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2023 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 and enable local officials to make arbitrary decisions on registration and recognition of new religious groups or places of worship. The Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups requiring such decisions at each stage.

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 whether the reported cases were related solely to religious affiliation. There were reports Dak Lak Province security officers physically abused two ethnic minority Protestants during interrogations about their religious affiliation and links to NGOs the authorities said were involved in the attacks. In the Northwest and Northern Highlands, leaders representing both registered and unregistered religious groups said authorities frequently used nonviolent or less physically aggressive approaches in their dealings with religious groups compared with prior years, 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. Members of unregistered religious groups reported authorities pressured

recognized religious groups to interfere in the internal affairs of unregistered groups.

In April, Dak Lak Province authorities arrested Y Krec Bya, a member of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ (ECC), and charged him with “undermining solidarity policies” under the penal code. The local authorities accused him of collecting and disseminating distorted information that created division between residents and authorities and among religious groups. On May 18, Phu Yen authorities arrested Nay Y Blang, also a member of the ECC, and charged him with “abusing democratic freedoms.” under the penal code. The local security authorities accused him of proselytizing and conducting religious activities illegally, among other accusations. In July, authorities in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang Provinces arrested three Khmer Krom Buddhist advocates for “abusing democratic freedoms.” In December, An Giang authorities tried and sentenced independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Hoang Nam to eight years in prison for “spreading anti-state materials” by posting documents “undermining policy on religious or national unity.” At year’s end, eight H’Mong Duong Van Minh followers remained in prison on charges of “acting against persons on duty” and “violating provisions on safety in crowded areas.” During the year authorities released seven others who were arrested in 2021-2022 on similar charges. According to the Ministry of Public Security, as of March, nearly 8,000 Duong Van Minh followers had renounced their faith following intensive campaigns to do so in 2022 and early 2023. By midyear, local authorities in several areas, including Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen Provinces, said their localities were “completely free” from the “Duong Van Minh evil-way religion’s influence.” Following attacks by armed assailants on government buildings in Dak Lak Province on June 11 that left nine persons dead and which authorities described as terrorist attacks, authorities accused several religious freedom/ethnic minority rights advocates and NGOs in the United States and Thailand of involvement in the attacks.

Authorities recognized two new religious organizations after more than four years without any new recognitions. Many religious groups continued to report that registration with local authorities remained difficult, particularly for new religious movements and groups with large numbers of ethnic minorities. On December 29, the government issued Decree 95, effective March 30, 2024, which will provide new limits on the discretion of local authorities in implementing the Law on Belief and Religion and provides a mechanism for the central government to suspend religious groups for “serious infractions” of the law. It also includes new requirements for receiving foreign funding.

There continued to be reports of conflicts between members of unregistered and registered or recognized religious groups or between believers and nonbelievers. On August 26, members of the registered Cao Dai group of Long Thuan Commune, Ben Cau District of Tay Ninh Province

reportedly pressured Lam Thi Dam, an independent Cao Dai adherent, to have her father's funeral ceremony conducted by the registered Cao Dai group instead of by her independent Cao Dai group.

In April, the U.S. Secretary of State visited St. Paul de Chartres Convent in Hanoi and met with the Catholic sisters, highlighting their child education work and feeding of the poor as examples of positive contributions of religious groups when able to function freely in society. The Ambassador, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, and other U.S. embassy and consulate general officials 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 the 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 Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), independent Hoa Hao groups, independent Cao Dai groups, and ethnic minority house churches. 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 continued to urge the government to resolve outstanding land rights disputes fairly and peacefully with religious groups. 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 December 29, 2023, 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.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 104.8 million (midyear 2023). According to Vietnam's White Book on Religion published by the GCRA in March 2023, there are approximately 26.5 million religious adherents as of December 2021, accounting for 27 percent of the total population at the time. The White Book noted Buddhism replaced Catholicism as the largest religious group in Vietnam since the prior census.

