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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2024 - Vietnam

NOT FREE

19

/ 100

Political Rights 4 / 40

Civil Liberties 15 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

19 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Vietnam is a one-party state, dominated for decades by the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Although some independent candidates are technically allowed to run in legislative elections, most are banned in practice. Freedom of expression, religious freedom, and civil society activism are tightly restricted. The authorities have increasingly cracked down on citizens' use of social media and the internet to voice dissent and share uncensored information.

Key Developments in 2023

- President Nguyễn Xuân Phúc was forced to resign amid a far-reaching anticorruption crackdown in January after the party deemed him to be responsible for “violations and wrongdoing” committed by officials beneath him. He was replaced by Võ Văn Thưởng, who became Vietnam’s youngest-ever president after being elected by the parliament in March.
- In September, a top government official admitted that a June incident—in which two armed groups of about 40 people attacked the headquarters of two southern communes—was caused in part by

state mismanagement and high levels of inequality. Nearly 100 people had been detained in connection with the attacks as of July.

- The government intensified its crackdown on journalists, activists, and other dissidents during the year. Several prominent environmentalists were jailed in a new crackdown on environmental experts, and numerous other activists were given prison sentences on charges related to their activism.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The president is elected by the National Assembly for a five-year term, and is responsible for appointing the prime minister, who is confirmed by the legislature. However, all selections for top executive posts are predetermined in practice by the CPV's Politburo and Central Committee.

In 2021, Nguyễn Phú Trọng was reelected to a third term as the CPV's general secretary, despite reports that he suffered from significant health problems and party rules barring general secretaries from serving more than two terms. The National Assembly formally confirmed Phạm Minh Chính, a hard-line security official, as prime minister and Nguyễn Xuân Phúc as state president.

Nguyễn Xuân Phúc was forced to resign as president amid a far-reaching anticorruption crackdown in January 2023 after the party found him responsible for "violations and wrongdoing" committed by officials beneath him. The parliament elected Võ Văn Thưởng as Vietnam's youngest-ever president in March.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

Elections to the 499-seat Quốc Hội, or National Assembly, are tightly controlled by the CPV, which won 485 seats in the 2021 balloting. Candidates who were technically independent, but were in fact vetted by the CPV, took the other 14 seats.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

The electoral laws and framework ensure that the CPV, the only legally recognized party, dominates every election. The party controls all

electoral bodies and vets all candidates, resulting in the disqualification of those who are genuinely independent.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, 0 / and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of 4 these competing parties or groupings?

The CPV enjoys a monopoly on political power, and no other parties are allowed to operate legally. Members of illegal opposition parties are subject to arrest and imprisonment.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its 0 / support or gain power through elections? 4

The structure of the one-party system precludes any democratic transfer of power. The Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), responsible for vetting all candidates for the National Assembly, is ostensibly an alliance of organizations representing the people, but in practice acts as an arm of the CPV.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces 0 / that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that 4 employ extrapolitical means?

The overarching dominance of the CPV effectively excludes the public from any genuine political participation.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, 1 / religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full 4 political rights and electoral opportunities?

Although members of ethnic minority groups are nominally represented within the CPV, they are rarely allowed to rise to senior positions, and the CPV leadership prevents effective advocacy on issues affecting minority populations. Vietnam has enacted policies and strategies aimed at boosting women's political participation, but in practice the interests of women are poorly represented in government. The 2021 legislative elections featured the first openly gay candidate in modern Vietnam's history, though he did not win.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

The CPV leadership, which is not freely elected or accountable to the public, determines government policy and the legislative agenda.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

CPV and government leaders have acknowledged growing public discontent with corruption, and there has been an increase in corruption-related arrests in recent years. Multiple senior officials, including members of the Central Committee, have faced party disciplinary action and jail time. In June 2022, the health minister, the mayor of Hanoi, the head of the Hanoi Center for Disease Control, and dozens of other officials were dismissed from their posts and arrested in connection with a scandal that included price-fixing and bribery related to COVID-19 test kits.

The authorities' crackdown on corruption intensified in 2023. Several top officials were arrested or forced to leave office in relation to corruption allegations during the year. Two deputy prime ministers were formally dismissed in January; both had ties to individuals accused of corruption. Later that month, then president Nguyễn Xuân Phúc resigned from office after the ruling party found him responsible for "violations and wrongdoing" committed by officials beneath him. In July 2023, a Vietnamese court convicted 54 people on corruption charges, including bribery and fraud, in relation to a scandal over COVID-19 repatriation flights. Those convicted included a number of high-ranking officials.

