

FREEDOM OF WORSHIP

A FALSE REALITY IN VIETNAM



BY COLTON GRELLIER

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

Freedom of Worship: A False Reality in Vietnam

By Colton Grellier

Christian persecution in Vietnam encapsulates the state of religious freedom under modern communism.

Any religious expression allowed to exist publicly is strictly controlled by the central government. Internally, churches and religious organizations must contend with covert government operatives or be forced underground. And Christians who refuse to follow the regime's instructions face a judiciary system that has already determined one's guilt and sentence before the first hearing.

However, blanket statements rarely do justice to the past tragedy and current reality of the persecuted church in any country, and Vietnam is no exception. In this report, we will briefly discuss the unique history of the church in Vietnam up to its modern oppression by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), provide examples of the CPV using fabricated or vague criminal charges to silence religious and other prisoners of conscience, and discuss how the CPV exercises control over religion in the country.

Politics and Persecution

The history of Christianity in Vietnam begins with the Catholic church in the 16th century. French Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes set up a mission in the country in 1615, and after his expulsion from Vietnam, he founded the Foreign Mission Society and encouraged French missionaries to evangelize in Southeast Asia (Scribd, n.d.).

His influence over the society and region led to about 300,000 new members of the Vietnamese Catholic Church (VCC) during the following decades. By 1665 and seeing the influence Christianity had on their people, Vietnamese ruler Hien Vuong began controlling the number of missionaries entering their nation, banning Christian works, and even killings.

Protestantism arrived roughly three centuries later with missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA). In 1916, missionaries began planting churches throughout cities of Vietnam, such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, Saigon, Sa Dec, Chau Doc, Can Tho, Vinh Long, and Bien Hoa, which led to 74 churches and more than 4,000 church members by 1927.

CMA missionaries would eventually find further success among the Montagnard and Hmong tribes in the Central and Northern Highlands of Vietnam. (Tapp, 2001)

The Vietnam War would leave its own indelible mark on the nation's church. In 1975, U.S. Green Berets would find allies among the native Christian Montagnard tribes that stood in opposition to the Communist North Vietnamese.

The Green Berets provided training and weapons to the Montagnards tribes who, in turn, acted as pathfinders and provided on-the-ground support. (McGarr, 2014).

However, when Communist forces eventually claimed victory, they would see these highland tribes as traitors who had aligned themselves with a foreign enemy. The CPV sought to extinguish the ethnic and religious identity of the Montagnards by confiscating their land, closing churches, imprisoning church members and pastors, and banning their indigenous language. (Human Rights Watch, 2009)

Some Montagnards were able to find asylum with their old ally, the United States, and settled with their families in Protestant communities that exist to this day.

Religion in Modern Vietnam

The modern CPV has two philosophies when dealing with Christianity and organized religion in general. The first is strict control over the religious groups and leaders in the country. The second, usually used when the first tactic fails, are baseless criminal charges and prison sentences.

Controlled Belief

In 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published its report, “State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom in Vietnam.” The report detailed three strategies the CPV uses to compel the various religions in the country. The first strategy, substitution, attempts to “outlaw historically independent Vietnamese religious organizations and to establish state-controlled substitutes. The government seized properties belonging to independent religious organizations — often by force — and transferred them to state-controlled alternatives.” Substitution has been used significantly against Buddhist organizations.

The second strategy, co-opting, “involves what can be referred to as ‘hybrid’ organizations, which were not created by the government but have, over time, acquiesced to government control. This acquiescence may have resulted from a sense that operating within the strictly controlled government system is the best and/or only way for members to practice their faith in Vietnam.”

This strategy has been seen particularly in “politically sensitive” regions of the Northwestern and Central Highlands, areas that often make up the traditional lands of Montagnard and Hmong tribes. Indeed, co-opting has been used to exercise control over the northern and southern bodies of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, whose leadership “remain silent about violations against members of their religious community, including ... ethnic Hmong Christians and the ongoing, brutal crackdown on Montagnard house churches.”

The third strategy, infiltration, has been used most notably against the Catholic Church, the only recognized religious group that is not directly under the official control of the CPV. However, to exercise unofficial control, the CPV has organized a “state-controlled pseudo-religious organization” called the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics, which has “infiltrated Catholic congregations and hierarchy through priests and bishops who are close to the CPV.”

Members of the Committee have “attacked priests and parishioners who speak out against social and environmental injustices, defend religious freedom, or simply refuse to compromise with the government.”

Punishing Belief

For individuals who refuse to stay within the authorized boundaries of religious life, the CPV has a long track record of using prison sentences to suppress dissidents. This has been seen through its consistent arrests of Christians imprisoned under Article 331/2015 VCC or Article 87/1999 VCC.

Per Article 24 of the Constitution of Vietnam, every citizen has the right to follow the religion of their choice, and all religions are equal before the law, and no one can infringe upon that.

However, the government itself has violated this. According to the USCIRF Frank R. World Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, Vietnam has 57 unreleased religious prisoners, with five having received some form of torture. So that the Vietnamese government can imprison religious dissidents, many of those who are imprisoned are cited for “undermining national unity policy” or “abusing democratic freedoms.”

Nay Y Blang was detained on May 18, 2023, and imprisoned for his religious beliefs and activities, and the CPV cited him under Article 331/2015 VCC for abusing democratic freedoms for his affiliation and meetings with the unregistered Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ. Blang was previously imprisoned in 2005 for the same citation. Many of those imprisoned have been held beyond their sentences and are suffering in prison.