According to the White Book, Buddhist membership increased from nearly 10 million in 2008 to approximately 14 million in 2021, accounting for 52.8 percent of the total number of religious believers nationwide and 13.3 percent of the overall population. The White Book did not specify whether the data recorded only Buddhists formally registered with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) or also included unregistered Buddhist groups such as the UBCV. 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 GCRA, Catholics ranked as the second largest group with more than seven million followers, accounting for 6.6 percent of the total population. The Catholic population increased by a million followers since the 2019 census.

According to the White Book, Protestants were the third largest group, with 1.2 million followers, accounting for 4.5 percent of the total number of believers nationwide and 1 percent of the overall population, followed by 1.4 percent Hoa Hao Buddhist, and 1 percent Cao Dai.

GCRA officials also estimated that 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 the GCRA, the total number of religious adherents reportedly more than doubled, from 13 million in the 2019 census data to 26.5 million in 2021.

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 (The 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.

On December 29, the government issued Decree 95, replacing Decree 162 on the Law on Belief and Religion. Decree 95 enters into effect on March 30, 2024. The new decree includes provisions that would limit local authorities’ discretion in implementing the law. It provides a mechanism for the central government or provincial authorities to recommend that the central government suspend religious groups for “serious infractions” for up to 24 months. It also includes new requirements for religious organizations to receive foreign funding. The new decree also provides details regarding the administrative procedures for registering groups or congregations. For example, Decree 95 states authorities need to provide applicants with notification of receiving registration applications and must provide applicants guidance on how to revise applications.

According to the GCRA, the government recognizes 38 religious organizations that affiliate with 16 distinct “religious traditions” as defined by the government: Buddhism, Islam, the Baha’i Faith, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, 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. Three additional groups – the Assemblies of God, Vietnam United Gospel Outreach Church, and The Church of Jesus Christ, 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 laws and decrees on religious affairs; 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 government 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, with some exceptions, although none related to religious belief.

The law requires individuals to register locations for collective religious practice – referred to as “meeting points” in Vietnamese law – with communal authorities where the “lawful premises for the religious practice is based.” 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 permitted activities.

The law states religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and members 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 their members.

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 with the right to 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

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

NGOs and members of religious groups continued to report cases of government officials physically abusing, intimidating, and harassing individuals from religious minority groups, particularly ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and Northern Highlands, although because religion, ethnicity, and politics were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In the Northwest and Northern Highlands, leaders representing both registered and unregistered religious groups said authorities frequently used nonviolent or less physically aggressive means as compared with prior years. For example, authorities summoned representatives for periodic meetings or threatened or imposed administrative fines to pressure them to comply with government demands, including seeking registration and ceasing illegal gatherings.

On April 8, Dak Lak authorities arrested Y Krec Bya, a member of the unregistered ECC, and charged him with “undermining solidarity policies” under the relevant article of the penal code. The local authorities accused him of collecting and disseminating information that created division between residents and authorities and among religious groups, including by participating in online training on human rights.

On May 18, Phu Yen authorities arrested Nay Y Blang, also a member of the ECC, and charged him with “abusing democratic freedoms” under the relevant article of the penal code. The local security authorities charged him with proselytizing and conducting religious activities illegally, among other accusations.

At year’s end, eight H’Mong Duong Van Minh followers remained in prison on charges of “acting against persons on duty” and “violating provisions on safety in crowded areas.” During the year, authorities released seven others who were arrested in 2021-22 and being held on similar charges.

On July 30 and 31, security authorities in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang Provinces arrested three Khmer Krom Buddhist advocates, To Hoang Chuong, Thach Cuong, and Danh Minh Quang, for “abusing democratic freedoms.” The three individuals reported abuses of their rights to the international community and disseminated international documents about ethnic minority rights and religious freedom to community members to inform

them of their rights. Chuong stated that authorities detained and physically assaulted him in June. According to state media, authorities said Cuong and Chuong “illegally formed groups and mobilized individuals” in the region, shared information with “reactionary forces,” and used social media accounts to “distort revolutionary achievements and slander local authorities.” The authorities also stated their behavior caused divisions among ethnic groups, violated the interests of the State, disturbed public security, and were slanderous.

