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2022 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. For example, the Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups.

Most religious leaders in urban areas reported authorities generally permitted them to practice so long as they cooperated with authorities and acted in accordance with legal and administrative requirements that apply to religious organizations. Unrecognized religious denominations operating in the Central and Northwest Highlands and in certain parts of the Mekong Delta – especially those with a predominantly ethnic minority following – were, however, more likely to report harassment from government officials. Recognized religious denominations in these areas reported rapid growth and generally fewer problems with officials.

Many members of religious groups targeted for harassment were also involved in human rights advocacy activities or had links to individuals and organizations that were critical of the government.

In May, authorities in Tuyen Quang Province prosecuted and sentenced 15 ethnic H'mong followers of the late Duong Van Minh, a H'mong spiritual leader who died in 2021, to two to four years in prison on charges of "acting against a person on duty" or "violating provisions on safety in crowded areas." These individuals were among 56 H'mong

followers detained at the funeral of the late Duong Van Minh in December 2021 when they protested local authorities' dispersing the gathering on the grounds of pandemic-related social-distancing restrictions. Several followers reported police beat 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.

Similar to previous years, civil society organizations reported crackdowns on members of unregistered groups, particularly in the Central Highlands, Northwest Highlands, Southwest, and Central regions. On July 20, six members of the Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe, formerly known as Peng Lai Temple, were sentenced to three to five years in prison for "abusing democratic freedoms." Religious leaders reported the intervention of government authorities in the internal affairs of their organizations, including in the election and appointment of leaders or transfer of clergy. Religious freedom activists again said local authorities approved registration applications based more on religious groups' perspective on politics than on religious doctrine.

For the fourth year in a row, authorities did not recognize any new religious organizations, including chapters of larger, previously approved groups. During the year, the Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC) filed approximately 40 registration requests for collective religious practice in northern mountain provinces, but few were successful. One pastor reported that when he tried to register a new meeting point for his congregation, local authorities requested a list of his church's members. The pastor later learned that subsequent visits by police to his church's members discouraged others from joining his congregation. Many religious leaders across the country continued to report improving conditions compared with prior years, such as better relations between unregistered religious groups and local authorities, quicker approval of permits for religious events, and a reduction in aggressive forms of harassment, such as regular questioning and threats. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration said they were generally able to practice their beliefs with less government interference than unregistered groups. Members of some religious groups continued to report that certain 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 again did not hold any government official accountable for failure to follow legal deadlines and written registration notification requirements contained 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. Independent Cao Dai adherents in the

Southwest region reportedly faced harassment from registered state-sanctioned Cao Dai adherents. Independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) monks in Cu Chi District of Ho Chi Minh City also reported harassment from the local community. In both cases, police officers reportedly neither intervened nor held those responsible for the harassment accountable. Religious activists blamed authorities for “manipulating” recognized religious groups by interfering in their elections and appointments of their leadership and accused their agents or proxies of causing conflicts in order to suppress the activities of unregistered groups.

The U.S. Ambassador, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, other senior U.S. embassy and consulate general officials, and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom regularly urged authorities to allow 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 lacking recognition or registration. They stressed to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship. They advocated religious freedom in visits across the country, including to the Northwest Highlands, Mekong River Delta, and Central Vietnam. With the Government Committee on Religious Affairs (GCRA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and provincial and local authorities, U.S. government officials raised specific cases of abuses, as well as of government harassment, against Catholics, Protestant groups including independent Pentecostal groups, the 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. They urged the government to resolve outstanding land rights disputes fairly and peacefully 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 the leadership of both registered and unregistered religious groups and attended religious ceremonies to demonstrate support for religious freedom.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Vietnam on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. In December, the Ambassador informed the government of its inclusion on the Special Watch List and urged it to improve efforts to protect religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 103.8 million (midyear 2022). The government's 2019 National Population and Housing Census reported approximately 13 million religious adherents, accounting for 14 percent of the total population at the time. The census noted Roman Catholics represented the largest number of adherents, with six million followers, accounting for 45 percent of the total number of religious 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 0.2 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 60 percent practice Bani Islam, and approximately 40 percent are Sunni); 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 0.3 percent of the population. A small, mostly foreign, Jewish population resides in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

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 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 persons 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 individuals, 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.

According to the GCRA, the government recognizes 36 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, 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 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 "certificates of registration 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 are related to religious belief.