Despite the recent crackdowns, enforcement of anticorruption laws is often selective and linked to political rivalries. Many top officials who have been detained or jailed belonged to a different CPV faction than that of Trọng, the general secretary. The CPV does not tolerate journalistic investigations, independent courts, or other autonomous bodies that might serve as external checks on corruption within the party.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

The CPV leadership operates with considerable opacity. The provisions of a 2016 access to information law are relatively weak. While the government sometimes consults or partners with certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent journalists and civil society activists are not permitted to scrutinize or critique government activities, and they routinely face criminal penalties for doing so.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Although the constitution recognizes freedom of the press, journalists and bloggers are constrained by numerous repressive laws and decrees. The criminal code prohibits speech that is critical of the government, while a 2006 decree prescribes fines for any publication that denies revolutionary achievements, spreads “harmful” information, or exhibits “reactionary ideology.” Decree 72, issued in 2013, gave the state sweeping new powers to restrict speech on blogs and social media. The state controls all print and broadcast media.

A 2018 cybersecurity law requires companies like Facebook and Google to store information about Vietnamese users in Vietnam and allows the government, in collaboration with technology firms, to block access to a broad range of news and information that is deemed a threat to national security. Although Hanoi has complained at times that global technology firms are not doing enough to block problematic content, in practice the companies have reportedly complied with most of the government’s requests.

A decree issued in 2022 detailed the implementation of the cybersecurity law’s data localization requirements, and the regulation took effect later that year. The Ministry of Information and Communications also announced in 2022 that major tech platforms would be required to take down “false” content within 24 hours of an official request or face serious sanctions. The limit had previously been set at 48 hours.

Arrests, assaults, and criminal convictions of journalists and bloggers continued to be reported in large numbers in 2023. According to rights groups, at least 60 bloggers and activists have been convicted of “making, storing, and disseminating materials against the state” since 2018. The Vietnamese government has also increasingly used rendition to grab journalists, bloggers, and other dissidents from outside of Vietnam. In April 2023, Vietnamese journalist and blogger Duong Van Thai—who had lived as a refugee in Thailand since 2020—disappeared in Bangkok. Several days later, Vietnamese state media reported that he had been arrested while allegedly trying to reenter Vietnam; international rights organizations have alleged that Thai was abducted in Thailand. The journalist was charged with “propaganda against the state” and was kept in prison long after his temporary detention was supposed to have ended in August. Thai remained in state custody at year’s end. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least 19 journalists were imprisoned for their work in Vietnam as of December 2023.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 1 / 4

Religious freedom remains restricted. All religious groups and most individual clergy members are required to join a party-controlled supervisory body and obtain permission for most activities. The 2016 Law on Belief and Religion reinforced registration requirements, allowed extensive state interference in religious groups' internal affairs, and gave authorities broad discretion to penalize unsanctioned religious activity.

Unregistered and unrecognized religious groups face routine harassment, including violence, criminal charges, and property damage. In 2022, six members of the Peng Lei Buddhist House, which had refused to register with the official Buddhist organization, were sentenced to a combined 23 years and six months in prison for "abusing democratic freedoms."

In July 2023, the Vietnamese government agreed to allow the Vatican to appoint a resident representative to the country—the first since the war ended in 1975—and open an office for the Holy See in Vietnam.

D3 0-4 pts

**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free 1 /
from extensive political indoctrination? 4**

Academic freedom is limited. University professors face punishment if they criticize government policies or fail to adhere to party views when teaching or writing on political topics.

D4 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or 1 /
other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4**

Although citizens enjoy more freedom in private discussions than in the past, authorities continue to attack and imprison those who openly criticize the state, including on social media. The government engages in increasingly sophisticated surveillance of private online activity and in 2023, stepped up its surveillance of private social media activity. As a result, authorities have been more able to trace and take down purportedly false content, which has chilled discourse, as well as to track citizens' social media usage, which has led to the arrests of people who have criticized the government online.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Freedom of assembly is tightly restricted. Organizations must apply for official permission to assemble, and police routinely use excessive force to disperse unauthorized demonstrations.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 0 / 4

A small but active community of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promotes environmental conservation, land rights, women's development, and public health. However, human rights organizations are generally banned, and those who engage in any advocacy that the authorities perceive as hostile risk imprisonment.