On August 4, An Giang authorities arrested independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Hoang Nam. In December, An Giang People’s Court convicted Nam of “disseminating anti-state propaganda” and sentenced him to eight years in prison related to his social media posts since he was released from prison in 2021 after serving a prior five-year sentence for “causing public disorder.” Nam frequently posted about Hoa Hao religious ceremonies and charity work. According to state media, Nam posted false information about government COVID-19 public health measures and content that insulted local authorities.

In September, the People’s Court of Gia Lai Province sentenced ethnic minority Christian Rlan Thih to eight years in prison and three years’ probation for “undermining unity policies” under the relevant article of the penal code. A press release from the People’s Court of Gia Lai province said as a “Dega Protestant” religious leader, Thih encouraged individuals to join meetings about “Dega Protestantism” and advocated for a separate church and state for members of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

In February, the Ministry of Public Security’s Department of Cybersecurity and High Tech Crimes notified Long An Province officials that three human rights lawyers might have violated the law through their online social media posts. Later that month, Long An Province criminal investigators summoned three human rights lawyers for questioning about their public statements related to their defense of members of the Zen Hermitage at the Edge of the Universe (formerly known as the Peng Lai Temple). These investigators subsequently announced a criminal investigation into the lawyers for allegedly “abusing democratic freedoms” under the relevant article of the penal code. Fearing imminent arrest, the lawyers fled the country.

Early in the year, an unregistered religious group indicated local authorities convicted three H’Mong members of an unregistered Protestant group in Na Ngoi Commune, Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, sentencing one to 15 months’ imprisonment and two others to eight months’ imprisonment each on charge of “openly appropriating property.” Reports indicated at least 12 other members of the group fled their residences, some to Thailand, to avoid intimidation from local authorities and hostility from their community based on their religion. The GCRA

attributed the case to land disputes among family members and tension between believers and nonbelievers within the family. According to the GCRA, by year's end, the three individuals had their sentences commuted and all were released.

On June 11, armed assailants launched an attack on two government facilities in Cu Kuin District, Dak Lak Province, killing nine people. Authorities described and investigated the incident as a terrorist attack. The authorities and state media accused an NGO based in Thailand focused on the human rights concerns of members of ethnic minorities from the Central Highlands of involvement in the attacks. Security officers reportedly interrogated and threatened family members of the NGO's leadership to admit their family members were involved in the attacks. The Thailand-based NGO issued a statement in June condemning the attack and use of violence and denied any involvement. After the attacks, members of minority religious groups in Dak Lak Province reported increased surveillance and targeting by security officers, including physical assaults, unauthorized searches and seizures, the placement of cameras outside their homes, and questioning about their religious affiliation.

A religious freedom NGO reported that in June, security officers in Dak Lak Province detained and interrogated a member of the unregistered Good News Mission Church for three days regarding the attacks. Security officers reportedly punched him in the head repeatedly and questioned him about online human rights training by the Thailand-based religious freedom NGO.

The same week, security forces detained an Ede ethnic minority member of an unregistered Protestant house church in Ea Tul Commune, and assaulted his spouse, according to a religious freedom NGO. Security officers reportedly detained him for three days and physically assaulted him when he denied involvement in the attacks. Members of unregistered churches in the region reported security officers threatened them with arrest and physical harm for their peaceful advocacy of religious freedom and accused them and their foreign-based contacts of involvement in the attacks.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

Male Khmer Krom Buddhists traditionally enter the monastery for a period of at least one month before age 20. Adherents reported that mandatory conscription into the military from the age of 18 to 25 (or up to age 27 in the case of college graduates) with no possibility of alternative service interfered with this traditional religious rite of passage.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to state media, authorities from the central to the local levels established numerous interagency task forces led by public security

offices to combat unregistered religious groups deemed to be “evil-way” religions, antistate groups under the cover of religion, “affiliates to hostile forces,” or new religious movements and phenomena. Such groups include Duong Van Minh, Ba Co Do (Hoi Thanh Duc Chua Troi Yeu Thuong Chung Ta), World Mission Society Church of God (Hoi Thanh Duc Chua Troi Me), Evangelical Church of Christ (Tin Lanh Dang Christ Tay Nguyen), and Church of Jesus (Dao Gie Sua). Authorities accused these banned religious groups and their members of doing harm to traditional practices or “fine cultural values,” or having political motives, such as inciting social unrest, disrupting solidarity policies, and separatism. Members of these groups reported that local officials, government-affiliated social organizations, community-based organizations, and community members harassed them and coerced them to recant their faith. There were reports of communities and families boycotting and displacing members of banned religious groups because they did not share the same faith.