The law requires individuals to register collective religious practice 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 receives 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.

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 require advance approval or registration from authorities at the central 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 without administrative authority (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.

The government does not permit religious institutions 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) and faith adherents 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 solely 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, summoning representatives for periodic meetings or threatening or imposing administrative fines to pressure them to comply with government demands, including seeking registration and ceasing illegal gatherings. On July 3, local authorities of Ban Giang Commune, Tam Duong District, Lai Chau Province, subjected 21 H'mong Protestants who were gathering at a house church for Sunday services to a fine of 15 million dong (approximately \$640). Because religion, ethnicity, and politics were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On July 13, police clashed with local residents, many from a Catholic community, seeking to prevent the demolition of a road at Nghi Thuan Commune in central Nghe An Province. Police arrested at least 10 protestors, accusing them of "acting against persons on duty" and "disrupting public order." The protestors stated they feared that the destruction of the road would lead to the expansion of an industrial zone that would encroach on parish land. Nghe An authorities told media that the destruction of the road for an industrial park was carried out in accordance with due process, served the public interest, and had strong support from most of the public.

In May, authorities in Tuyen Quang Province sentenced 15 ethnic H'mong followers of the late Duong Van Minh, to two to four years in prison on charges of "acting against a person on duty" and "violating provisions on safety in crowded areas." Authorities did not allow these individuals to meet their families until after their appellate hearings in late July. On

appeal, authorities reduced their sentences by three months. Reportedly, authorities pressured the defendants against retaining a lawyer selected by their families and instead urged them to hire lawyers assigned by the authorities. Authorities confined 41 Duong Van Minh followers for a total of 42 days from 2021 to 2022 in COVID-19 quarantine centers, where those detained reported police interrogated them for hours on their religious activities and coerced them, including through severe beatings, to renounce their affiliation with the Duong Van Minh group. Several followers reported police beat 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. The GCRA reported the government did not consider Duong Van Minh a religious organization and that some members of the group violated laws related to construction, elections, public officials carrying out their duties, and pandemic control measures.

On July 20, authorities sentenced six members of the Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe, formerly known as Peng Lai Temple, to three to five years in prison for “abusing democratic freedoms.” The court found that the Zen Hermitage members defamed and slandered a senior leader of the VBS, Venerable Thich Nhat Tu, and distorted Buddhist doctrine. The Zen Hermitage members and their lawyers argued that the evidence presented at trial constituted commentary taken out of context and that the Zen Hermitage members never claimed to be Buddhists.

During the investigation phase, police examined allegations that Zen Hermitage community members engaged in incest after a local television station broadcast a documentary claiming the children at the temple were not orphans but were actually living with their nun birth mothers at the temple compound. Members of the Zen Hermitage reported that police forcibly took DNA samples of adults and minors within the community three times without their consent. The members denied the incest claims, saying the nuns were not biologically related to the children, but that they adopted the children to facilitate the issuance of birth certificates so the children could attend school. By year’s end, police were unable to confirm the reports of incest, despite a lengthy investigation and the multiple forced DNA tests.

One nun within the community reported that local commune police forced her to undergo a gynecological exam by a male doctor at a local hospital. The community’s lawyers filed a complaint regarding the forced gynecological exam with central and provincial authorities, who provided no explanation for the action but referred the case back to the local police for investigation. Local police reportedly assigned one of the officers who forced the nun to undergo the exam to interrogate her about her complaint. The nun reported feeling intimidated by the presence of this officer and was scared to answer questions about her complaint.

The GCRA reported the investigation into the Zen Hermitage was done in accordance with the law, including the DNA testing, and denied allegations of police misconduct.

On October 26, local authorities in Na Ngoi Commune, Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, detained three H'mong Protestants who filmed other members of the local community harvesting the Protestants' rice fields without their permission. The detainees' families stated they believed the authorities encouraged other community members to carry out the filming. By year's end, authorities had not informed the families where the detainees were being held. One religious leader in the community reported being threatened by local authorities with arrest and confiscation of livestock if he did not renounce his faith. In August, authorities detained a H'mong preacher from this Protestant group while he was on the way home after attending a training session in Dien Bien Province. In Nghe An, two individuals reported being threatened with arrest if they did not renounce their Protestant faith.

