

vietnam


PERSECUTION 101

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Heavy government control of religious life creates an environment of fear and repression that severely limits many Christians and other unregistered religious groups

Marxist socialism has shaped Vietnam since the first days of its existence as a modern state. Founded by Hồ Chí Minh in 1930, the Communist Part of Vietnam is the only political party in the country, as it has been since it became the ruling party of North Vietnam after Hồ won the 1954 Battle of Điện Biên Phủ. The party requires complete loyalty to the state, and while it recognizes certain religious groups as legitimate, the government controls these groups closely and punishes independent religious activity severely.



QUICK FACTS



Type of Government

Communist



Head of Government

Nguyễn Phú Trọng,
General Secretary
of the Communist
Party, *since 2011*



Total Population

Approx. 104.79 million



Religious Demography

86.3% No Religious Affiliation
6.1% Catholic
5.8% Buddhist
1% Protestant
0.8% Other



Ethnic Demography

85.3% Viet
1.9% Tay
1.9% Thai
1.5% Muong
1.4% Khmer
8% Other



TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Government Restrictions

The Vietnamese government maintains strict controls over registered religious groups and harsh restrictions against taking part in unregistered groups.



ICC IN VIETNAM

Government crackdowns on Christians in Vietnam often create economic suffering for people of faith. Whether because the family's breadwinner is in prison or through social economic pressure, those targeted for their faith often face secondary pressures on top of the direct action taken against them. In one case ICC worked on, the family of a Christian believer came and seized his possessions in anger at his religious beliefs.

In this case and others like it, local authorities proved unhelpful in restoring the Christian's property to him and he was left with almost nothing on which to support himself and his family. ICC provided him with a small lot of land on which to grow rice. In other cases, ICC might provide livestock to the persecuted, giving them access to a sustainable and long-term source of income in the wake of a persecution incident.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Steeped in decades of Communist tradition, the government of Vietnam attempts to hold religion at arm's length, allowing it in some form but viewing it with suspicion and working to relegate it to the corners of society. Since the early days of the modern Vietnamese state in the 1950s and continuing through the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s to the present day, religion has been tightly regulated in the southeast Asian country.

As is commonly the case in socialist states—including China and North Korea—Vietnam allows some semblance of religion in the form of tightly-controlled registered religious groups. Though the level of control exerted over these groups may not be as extreme as that found in North Korea or China, Vietnam requires that groups seeking official approval comply with an invasive multi-year registration process and avoid any activities deemed contrary to national security and unity—a vague requirement that gives authorities a great deal of latitude to restrict religious activity.

Vietnam received a failing “Not Free” grade in 2022 from Freedom House’s annual *Freedom in the World* report, partly for its lack of civil liberties and abysmal record on religious freedom. *“All religious groups and most individual clergy members are required to join a party-controlled supervisory body and obtain permission for most activities,”* the report notes, adding that a 2016 law affirming the country’s registration requirements *“gave authorities broad discretion to penalize unsanctioned religious activity.”*

While registered groups face myriad restrictions on their activities, unregistered groups experience an even more sinister type of repression backed by a legal framework that criminalizes their very existence. Leaders and members of these groups, including many protestant Christians, are subject to spurious legal charges, arrest, and even physical assaults. In some cases, authorities withhold critical identity paperwork such as birth certificates from members of these unregistered groups, effectively rendering them stateless according to a 2023 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).



Also reported by USCIRF, there has been a marked increase in recent years of incidents in which authorities pressure persons of faith to publicly renounce their faith in favor of the majority stance of religious non-affiliation. This pattern is not restricted to members of unregistered ethnic or religious minority groups, either—in some instances this practice targeted members of the state-approved protestant church as well.

Religious persecution is particularly severe in the more rural areas and for members of ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong and Montagnard ethnic communities. One of the first communities to receive French missionaries, the Montagnard community has long been unusual in Vietnam for its large Christian population, with the Hmong people experiencing a similar shift toward Christianity after missionary exposure in the mid 1900s. Local authorities seem empowered to harass them with charges under many laws, and local communities are often intolerant of their religious sentiments.

The international community often overlooks the issues in Vietnam. After being designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) twice in 2004 and 2005, Vietnam dropped off the Department of State's CPC list in 2006 and has not been returned since, though they were added to the lower-level Special Watchlist in 2022.

Resources and Reports

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Vietnam Chapter](#)
[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Vietnam Chapter](#)