Human rights defenders reported that local authorities in Tuyen Quang, Cao Bang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen Provinces continued to coerce Duong Van Minh followers to renounce their beliefs by employing intimidation and physical assault. Local security authorities disrupted gatherings, intimidating and in certain cases beating the host and participants. Local security authorities prohibited Duong Van Minh followers from using the group’s symbolic items, including the cross, at funerals or for decorating altars in their residences. Local authorities also disrupted funerals, destroying altars and confiscating prohibited worship items. On April 5, local authorities in Nam Quang Commune, Bao Lam District, Cao Bang Province broke into private residences of 31 Duong Van Minh households, destroying their altars, confiscating prohibited items, and violently coercing them to sign or leave fingerprints on a written document renouncing their faith. In May, security forces prevented Duong Van Minh followers from Cao Bang Province from travelling to Hanoi to meet with a foreign delegation. Duong Van Minh followers later reported security forces forced a follower to sign a document with her thumbprint recanting her beliefs. In October, Duong Van Minh followers in Na Phac Commune, Ngan Son District, Bac Can Province reported that local authorities broke into several private residences, destroyed altars, and confiscated worship items. On December 1, local officials of Yen Lam Commune, Ham Yen District, Tuyen Quang Province broke into the houses two Duong Van Minh followers, dismantling their decorated altars and removing worship items. When they refused to recant their faith, local officials coerced them to return allowances and cows that authorities provided them as low-income households. On December 2 and 10, local officials from Ly Bon Commune, Bao Lam District, Cao Bang Province broke into the homes of at least six Duong Van Minh followers and dismantled their altars and removed worship items. This followed a November 30 visit to the group by a foreign embassy official. According to a Ministry of Public Security publication, as of March, nearly 8,000 Duong Van Minh followers had renounced their faith following intensive

campaigns to eliminate Duong Van Minh in 2022 and early 2023. By midyear, local authorities in several areas, including Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen Provinces, said their localities were “completely free” from the “Duong Van Minh evil-way religion’s influence.” The GCRA stated in taking these actions that the Duong Van Minh group was an illegal organization, not a religious organization, members of these groups were held accountable for breaking the law, e.g. building funeral houses (Nha Don) illegally, acting against persons on duty, and inciting boycotts of elections of local councils at different levels, among others.

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 abuses 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 that the officials accused of opposing the government, or pressured members to instead join a registered religious organization. For example, in August, Khmer Krom Buddhists in the Mekong Delta, ethnic minority Christians in the Central Highlands, and independent Cao Dai followers reported authorities in several provinces warned them against observing or gathering on August 22 to acknowledge the UN International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

In September, multiple individuals shared a posted video that showed public security officers from Bac Ha District, Lao Cai Province forbidding an ethnic H'Mong Christian member of the unregistered God Loves Us Church from joining online worship services and participating in church activities. In the video, the officer threatened his wife and children, and stated authorities would cut off the water supply to his home if he did not comply.

Activists from an unregistered Hoa Hao group reported that in April security forces in An Giang Province assaulted a Hoa Hao leader and prevented Hoa Hao followers from commemorating a religious holiday. In December, security officers prevented an unregistered Hoa Hao community in An Giang Province from commemorating another religious holiday, according to media reports.

In December, a religious freedom NGO reported security forces in Dak Lak Province threatened several members of unregistered churches against participating in “unauthorized” Christmas celebrations and pressured them to join the registered Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

Sources stated that authorities limited the freedom of movement or right to leave the country of many religious freedom advocates and representatives of unregistered religious groups through exit bans or

withholding passport issuance. For example, in September authorities prevented Nguyen Xuan Mai from an unregistered Cao Dai group from traveling internationally to attend a religious pilgrimage.