In May, the government sentenced ethnic Ede Christian Y Wo Nie to four years in prison for "abusing democratic freedoms." As evidence of his guilt, authorities said he participated in online training on human rights and religious freedom, sent reports on the country's human rights and religious freedom violations to international organizations, and contacted diplomats.

Local authorities in some parts of the Central Highlands reportedly intimidated and threatened violence against members of certain unregistered Protestant groups that reported human rights violations to international NGOs or UN bodies, or commemorated international days focused on religious freedom. Reports indicated authorities pressured members of these groups to recant their affiliation with unregistered religious groups the officials accused of opposing the government or to join a registered religious organization. For example, three ethnic minority Christians reported being summoned, arrested, and fined by police in Dak Lak Province in May and June related to inquiries about registering a religious group, commemorating International Religious Freedom Day in 2021, and communication with international religious freedom NGOs.

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. A 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 reports of local authorities banning and disrupting gatherings and confiscating publications of various religious groups. These included well-established ones like the Catholic Church and less known and unregistered groups

such as Pure Hoa Hao in An Giang, Yiguandao in Thua Thien Hue, Evangelical Church of Christ in Dak Lak and Phu Yen, and Falun Gong in Lam Dong, and 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 Thien Am Ben Bo Vu Tru (the Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe) in Long An Province.

During the year, local police in Lam Dong and Binh Duong disrupted gatherings of Falun Gong practitioners and confiscated their publications and other items. Local police summoned some practitioners to local police stations for interrogation or fined them. On February 13, local police of Cu Mgar District, Dak Lak Province, fined four Falun Gong practitioners for distribution of illegal publications. In April and May, many Falun Gong practitioners at Lam Vien Square, in Dalat, reported local security officials disrupted their service, and at times insulted and attacked them. Although local security officials ceased this harassment after practitioners complained to provincial police and the Ministry of Public Security, the practitioners reported continued interference by plainclothes individuals.

According to reports from the NGO Boat People SOS, during the year there were at least 95 incidents where local police summoned, questioned, harassed, or threatened members of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ, Good News Mission Church, International Degar Church, and other house churches, at local police stations or their residences. Boat People SOS NGO 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 to 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.

A member of the International Degar Church in Gia Lai Province reported that during the year, he was interrogated by police, detained, and beaten multiple times while authorities repeatedly demanded that he renounce affiliation with his church. He stated that in August, police burned his Bible and other religious materials and placed the embers on his face. He also reported police hung him from the ceiling and beat him with a stick for hours.

In June, local police in Dak Lak Province detained and interrogated three ethnic minority Christians after they requested information from local authorities on how to legally register their independent house church.

In July, police detained and interrogated 1926 Pure Cao Dai member Nguyen Xuan Mai upon her return from an international religious freedom summit in Washington, D.C. Mai reported police and airport security officials strip searched her and detained and questioned her at the airport for six hours, during which time they took her mobile phone, checked her messages, printed out all of her emails, and forced her to sign documents stating she would not contact international organizations, before releasing her.

In November, An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist founder Phan Van Thu died in Gia Trung Prison in Gia Lai Province while serving a life sentence for national security charges tied to religious activities. His family reported authorities refused to provide him proper medical attention and did not adequately respond to his requests for treatment.

For the fourth year in a row, authorities did not recognize any new religious organizations. Many religious groups continued to report that the registration of collective religious practice 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 approval of applications.

According to the GCRA, by year's end, authorities granted more than 3,700 registrations of collective religious practice (meeting-points) across the country, including 67 for foreign nationals staying in the country legally. The GCRA did not report province-level statistics. 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.

The law required an unregistered religious group to have legal premises for collective religious practice to be eligible for registration. Many religious leaders pointed out that they could not obtain the certificate indicating they had a legal premises because unregistered religious groups could not buy or rent property. There were reports authorities intervened with property owners or notary offices to prevent unregistered religious groups from securing legal premises or obtain a certificate indicating they had a legal premise. Given the legal and administrative

barriers to buying or renting property in the name of religious groups, there were reports of religious groups buying or renting their members' private properties as a mitigation strategy.

Authorities attributed delays and denials of registration applications to applicants' completing forms incorrectly or providing incomplete 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, which 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.