Activists and NGO employees sometimes face arrest and prosecution for their work. During 2023, several prominent environmentalists were jailed in a new crackdown on environmental experts, and numerous other activists were given prison sentences on charges related to their activism. In May, democracy activist Tran Van Bang was sentenced to eight years in prison followed by three years of probation for criticizing the government online. His sentence was upheld upon appeal in August. In May, an activist who posted a video parodying a leading Vietnamese official who had eaten a steak topped with 24-karat gold—a sign to many of the corruption in the ruling party—was sentenced to more than five years in jail for “propaganda against the state.”

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4

The Vietnam General Conference of Labor (VGCL), the only legal labor federation, is controlled by the CPV.

A revision of the labor code that took effect in 2021 would theoretically allow workers to form their own representative bodies, but the change had little effect in practice, and independent unions outside the VGCL still face enormous obstacles to legal registration.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

The judiciary is subservient to the CPV, which controls the courts at all levels. This control is especially evident in politically sensitive criminal prosecutions, with judges sometimes displaying greater impartiality in civil cases.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Constitutional guarantees of due process are generally not upheld. Defendants have a legal right to counsel, but lawyers are scarce, and many are reluctant to take on cases involving sensitive topics. Defense lawyers do not have the right to call witnesses, and often report

insufficient time to meet with their clients. In national security cases, police can detain suspects for up to 20 months without access to counsel.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

There is little protection from the illegitimate use of force by state authorities, and security personnel are known to abuse suspects and prisoners, sometimes resulting in death or serious injury. Prominent dissident and political prisoner Dang Dinh Bach alleged in September 2023 that he had been badly abused in prison. That same month, a man accused of theft died in the hospital after being detained and allegedly beaten by police. The death penalty can be applied for crimes other than murder, including drug trafficking; executions are carried out, but related statistics are considered a state secret.

In June 2023, two groups of 40 armed individuals carried out attacks on two communes in Đắk Lắk province, killing nine people. Authorities labeled the incident—allegedly carried out by members of marginalized Indigenous groups collectively known as Montagnards—a terrorist attack. As of July, nearly 100 people had been detained in connection with the attacks. In an unusual move, in September, a high-ranking government official admitted that the incident was caused in part by state mismanagement and high levels of inequality in Vietnam.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Members of ethnic and religious minority groups face societal discrimination, and some local officials restrict their access to schooling and jobs. They also sometimes encounter harassment by authorities seeking to suppress dissent and suspected links to exile groups.

Men and women receive similar treatment in the legal and education systems. Economic opportunities for women have grown, though they are still subject to discrimination on wages and promotions.

The law does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and societal discrimination remains a problem. Nevertheless, LGBT+ pride events are held annually across the country.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

Freedom of movement is nominally protected by law. Residency rules limit access to services for those who migrate within the country without

permission, though this system is not consistently enforced. Authorities have restricted the movement of political dissidents and members of ethnic minorities on national security or other grounds. People detained on grounds of being political dissidents or activists in any way generally have their movements then restricted, and have files created on them by the authorities, who continue to detain them. Independent reports indicate that the Vietnamese government is holding at least 160 political prisoners, including human rights activists, as of year-end 2023.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

All land is owned by the state, which grants land-use rights and leases to farmers, developers, and others. The seizure of land for economic development projects is often accompanied by violence, accusations of corruption, and prosecutions of those who protest.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

The government generally does not place explicit restrictions on personal social freedoms. Men and women have equal rights pertaining to matters such as marriage and divorce under the law. In 2015, Vietnam repealed a legal ban on same-sex marriage, but the government does not grant such unions legal recognition.

Domestic violence against women remains common, and the law calls for the state to initiate criminal as opposed to civil procedures only when the victim is seriously injured.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Human trafficking and mistreatment of laborers are major problems in Vietnam. In its 2023 *Trafficking in Persons* report, the US State Department upgraded Vietnam from the lowest tier to the Tier 2 Watch List, citing the government's achievements during the reporting period, which included "initiating more investigations, prosecuting and convicting more traffickers, and initiating criminal proceedings against allegedly complicit officials."

Vietnamese migrant workers are vulnerable to recruitment for forced labor abroad in a variety of industries, and debt bondage has been prevalent in recent years. Enforcement of legal safeguards against child labor and exploitative or hazardous working conditions remains poor.

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