Government officials in different parts of the country reportedly continued to monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily detain, intimidate, and discriminate against 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, had ties to overseas individuals and organizations that were outspoken and critical of authorities, or were affiliated with new religious movements. There were government and international media reports of local authorities banning and/or disrupting gatherings and confiscating publications of various religious groups. These included well-established groups such as the Catholic Church and lesser known and unregistered groups such as Pure Hoa Hao in An Giang, unregistered Cao Dai groups in the Mekong Delta, Yiguandao in Thua Thien Hue Province, the Evangelical Church of Christ in Dak Lak and Phu Yen Provinces, and Falun Gong and the World Mission Society Church of God (Hoi Thanh Duc Chua Troi Me) in many provinces. This also affected 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. Other new movements included Thanh Hai Vo Thuong Su, Dao Troi Thai Binh, and An Dien Cuu Roi. The GCRA estimated there were more than 85 new religious movements or phenomena that it described as "evil-way" or "strange" religions.

In September, the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered local authorities to take measures to "eliminate" the World Mission Society Church of God due to what it stated were legal violations.

According to NGO reports, in August, security authorities of Tan Hanh Commune, Long Ho District, Vinh Long Province pressured Phan Thi Bui against inviting other independent Cao Dai adherents from neighboring provinces to her late husband's death commemoration and accused her of "networking with reactionary individuals."

In August and December, authorities recognized the Ta Lon Dutiful and Loyal Buddhism and Vietnam Full Gospel Church, the first religious groups to receive such approval in more than four years. Also in December, authorities approved the establishment of a Baptist seminary in Ho Chi Minh City, the first Baptist and third Evangelical Christian seminary to receive such approval since 1975. Many religious groups continued to report that the registration of locations for collective religious practice, referred to in the law as "meeting points," with local authorities remained

difficult, particularly for new religious movements and groups with large numbers of ethnic minorities. 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, 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 registered more than 3,700 out of approximately 5,000 meeting points across the country, including more than 60 for foreign nationals. The GCRA did not report province-level statistics. The GCRA estimated that more than 80 new religious movements and activities with various origins 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 to register a "meeting point." Many religious leaders stated 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 an alternative.

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 in navigating 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

ability 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, independent house churches in Dak Lak and Phu Yen Provinces, Ba Co Do (Church of God Loving Us) in northern mountainous provinces such as Lao Cai, Dien Bien, and Lai Chau, and World Mission Society Church of God in major cities. Multiple reports said authorities summoned members of unregistered churches to public security offices, where security authorities told them to leave their unregistered churches to join the registered Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

Y Nuer Buon Dap, a member of an independent house church in E Map Village of Ea Poch Township, Cu Mgar District, Dak Lak Province reported that since late September, local authorities pressured him and his church followers to leave their house church to join the registered Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

In March, media reported that security authorities in Hoi An City, Quang Nam Province, disbanded a World Mission Society congregation, accusing it of conducting "illegal religious activities."

Ethnic minority Christians reported that security authorities prevented them from gathering during important religious events or forced them to take down their Christmas decorations. Authorities reportedly restricted their movements to prevent them from meeting with foreign diplomats. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN) stated that obtaining recognition of its local congregations remained 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. The ECVN reported having more than 1,350 local branches and "meeting points." Of these, ECVN said that 44 local branches and approximately 800 meeting points were registered. During the year, local authorities registered two new local branches out of seven applications and reported that "a few" meeting points successfully registered. The ECVN stated it experienced difficulties registering its meeting points with local authorities mostly in mountainous areas, including Lai Chau, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, Dien Bien, and Nghe An Provinces.

Authorities had registered approximately half of an estimated 150 meeting points of the Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC) in the country. During the year, few meeting points affiliated with the VBC received registration while many VBC meeting points managed to register as

affiliates of other recognized organizations. The majority of VBC meeting points in northern mountainous areas were registered. By the end of the year, local authorities had registered approximately 25 of 28 VBC meeting points in northern mountainous provinces. However, none of the nine meeting points in the northern delta provinces received registration approval. Despite lacking registration, many of these groups continued to meet without interruption.

Authorities required most, if not all, applicants seeking registration of their religious group or recognition of their organization to include in their applications language stating the 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.

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.