In several cases, local authorities harassed members of unregistered local congregations. There were multiple reports of such harassment from ethnic minority Christians of independent churches such as the Evangelical Church of Christ, Good News Mission Church and Independent House Church in Dak Lak and Phu Yen. Multiple reports said authorities summoned members of unregistered churches to police stations, where police told them to leave their unregistered churches to join the state-sanctioned Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South. Ethnic minority Christians also reported police prevented them from gathering during important religious events or forced them to take down their decorations for Christmas. Police reportedly restricted their movements when an international delegation visited the country. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN) reported that obtaining 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, of its 1,300 local branches and meeting points, the government registered 42 local branches and 800 meeting points, an increase of 19 local branches and 300 meeting points over the prior year. The ECVN reported it experienced difficulties registering its meeting points with local authorities in Nghe An and Dien Bien Provinces.

During the year, the VBC filed approximately 40 registration requests for collective religious practice in northern mountainous provinces, but few were successful, despite the group's attempts to facilitate local

applications by channeling applications through church leadership to the GCRA in Hanoi. The VBC reported registration difficulties in Son La, Lao Cai, Dien Bien, and Yen Bai Provinces. Despite lacking registration, many of these meeting-points were able to conduct collective religious practice without problems.

Authorities required most, if not all, applicants seeking 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's political ideology. 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.

Authorities continued to impose a rigid upper-management structure on religious organizations, according to reports from local religious leaders. 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.

According to Catholic leaders, parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations continued to face difficulty registering with provincial authorities due to an 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 Hoa Binh, 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).

There were reports of local authorities requiring a list of all members and their biographies from religious groups seeking registration. Religious

leaders expressed concern that the lists, which were not required by law, would be used to target members for harassment or limit the ability of groups to register new members in the future. One pastor reported that when he tried to register a new meeting point for his congregation, local authorities requested a list of his church's members. The pastor later learned that subsequent visits by police to the church's members discouraged others from joining his congregation.

The VBC reported authorities did not approve registration requests for 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: the VBC, United Presbyterian Church in Vietnam, and the Full Gospel Church of Vietnam. 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 or legal requirements. The GCRA continued to deny public access to pending registration applications.

In September, Hai Phong City police issued a statement advising residents that the "Jesus Church" was operating in many localities without permission and warning them against joining the group, calling it an "evil religion." The church, founded around 2017 by an ethnic H'mong from Laos currently residing in another country, is concentrated in the provinces of Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Son La, Lao Cai, Yen Bai, and Thanh Hoa.

Religious leaders reported local authorities continued to obstruct the assignment and transfer of religious leaders to unregistered local congregations, particularly leaders assigned to provinces outside of their home provinces or leaders the government considered outspoken on social and political issues.

There were reports authorities intervened in the election or appointment of leaders for several religious organizations during the year. These interventions included authorities vetting lists of candidates, questioning candidates, and pressuring the leaders of religious organizations to accept candidates the government deemed acceptable.

Authorities monitored, prevented, or disrupted the gatherings of some unregistered groups and harassed their members, including through confiscating their property, intimidation, questioning, and restricting their movement.

Early in the year, many religious groups cancelled religious ceremonies and services or conducted them online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were reports of authorities disrupting gatherings that violated pandemic restrictions, including religious gatherings. Leaders of some

religious groups stated they believed that government officials arbitrarily applied a higher level of scrutiny when enforcing public health restrictions on gatherings of religious groups.

Authorities banned pastors and members of the Revival Ekklesia Mission Church from gathering in May 2021 while they investigated a cluster of COVID-19 cases within the congregation. Although authorities suspended the investigation in January, by year's end, they had not reinstated the group's authorization to gather, despite government officials saying they would do so multiple times throughout the year. In September, local authorities, citing violations for gathering without permits, fined church pastors for distributing school supplies to poor children. Local police surveilled the homes of the congregation's leaders and interrogated them about meetings with foreign government representatives. The GCRA reported legal proceedings against the group were conducted in accordance with the law.

On February 20, the Communist Party Chairman of Vu Ban town Pham Hong Duc and Vice Chairman of Vu Ban town people's committee Pham Van Chien (Lac Son District, Hoa Binh Province), disrupted a Mass led by Hanoi Catholic Archbishop Vu Van Thien, reportedly to enforce public health restrictions and because the mass was held in an unregistered location. Church leaders reported the officials seized the microphone from the pulpit, an area that worshippers consider sacred. The GCRA said the government reprimanded and transferred the officials involved.