Dinh Yum was detained in March of 2014 and sentenced to 11 years in prison under Article 87/1999 VCC for “undermining national unity policy.” He was accused of spreading Degar Protestantism to support separatist activities and had previously spent time in prison for religious activity. He has been tortured in prison. Blang and Yum are just two of the many who are in prison for their religious beliefs.

Y Wo Nie was arrested for taking online classes about several topics including human rights. Authorities alleged that classes were held by reactionary forces and charged him with abusing democratic freedoms (Article 331/2015 VCC). He had previously been arrested for peaceful protests for religious freedom and land rights.

During the past 13 years alone, the CPV arrested 18 Buddhist believers under similar charges, citing believers Vo Ngoc Cu and Nguyen Thai Binh as just a couple of Vietnamese citizens who have been arrested for “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the State” (Article 258/1999 VCC).

On Dec. 29, 2023, the CPV issued Decree 95, which replaced Decree 162. This decree went into effect on March 30, 2024, and allowed the central government to suspend religious groups for serious infractions for up to 24 months. It also requires denominations to be registered with the state.

The Government Committee on Religious Affairs recognizes 38 religious organizations affiliated with 16 religious traditions. These include Islam, Buddhism, Baha’i faith, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hao 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. Other denominations within these traditions must get their own registration and recognition.

According to the U.S. Department of State’s 2023 report on International Religious Freedom: Vietnam, “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.” Many of the victims were a part of unregistered groups engaged in political or human rights advocacy.

Montagnards Suffer in the Central Highlands

In December 2025, a Montagnard pastor from Vietnam now living in North Carolina on the U.S. government and the United Nations to do more to combat the ongoing persecution of the Dao Blung Hlao Church in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Authorities often increase persecution the week of Christmas in the Central Highlands, arresting Christians and warning worshippers not to celebrate the holiday outside state-sponsored churches.

“Our people are being detained. Police are forcing citizens to remain silent,” Pastor Nglol Rahlan wrote. “Authorities coerced followers of the Dao Blung Hlao Church to attend Christmas services at state-controlled churches that worship Ho Chi Minh, which are officially recognized by the government.”

The Dao Blung Hlao Church, founded by Pastor Rahlan, is formed of Montagnard Christians who have long been persecuted in Vietnam. Rahlan shared his testimony in February at the 2025 IRF Summit in Washington, D.C. International Christian Concern (ICC) and other groups spearheaded the “legislate”

breakout session, “Vanishing Freedoms in Vietnam.” ICC continues to advocate for Christians in the Central Highlands and to share their stories.

The Summit session also included remarks from U.S. Rep. Derek Tran (D-Calif.), Jean Wu of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and Hon. Grover Joseph Rees III, former United States Ambassador to East Timor. Sara Colm of the Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam moderated. Two representatives from the Vietnamese Embassy also attended the session and watched the comments.

In his statement to U.S. officials, Rhalan pleaded for the international community, the United States government, and President Trump to protect religious freedom in the Central Highlands. He noted that Vietnamese officials, including Communist Party leader and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, claimed to protect religious freedom, yet their actions say otherwise.

The Vietnamese government has long targeted ethnic minorities, including Christians of Montagnard and Hmong descent, for perceived political and religious threats. State-controlled religious groups give the government complete control over Christian activities and pressure independent churches to join or risk punishment.

Yet these groups must undergo a multi-year registration process and avoid any activities believed to be contrary to national security and unity — a vague requirement that gives authorities freedom to restrict worship. Like China and North Korea, state-sponsored churches in Vietnam pressure members to quasi-worship government leaders ahead of Christ.

“To this day, Dao Blung Hlao followers do not have religious freedom and face increasing hardship,” Rhalan said. “Vietnam claims to follow international law yet continues these actions. Vietnam shows no fear of international law.”

Prayers for the Vietnamese Church

Due to support from its much larger neighbor, China, and the tactics of its own brutal regime, there is no sign that the Communist party is at risk of losing control over Vietnam or will willingly grant greater religious liberties to its people.

Catholic and unregistered churches present an ideological alternative to the communist philosophy at the heart of the CPV. Additionally, the scars of the Vietnam War have ingrained a generational animosity into the CPV against the minority Montagnard and Hmong tribes, both for their religious independence and former alliance with the U.S. military.

Change is unlikely to come from within. However, Vietnam is not so invulnerable from outside its border. Its economy is disproportionately reliant on trade with other countries, especially the United States. Political advocacy and public awareness have worked to bring about relief and even freedom to prisoners of conscience jailed for their opposition to the CPV’s totalitarianism. Unlike its much more powerful Communist neighbor, Vietnam cannot afford to ignore all calls for justice from the international community. More than ever, prayers and dedicated advocacy on behalf of the persecuted church of Vietnam are needed to move the needle, even slightly, toward religious liberty.

Note: ICC would like to thank interns Adonis, Coburn, Estrellita, and Makayla (last names withheld for security reasons) for their contributions to this report.

Sources

ResearchGate. (n.d.). *The relationship between the state and the church in Vietnam through the history of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris*. Retrieved July 26, 2025, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338110116_The_Relationship_between_the_State_and_the_Church_in_Vietnam_through_the_History_of_the_Society_of_Foreign_Missions_of_Paris (Accessed June 28, 2025)

Tapp, N. (2001). *The Hmong: History and Culture*. Silkworm Books.

Human Rights Watch. (2009, January 21). On the margins: Rights abuses of ethnic Khmer in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/01/21/vietnam-halt-abuses-ethnic-khmer-mekong-delta> (Accessed June 28, 2025)

McGarr, P. (2014). *The Vietnam War: A concise international history*. Oxford University Press.