Similar to prior years, Protestant leaders continued to report local authorities interpreted and enforced the law inconsistently when processing registration applications for local congregations. Local authorities in Noong Luong Commune, Dien Bien District, Dien Bien Province, for example, continued to deny the registration applications of an independent Pentecostal congregation, stating the congregation was affiliated with an unrecognized religious group. The 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 the local congregation had been active for nearly 30 years before filing a registration application in 2017. Dien Bien authorities continued to deny registration of the Assembly of God of Vietnamese People (Hoi Thanh Phuc Am Ngu Tuan Nguoi Viet), stating 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). Similarly, local authorities in Bac Can, Hung Yen, and Phu Tho Provinces continued to deny registrations of Pentecostal groups that refused to affiliate themselves to recognized organizations.

The VBC stated that authorities continued to deny registration requests for new local congregations in many provinces, including in Thanh Hoa, Hanoi, Hai Phong, Quang Ninh, Hai Duong Provinces and in the Northwest Highlands. Local authorities encouraged registration of these new local congregations under recognized organizations.

Religious leaders stated that the central authorities continued to deny applications of several Protestant groups, including the VBC and United Presbyterian Church in Vietnam. Religious freedom advocates stated that the determining factor as to whether local authorities approved a registration application was more closely linked to the religious group's perspective on politics than on religious dogma or legal requirements. The GCRA continued to deny public access to pending registration applications.

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

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

There were continued reports of local authorities requiring a list of all members and their biographies from religious groups seeking registration, and extensive biographical information about their extended families. 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.

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

Sources stated that authorities monitored, prevented, or disrupted the gatherings of banned and some unregistered religious groups and harassed their members, including through confiscating their property, intimidation, questioning, and restricting their movement. There were reports of local authorities interrupting religious services due to alleged registration or permitting issues.

There were reports that local authorities in Dien Bien and Lai Chau Provinces prevented and disrupted Sunday services of ethnic minority congregations affiliated to banned group Ba Co Do (Church of God Loving Us). There were several reports of local officials violently removing key members of these groups away from religious services, causing the members minor injuries when they refused to cooperate.

On March 22, local authorities of Dak Nong Commune, Ngoc Hoi District, Kon Tum Province disrupted a Mass celebrated by Father Le Tien of Dak Giac Catholic parish. According to the local authorities, the Mass was an illegal religious gathering conducted at an unregistered location without a permit.

Similar to prior years, religious leaders in urban areas – of both registered and unregistered groups – stated that authorities generally permitted them to practice as long as they acted in accordance with legal and administrative requirements that applied to religious organizations.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported holding positive and productive conversations with the government during the year to further the community's longstanding request for national registration.

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 – more frequently reported harassment from government officials than other religious groups. Recognized religious denominations in these areas continued to report rapid growth and generally fewer problems with officials.

Many ordained pastors conducted pastoral work, despite not having completed the paperwork mandated by law to be recognized as clergy by the government.

Sources reported that 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 generally denied allegations of abuse of religious freedom. Although officials said the government would punish authorities who violated the rights of religious believers, 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 with leeway to exercise significant discretion. Religious leaders of multiple faiths continued to report that 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.

Prisoners generally had access to religious materials of all registered church groups. According to the White Book on Religion, authorities distributed thousands of copies of 17 religious titles to all 54 detention

center libraries. The publications distributed included religious texts, including the Bible and several Buddhist texts, and publications on the country's religion-related laws and policies. Prisoners and detainees who were religious adherents were also allowed to conduct certain religious activities such as holding prayer groups, as long as these activities did not disturb other prisoners.

Authorities permitted Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Baha'i, and Buddhist groups to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities, and religious leaders said they noted increased enrollment in these education programs in recent years.

Although the law allows recognized religious organizations to establish and run their own media press agencies while prohibiting the publication of 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. Authorities confiscated and destroyed religious texts of unregistered religious groups that were labelled "evil-way" religions. 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'nong, H'mong, C'ho, and English. Other published texts included works pertaining to ancestor worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai.

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, Ha Nam, and Binh Thuan Provinces, mostly regarding land disputes or relating to the activities of human and environmental rights advocacy groups.