Following the death of Duong Van Minh in December 2021, local authorities in Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, Cao Bang, and Thai Nguyen Provinces prevented weekend gatherings of his followers throughout the year. Local police officers set up check points near the followers' gathering points and intimidated those seeking to enter for months after Minh's death. There were reports of local officials beating and threatening to detain Duong Van Minh followers who protested the authorities' intervention. According to state media, throughout the year following Duong Van Minh's death, state officials directed local authorities to "crack down" on the Duong Van Minh faith. A Ministry of Public Security-run news site in July stated its goal was to "fight, prevent, and proceed to eliminate the illegal Duong Van Minh organization" in Bac Kan Province. In August, the state-run Cao Bang Province Broadcasting Station confirmed that Bao Lam District authorities were "now fully mobilized to suppress the religion."

Religious leaders in urban areas reported authorities generally permitted them to practice as long as they acted in accordance with legal and administrative requirements that applied to religious organizations. 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. Many members of religious groups targeted for harassment were also involved in human rights advocacy activities or had links to individuals and organizations that were critical of the government. Central government authorities denied all allegations of abuse of religious freedom; there were no public reports that authorities took disciplinary actions against government officials violating religious freedom protections guaranteed by the law.

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 entered 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.

According to the friars of Thien An Monastery in Thua Thien, Hue Province, the relationship between the monastery and the provincial leadership improved, compared to previous years. Provincial authorities met with the monastery's leaders during the year to discuss a longstanding land dispute; the issue remained unresolved at year's end.

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 estimated only approximately one-fifth of its pastors had been recognized by the government.

According to family members, Catholic prisoners Le Dinh Luong in Nam Ha Prison, Ha Nam Province, Nguyen Nang Tinh in Prison 5 in Thanh Hoa Province, and Protestant prisoner Nguyen Trung Ton in Gia Trung Prison, Gia Lai Province, had improved access to the Bible and other religious materials. In November, prison officials said prisoners had access to religious materials in the library.

Authorities at An Diem Prison in Quang Nam Province refused to give Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Bac Truyen the original Hoa Hao sacred texts, according to Truyen's family. Instead, they provided him an edited version published by the state-sponsored Hoa Hao group. Family members reported that prison officials did not provide Truyen and other Hoa Hao Buddhist prisoners sufficient food that complied with their religiously mandated vegetarian diet.

On August 22, local police prevented ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands and Cao Dai followers in An Giang from observing the International Day to Commemorate Victims of Violence Based on their Religion or Belief.

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 were unable to organize in-person training, due to COVID-19.

Although the law prohibits publishing any 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'ngong, H'mong, C'ho, and English. Other published texts included works pertaining to ancestor worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai.

In April, the Ministry of Public Security, in cooperation with the GCRA, provided approximately 4,400 copies of 17 religious titles to 54 prisons across the country. The distributed publications included religious texts, including the Bible and several Buddhist texts, and publications on the country's religion-related laws and policies.

Media sources continued to report tension and disputes between Catholics and authorities in many areas, including Hanoi, Hoa Binh, 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 early November, Hanoi authorities deployed hundreds of police officers to Hoanh village, Dong Tam Commune, Hanoi, to support the renovation of a common house, a government-managed community space. Many Catholic parishioners protested its renovation, stating the common house was on land that belonged to the Catholic Church. Police officers set up checkpoints in the area and restricted protestors to their residences during working hours for days to ensure they did not disrupt the renovation.

Followers of Duong Van Minh reported local authorities in Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, Thai Nguyen, and Cao Bang Provinces destroyed at least 30 historical *Nha Don*, small structures used to store funeral-related items, since December 2021. By years end, only one altar, in Dong Hy District, Thai Nguyen Province, remained intact. Local officials in these four

provinces also pressured Duong Van Minh followers to disassemble their altars, which were designed in accordance with Duong Van Minh's instructions. In many cases, local officials broke into followers' residences, destroyed altars, and replaced them with portraits of Ho Chi Minh. Some followers reported that local officials continued to inspect their houses to confirm the altars had not been rebuilt. There were reports local officials confiscated funeral items and disrupted funerals that were conducted in accordance with Duong Van Minh's instructions. The local officials reportedly beat observers who filmed police when they destroyed altars or disrupted gatherings.

Provincial and local authorities continued to exercise eminent domain over land, including land occupied by 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. Some religious leaders reported that authorities did not intervene transparently, fairly, or effectively in many land disputes that involved religious organizations or believers, and that in most of these cases, religious organizations or believers were unsuccessful in retaining land use rights. Such disputes involved recognized, registered, and unregistered religious organizations.

