. The local authorities accused parishioners of encroaching on agricultural land and starting construction work without permits, while parishioners said the work they were carrying out on parish property did not require a permit. State-run media and progovernment websites accused the parish leadership of inciting the parishioners to act against the authorities and causing social unrest prior to National Assembly and People’s Council elections, while the parish leadership stated the authorities harassed them because of their criticism and protests.

Leaders of the unregistered Christian Duong Van Minh group reported local authorities in Ha Giang, Thai Nguyen, and Cao Bang Provinces no longer destroyed “Nha Don” structures built years ago for storing funeral-related items and were allowing the renovation of a small number of these structures. However, local authorities in parts of Tuyen Quang Province continued prohibiting and destroying these structures. The Duong Van Minh group, which the government considered either an “evil-way” religion or an “illegal organization,” reported local authorities monitored key members and stated that local police officials “visited” their residences from time to time or “invited” them to local authorities’ headquarters. Those who refused such “invitations” said they were not subjected to reprisals.

Provincial and local authorities continued to exercise eminent domain over land belonging to individuals and religious organizations in the name of social and economic development projects. Authorities continued many projects that required the revocation of land rights and the demolition of properties of religious organizations or individuals across the country. Authorities reportedly did not intervene effectively in many land disputes that involved religious organizations or believers, and in most of these cases, the religious organizations or believers were unsuccessful in retaining land use rights. Such actions resulted in land disputes involving recognized, registered, and unregistered religious organizations.

State media and progovernment websites alleged that Catholic priests in many parishes occupied – or urged their parishioners to use or illegally occupy – land legally used by non-Catholics 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. From March to May, Dang Cao parishioners at Dien Doai commune, Dien Chau District, Nghe An Province unsuccessfully attempted to fill and level an aquaculture pond to expand parish church facilities and build a fence surrounding a stadium it claimed as church property. The parish also claimed a lot that was used as community property of the commune. Many parishioners in this area said they were dissatisfied with the local authorities concerning the construction of a north-south highway in which the local authorities exercised eminent domain over parish land without providing adequate compensation and assistance. Local authorities said they considered the parish’s claims groundless and unreasonable. Some progovernment websites accused the parish leadership of attempting to cause social unrest before the May National Assembly and People’s Council elections.

From June to October, independent Hoa Hao followers in An Giang reported that local authorities and state-recognized Hoa Hao Buddhist groups in Phu Tan District, An Giang Province, citing a need to build a new pagoda, advocated tearing down the 100-year-old An Hoa Tu Pagoda. That building is one of the first independent Hoa Hao pagodas built by Prophet Huynh Phu So, founder of the Hoa Hao religious tradition. Independent Hoa Hao followers opposed the pagoda’s demolition due to its religious importance; they 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.

Members of some unregistered religious groups, including independent Pentecostals in Dien Bien; unregistered Baptists in Thanh Hoa; Duong Van Minh in Tuyen Quang, Ha Giang and Cao Bang; and ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands; reported administrative difficulties and an inability to access social welfare benefits. There were cases in which individuals from these groups stated that local authorities told them the “difficulties would go away” if they recanted their faith. Duong Van Minh followers in Cao Bang Province, for example, said local authorities denied new residential registrations and subsequently denied or delayed approval of businesses for those Duong Van Minh followers who lacked residential registration. Local authorities required Duong Van Minh

followers to sign a commitment to stop following Duong Van Minh if they wanted to receive assistance the authorities provided to ethnic minority households to construct housing. In many cases, the individuals said they assumed authorities discriminated against them because of their faith.

On February 22, the Central Commission for Propaganda and Education of the Communist Party issued guidance on ethnic and religious issues. Among its key contents relating to religion was an affirmation of the state’s respect for and guarantee of religious freedom that noted that religions are equal with each other and before the law. The guidance also stressed the state’s determination to combat those who act against the Communist Party, the state, and “solidarity” under the cover of religion. Numerous state officials, the GCRA, Ministry of Information and Communication, Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam Fatherland Front, local authorities, and others helped to disseminate the key messages of the guidance. In connection with issuing the guidance, state officials, state-run media, and progovernment websites highlighted the foundation and operation of “illegal religious groups” that, they said, conducted activities that went against well-established and well-recognized religions and what they called “fine national traditions.”

The government continued efforts to deepen knowledge about the LBR among government officials and religious adherents. Authorities also called for registered and recognized religious organizations to share publicly more information about their dogma and belief systems in an effort to persuade religious adherents to affiliate with established faith groups rather than with “new religious movements” or groups about which the government lacked information.

State-run media and progovernment blogs continued to accuse religious leaders and members who were vocal in their opposition to the government of exploiting religion for personal gain and of “colluding with hostile forces with the purpose of inciting public disorder and acting against the Communist Party and State.” On July 12, *Propaganda and Education* magazine, a publication of the Communist Party, published an article criticizing outspoken priests. The article labeled such priests “extremists” and asserted their criticism was fabricated or based on distorted information in order to tarnish the Communist Party and state, “to sow seeds of division,” and “to disrupt social order.”

State-run media and progovernment websites sometimes equated particular Christian denominations and other religious groups, often ones associated with ethnic groups such as the Vang Chu H’mong in the Northwest Highlands, Ha Mon Catholics and Degar Montagnard Protestants in the Central Highlands, and Khmer Krom in the southwestern region, with separatist movements, blaming them for political, economic, and social problems.