In June and July, local authorities of the Hop Ly Commune in Ha Nam Province expanded the commune's community center on a property that a local Catholic church stated belonged to it. The parishioners said that local authorities took their church's properties after the Vietnam War and continued using part of the church's properties for secular purposes, including a community center. The community center's expansion included a kitchen and toilet near the altar area of the church. Local authorities removed religious items, including a statue of Jesus that parishioners placed in the disputed areas as an effort to strengthen their claim to the property.

Followers of Duong Van Minh reported local authorities in the northern provinces of Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, Thai Nguyen, and Cao Bang, destroyed all remaining *Nha Don*, the small structures used to store funeral-related items, during efforts to suppress Duong Van Minh groups following his death in December 2021. During the year, local officials in some areas of these provinces continued pressuring Duong Van Minh

followers to disassemble their altars. 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.

Provincial and local authorities continued to exercise eminent domain over land, including land occupied by religious organizations, to further 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, they were unsuccessful in retaining land use rights. Such disputes involved recognized, registered, and unregistered religious organizations.

In April, local authorities ordered the UBCV monks of Thien Quang Pagoda in Xuyen Moc District of Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province to demolish and remove most of the structures at the temple complex, saying they were constructed without authorization on land zoned for growing trees. The authorities indicated that the leader of the pagoda would be charged nearly one billion dong (\$41,200) if the government resorted to demolishing the structures. At year's end, the monks reported that local authorities had not executed the removal order.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

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 Provinces, and ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands, continued to report 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 Bao Lam District, Cao Bang Province, for example, said local authorities denied requests for social assistance benefits from their members in April. The district's primary school requested any pupils whose parents followed Duong Van Minh to submit residential registrations to be able to receive ethnic minorities' entitlements. Local police refused to provide such registrations if the parents did not recant their faith. According to local media, this was part of an intensive government campaign in northern mountainous provinces conducted in 2022 and early 2023 against Duong Van Minh followers. By June, many local authorities had announced their localities were free of Duong Van Minh influence and began approving public benefits.

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.

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 and Protestant representatives said the government refused to return their churches' properties, including churches, administrative buildings, hospitals, clinics, and schools it seized between 1954 and 1975. During the year, however, authorities at the central to local levels in some cases authorized and encouraged the engagement of recognized religious groups in educational, charitable, and healthcare activities and recognized their contributions to society in public praise. Many religious groups and religious adherents organized and ran these activities or joined with authorities and other organizations and individuals to do so.

Several ethnic minority Christians from the Central Highlands said local public security officers 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 they had been arrested for participating in protests in 2001 in the Central Highlands, despite the fact they had completed their prison terms and parole periods.

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.

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 or cheating for personal gains 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.

Official publications of the Communist Party of Vietnam, including the *Nhan Dan* newspaper and the *Tuyen Giao* newspaper, the People's Army, the Ministry of Public Security, and local authorities warned against attempts by "hostile forces" to act against the state, disrupt social order and security, incite separatism, and disturb solidarity under the cover of advocating for religious freedom.

State-run media and progovernment blogs continued to accuse leaders of unregistered religious groups and members who were vocal in their opposition to the government of exploiting religion for personal gain and of "undermining national unity policies" or "abusing democratic freedom to infringe upon national security." State-run media, including the *People's Police* newspaper of the Ministry of Public Security, and progovernment blogs such as Comrade Commissar (Don Vi Tac Chien Dien Tu) and Chicken-farm Taos (Dao si chan ga) accused independent Central Highland religious leaders of "colluding with hostile forces" and said that criticism from independent religious leaders was fabricated or based on distorted information to tarnish the Communist Party and state, "to sow seeds of division," or "to disrupt 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, Ba Co Do (God Loving Us), An Dien Cuu Roi (Salvation Grace) in the Northwest Highlands, Ha Mon Catholics, Degar Protestants, Evangelical Church of Christ (Tin lanh Dang Christ) 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 provinces, including Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen Provinces, 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” and “an illegal group.”

Several provincial-government, state-run, and progovernment websites continued referring to Falun Gong as an “evil-way religion” and an “extremist religious group.” Many pro-government 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.