State media and progovernment websites alleged that Catholic priests in many parishes illegally occupied or urged their parishioners to illegally use or occupy land. When in September Nguyen Dinh Thuc, pastor of the Loc My parish of the Diocese of Vinh, constructed a children's playing field near the church, authorities in Nghi Loc District, Nghe An Province, accused him of encroaching on the safety corridor of a dam. According to church officials, the land was a wetland lot on which residents often threw their garbage. Although earlier in the year, church officials informed the communal authorities before filling and leveling the land, authorities only verbally warned them about their concerns after the playing field was completed.

Government authorities warned the monks of UBCV Thien Quang Pagoda in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province that they planned to demolish the pagoda to build a canal. The authorities refused to issue permits for the monks to maintain and renovate the pagoda's facilities. On November 10, local authorities stopped the Thien Quang monks from repairing the roof, and 50 police officers removed the renovations that had already been completed. In the process, police caused further damage to the structure.

In October, the People's Committee of Ngoc Hoi District ordered Abbot Thich Nhat Phuoc of UBCV Son Linh Pagoda in Kon Tum Province to dismantle a building used as a temple within 45 days, citing it as illegal construction of a house on agricultural land. According to Radio Free Asia, Plei Kan town authorities ordered the abbot to comply with the request by

December 12; otherwise, they would destroy it and charge him the cost of the demolition. On December 13, police and dozens of local officials demolished UBCV Son Linh pagoda while Phuoc was away in another province. Police prevented the abbot's mother from entering the area to intervene. According to the abbot's mother, local government workers carried Buddha statues and worshiping tablets out of the pagoda and then tore down the wooden building with chainsaws, cranes, and excavators. In 2019, Ngoc Hoi District authorities demolished another temple structure built on the same grounds. Abbot Phuoc reported to Radio Free Asia that many individuals had built houses on agricultural land nearby but had not been forced to destroy them. The abbot said he believed authorities destroyed the pagoda because he refused to join the registered VBS.

In October, local authorities in Tam Binh District, Vinh Long Province, delivered a court order to the local Khmer Krom Buddhist community to demolish its mostly completed religious hall that was under construction, claiming the structure was built illegally. Khmer Krom members reported authorities had tried to prevent the community from constructing its religious hall since plans had begun in November 2020, despite initial support from local officials.

Religious communities of faith, including Con Dau Parish in Danang City and Loc Hung Garden in Ho Chi Minh City, reported unresolved land disputes with local authorities. Approximately 100 Con Dau parishioners continued to urge the government to provide adequate compensation for their forced eviction that took place in 2010. Although Loc Hung Garden residents met with local authorities to discuss compensation for their mass eviction in 2019, that dispute was also unresolved by year's end.

Members of some unregistered religious groups, including independent Pentecostals in Dien Bien, unregistered Baptists in Thanh Hoa, Duong Van Minh followers in Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, Thai Nguyen, and Cao Bang, and ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands, reported administrative difficulties and inability to access social welfare benefits. 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 adherents to sign a commitment to stop following Duong Van Minh if they wanted to receive assistance that 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.

There were multiple reports of government discrimination against individual faith adherents and religious groups across the country.

Members of some religious groups whose members were poor or were ethnic minorities continued to report that authorities denied them some of the legal benefits to which they were entitled. For example, in August, local authorities of Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, took back cows and buffalos that they provided to poor ethnic minorities who converted to Protestantism, according to local religious leaders.

Two H'mong Christians reported that in June, local authorities in Ky Son District seized their property and valuable assets after officials learned they were Protestant Christians. One H'mong said local officials gave his property to other local residents, who later accused him of "stealing their property."

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

Several ethnic minority Christians from the Central Highlands said local police refused to issue them identification documents and passports, citing the unstable nomadic lifestyle of members of their ethnic groups. Ethnic minority Christians from the Central Highlands also reported government officials denied passport requests because the Christians had been arrested for participating in protests in 2001 in the Central Highlands, and despite the fact that they had completed their prison terms and parole.

Many civil society advocates reported authorities prevented them from leaving the country to attend a regional Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference in Bali in November. Authorities at the airport reportedly told several participants who planned to attend that their COVID-19 vaccine documentation was not up to date, which the advocates denied.