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 group.” Some progovernment websites continued sharing sensational stories about Duong Van Minh’s leading a depraved life and misappropriating contributions of his followers for personal use.

A National Assembly deputy, Major General Sung Thin Co, at a National Assembly meeting in March criticized local officials for a “lack of responsibility and understanding about the Duong Van Minh group” and for turning it into an illegal organization. According to Co, Duong Van Minh and his group helped H’mong to modify what he called outdated and burdensome traditions. Progovernment websites heavily criticized General Co’s statement.

Several provincial-government, state-run, and progovernment websites continued referring to Falun Gong as an “evil-way religion” and an “extremist religious group.” Many progovernment websites associated Falun Gong with acts against the Communist Party and the state and with having a hostile political agenda. Some accused Falun Gong of doing harm to traditional culture and disrupting the social order and public safety. During the year, local police in several provinces, including Hanoi, Yen Bai, Quang Binh, Can Tho, An Giang, Tien Giang, and Tra Vinh, disrupted gatherings of Falun Gong practitioners and confiscated their publications and other items. In a number of cases, local police summoned the practitioners to local police stations for interrogation or fined them for violating COVID-19-related restrictions. On July 7, local authorities of Tan Hung commune, Cai Be District, Tien Giang Province fined seven Falun Gong practitioners more than 50 million dong (\$2,200) for violating social distancing regulations when they were found gathering at the house of a practitioner. On September 29, local police of Tan Xa commune, Thach That District, Hanoi city summoned two Falun Gong practitioners for disseminating materials relating to the group. Local police confiscated nearly 170 publications and items relating to Falun Gong and required them to stop the dissemination of similar materials.

During the year, authorities at the central to local levels encouraged the engagement of recognized religious groups in charitable and healthcare activities. Many religious groups and religious adherents directly organized and ran these activities or joined with authorities and other organizations and individuals to do so. Religious groups also contributed to COVID-19-related funding and communication campaigns. Thousands of members of different religious organizations volunteered to work at field hospitals, directly taking care of COVID-19 victims or otherwise assisting persons in need.

In what observers stated was a growing trend, 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 anecdotally 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. Religious leaders said that religious belief itself did not lead to official discrimination, but rather it was the implication of being affiliated with any type of extralegal group that could attract additional scrutiny from authorities. Practitioners of various registered religious groups served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. In May, one Catholic priest and four VBS monks were elected to the 499-member National Assembly. Many nationally recognized religious organizations, such as the VBS, as well as other clergy and religious followers, were members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. 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 Buddhist, they generally did not publicly discuss their religious affiliation.

During the year, the GCRA initiated a three-year review of the LBR and its implementing decree in numerous provinces. The National Assembly Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, Adolescence and Children and the Vietnam Fatherland Front also met with local authorities and leaders of religious organizations to oversee implementation of the law. During the year, authorities conducted many of the training sessions and inspections related to the review online. On July 24, GCRA Buddhism Department Director Nguyen Phuc Nguyen gave a presentation about the LBR and its implementing decree at the VBS online proselytizing center. The National Assembly Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, Adolescence and Children on October 8 worked with Tuyen Quang authorities to share information about the implementation of the laws in the field of belief and religions, among other legal rights and obligations.

Although the law prohibited publishing 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 other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M’ong, 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 continued to report authorities permitted it to import sufficient copies of the Book of Mormon, although at year’s end, the Church was still working with the GCRA to import additional faith-based periodicals.

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 these education programs in recent years. Students continued to participate in online training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy when many pagodas could not organize offline training, due to COVID-19.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of conflicts, at times violent, between members of unregistered and registered or recognized religious groups or between religious adherents and nonbelievers. Religious activists blamed the authorities for “manipulating” members of recognized religious groups and accused undercover government agents and proxies of causing these conflicts to intimidate or suppress the activities of unregistered groups.

On October 14, the Ministry of Information and Communication fined “Rap Nha Lam” 45 million dong (\$2,000) for producing and disseminating a music clip insulting Gautama Buddha following strong protests of Buddhist communities and the public against the clip.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Representatives of the embassy 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 GCRA, and other government offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and 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, Charge d’Affaires, and other embassy and consulate general officials continued to urge 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. They also sought greater freedom for recognized and registered religious groups, advocated for access to religious materials and clergy for persons who were incarcerated, and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. Embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases of abuses, as well as of government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups,

independent Cao Dai, and ethnic minority house churches with the GCRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial and local authorities. U.S. government officials continued to call for the increased registration of church congregations around the country and for improvement in registration policies to make them more uniform and transparent. In addition, U.S. officials urged the government to peacefully resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious groups.

The Department of State senior official for international religious freedom raised these issues during the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in November, and raised specific concerns about implementation of the LBR, the status of religious believers detained or imprisoned, property issues involving religious groups, and the situation of ethnic religious minority groups.

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 March 25, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City met with Archbishop Nguyen Chi Linh, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, during her visit to Thua Thien-Hue Province. On April 12, the Ambassador and the Consul General met with Pastor Le Quoc Huy, General Secretary of the Vietnam Evangelical Alliance, in Ho Chi Minh City. On May 24, the Consul General met with Deputy Patriarch of the VBS Thich Tri Quang on the occasion of Vesak.

Embassy and consulate general officials 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 leaders and members of numerous religious communities, including recognized, registered, and unregistered organizations.

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