In what observers stated was a continuing trend, local authorities permitted religious organizations to operate social services and gather for training on topics such as mindfulness. According to the GCRA, religious organizations ran approximately 300 preprimary schools, 2,000 education institutions for early childhood, 12 vocational training institutions, and more than 500 medical institutions and clinics; this included some educational institutions managed by unregistered churches. Religious organizations, mostly those affiliated with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Catholic Church, and registered Cao Dai, ran 113 social centers providing housing and support to nearly 12,000 people in need. Many faith-based drug rehabilitation centers reported operating successfully despite lacking official recognition.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

Authorities continued training for government officials working in religious affairs, including central, provincial, and local government officials. Among the participants were officials from the GCRA and local authorities for religious affairs, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Security, the army, and officials from political-social organizations, including the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Vietnam Women’s Union, Vietnam Farmers Association, Ho Chi Minh Youth Union, and Vietnam Veterans Association. The training content included relevant administrative procedures for protecting religious rights, handling what were termed illegal and harmful activities under the cover of religion and belief, and building close ties between state management agencies and the leadership of religious and belief groups. During the year, the GCRA organized three training sessions for 640 local officials on managing communications with religious groups, nine training sessions for more than 800 state officials about religious affairs professional skills, 12 conferences for 3,420 religious leaders and believers on religion-related legal affairs, and three training sessions for 750 religious leaders on religious affairs issues. Provincial authorities organized 520 training sessions for 63,500 local officials on religion-related professional skills, and 1,306 conferences for approximately 144,000 religious leaders and members on legal provisions.

Authorities continued working closely with religious leaders of recognized religious groups and representatives of belief institutions to promote the

Law on Religion and Belief and relevant policies. For example, on September 13, the Vietnam Fatherland Front of Ea Kar District organized a dialogue between the district leadership and leaders of recognized local congregations in the district. During the dialogue, religious leaders questioned local officials about issues affecting their congregants, from religion-related issues such as registration to non-religious issues, including bad roads and inflation.

Authorities promoted the admission to the Communist Party of members who were believers and ethnic minorities. Authorities also encouraged religious leaders and members of recognized religious groups to join elected People's Councils and the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), from central to local levels. The VFF at different levels organized dialogues between local authorities and religious leaders of recognized groups and registered congregations.

In July, Vietnam and the Holy See agreed to place a resident pontifical representative in Hanoi. On December 23, Pope Francis appointed Archbishop Marek Zalewski, previously the Apostolic Nuncio to Singapore and nonresident papal representative to Vietnam, as the first resident papal representative in Vietnam.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of conflicts between members of unregistered and registered or recognized religious groups and between religious adherents and nonbelievers. Persons associated with religious groups said authorities pressured 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 August 26, according to reports, members of the registered Cao Dai group of Long Thuan Commune, Ben Cau District of Tay Ninh Province pressured Lam Thi Dam, an independent Cao Dai adherent, to have her father's funeral ceremony conducted by the registered Cao Dai group instead of by her independent Cao Dai group.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In April, the Secretary of State visited St. Paul de Chartres Convent in Hanoi. He met with the Catholic sisters of the convent and visited their kindergarten classroom and kitchen where meals are prepared for those in need. The convent visit demonstrated the ongoing U.S. commitment to religious freedom and highlighted the positive contributions members of religious communities can make to society when allowed to operate freely.

Representatives of the U.S. 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 Ministry of Home Affairs, 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 the bilateral relationship. They engaged directly with national and provincial authorities on specific cases of concern, urging the authorities to adhere to the country's international commitments related to freedom of religion or belief.

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, 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.

U.S. government officials continued to raise concerns about religious freedom, including at the annual bilateral Human Rights Dialogue, to call for the regularized registration of religious organizations and meeting points around the country, improvement in registration policies to make them more uniform and transparent, and addressing gaps in the implementation of the law, especially in rural areas. 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.

U.S. government officials, including 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.

Embassy and consulate general officials traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, Mekong Delta, and the central coast, to monitor religious liberty, advocate for improved protections of religious freedom, 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 December 29, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State re-designated Vietnam to the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

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