Several H'mong in Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, reported being harassed, interrogated, and later banned from their villages for proselytizing. In June, local authorities monitored and harassed Lau Y Tong for weeks after she registered with ECVN in late May. She reported fleeing her village after refusing to sign a pledge recanting her faith that was demanded by local authorities.

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 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. Many nationally recognized religious organizations, such as the VBS, as well as other clergy and religious followers, were members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, a Communist Party organ. 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 resumés of the top three Communist Party of Vietnam leaders stated they followed no religion; while many senior party leaders were reported to hold strong religious beliefs, particularly Buddhist, they generally did not publicly discuss their religious affiliation.

State officials, local governments, state-run media, and progovernment websites continued affirming the state's respect for and guarantee of religious freedom, while warning about hostile forces acting against the state and doing harm to national traditions under the cover of religious freedom advocacy.

The government continued efforts to deepen knowledge about the LBR and religious policies 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." State-run media, including the *People's Police* newspaper of the Ministry of Public Security, *Propaganda and Education* magazine of the Vietnam Communist Party, and progovernment blogs such as Democracy Battlefield (Dau Truong Dan Chu), Youth Voice (Tieng noi tre), and Red Flag Association (Hoi Co Do) labeled vocal religious leaders "extremists" and asserted their criticism was fabricated or based on distorted information to tarnish the Communist Party and state, "to sow seeds of division," or "to disrupt social order." On June 28, for example, the online newspaper *Binh Phuoc* published an article criticizing Catholic priest Nguyen Dinh Thuc, in the Diocese of Vinh. The author stated Nguyen Dinh Thuc used the cover of being a priest to incite poorly educated parishioners to disrupt security and social order.

State-run media and progovernment websites sometimes equated certain 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, Degar ethnic minority 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 Duong Van Minh followers 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 leading a depraved life and misappropriating contributions of his followers for personal use. Some Duong Van Minh followers also reported that local officials denounced the group in conversations with local community members.

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, authorities at the central to local levels authorized and encouraged the engagement of recognized religious groups in charitable and healthcare activities and recognized their contributions to society in public praise. 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 gather for training. For example, in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding areas, city officials continued to allow Protestant house churches to operate drug rehabilitation centers. In a speech in Ho Chi Minh City before religious leaders in August, the Prime Minister praised the social contributions of religious communities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The GCRA continued a three-year review of the LBR and its implementing decree in numerous provinces. The National Assembly Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, Adolescents 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 training sessions and inspections related to the review online. The GCRA solicited input from registered religious groups on the Draft Decree on Administrative Sanctions in the field of Religion and Belief and the revision of Decree 162 guiding the implementation of the LBR. Religious leaders expressed concern that the decrees, if approved, would significantly hinder their communities' ability to practice their faith by providing local officials legal authority to administer fines for violations of the law.

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 and 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 January 10, in Ben Cau District, Tay Ninh Province, more than 30 members of the registered Cao Dai 1997 group interrupted a religious ceremony led by Nguyen Thanh Cong, a leader of the independent Cao Dai 1926 group. Cong said some of the Cao Dai 1997 group members attacked him and ripped his clothes off while police filmed the incident without acting.

After Le Tung Van, head of the Zen Hermitage at the Edge of the Universe, refused an offer to join the VBS, VBS leaders initiated a letter-writing campaign among its members to denounce the Zen Hermitage.

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 Communist Party of Vietnam leaders, including 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 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, and during a

prison visit in November, advocated access to religious materials and clergy for incarcerated persons 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. In November, consulate general officials observed the appeals trial of members of the Zen Hermitage at the Edge of the Universe in Long An Province. 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. U.S. government officials encouraged government officials to ensure proposed changes to the implementing decrees for the LBR were consistent with the country's international commitments related to religious freedom. In addition, U.S. government officials urged the government to resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious groups fairly and peacefully.

The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom raised these issues during the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue held in Hanoi in November, and raised specific concerns about implementation of the LBR, reports of faith adherents being coerced to recant their beliefs, 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 May 24, the Consul General attended the fourth General Assembly of the Vietnam Baptist Convention in Ho Chi Minh City. On May 12, the Consul General met with Supreme 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 Highlands and the central coast, 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.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Vietnam on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. In December, the Ambassador informed the government of its inclusion on the Special Watch List and urged it to improve efforts to protect religious freedom.

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