

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam worsened. Authorities intensified their control and persecution of religious groups—especially unregistered, independent communities, including Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Cao Dai followers, Hoa Hao Buddhists, and Unified Buddhists, as well as other unrecognized movements such as Duong Van Minh and Falun Gong. Even members of state-controlled religious groups experienced persecution. During the year, authorities harassed and persecuted some independent groups, particularly Montagnard Protestants and Cao Dai, for [observing](#) International Human Rights Day and International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) remained restrictive, and groups encountered challenges with registration due to the law’s uneven and inconsistent application throughout the country, contravening international standards. In June, the government [introduced](#) two repressive draft decrees to implement the LBR, which, if passed, could further restrict religious freedom in Vietnam.

USCIRF received many reports of local authorities [harassing](#) members of unregistered Montagnard Protestant groups, [disrupting](#) and banning their peaceful religious activities, interrogating and [threatening](#) them with imprisonment, imposing heavy fines, and coercing them to denounce and leave their denominations and instead join state-controlled Protestant organizations. During the year, some unregistered Montagnard Protestant churches in Cu Mgar district of Dak Lak Province requested guidance from their commune governments on lawfully conducting religious activities; they also requested the [implementation](#) of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Vietnam is a party. In response, authorities detained, interrogated, fined, and threatened the Montagnards with imprisonment.

There was a significant increase in the number of reported incidents of local authorities coercing Hmong Christian converts to publicly [renounce](#) their faith, including some who attended state-controlled Protestant churches. Those who refused to

comply [faced](#) threats and physical assaults, hefty fines, dispossession of properties that threaten their livelihood, denial of important identification documents and birth certificates that render them effectively stateless, and banishment from families and local Hmong communities.

Meanwhile, harassment of Catholic communities also increased. In February, officials from Vu Ban, Hoa Binh Province, [disrupted](#) a Mass celebrated by Archbishop Joseph Vu Van Thien of Hanoi and other priests. The Hanoi Archdiocese [delivered](#) a formal letter of complaint to the provincial government, protesting the local authorities’ frequent harassment and [urging](#) them to respect the religious freedom of Catholics in that province. Additionally, land [disputes](#) between Catholics and local governments [persisted](#).

Working with state-controlled Cao Dai groups, local authorities disrupted and banned home-based independent Cao Dai religious activities and observance of important rituals, demanding that adherents obtain approval for such activities and join the state-controlled organization. Authorities in An Giang and Dong Thap provinces similarly [prevented](#) or [disrupted](#) home-based religious activities of independent Hoa Hao Buddhists.

Authorities [harassed](#) members of the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). In December, local authorities in Ngoc Hoi district, Kon Tum Province, destroyed a UBCV pagoda, reportedly in retaliation against its abbot’s refusal to join the state-controlled Buddhist church. Moreover, local authorities [threatened](#) to demolish a religious hall built by Khmer-Krom Theravada Buddhists in Loan My Village, Vinh Long Province.

Authorities also continued persecution of other religious movements—including [Duong Van Minh](#), [Falun Gong](#), [Ha Mon](#), [the Jesus Church](#), [Peng Lei Buddhists](#), [the World Mission Society Church of God](#), and [Yiguandao](#)—characterizing many of them as “false” or “evil” religions and vowing to eradicate them. In May, the Hanoi Government Committee for Religious Affairs stated that such groups are [ineligible](#) for registering religious activities with the government.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a new binding agreement with the government to address worsening religious freedom conditions;
 - Engage with the Vietnamese government and relevant academic and civil society stakeholders to encourage amendments to the 2018 LBR and the two 2022 draft implementing decrees to conform to international standards, including by making registration simpler and optional;
 - Hold Vietnam accountable for religious freedom violations as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and press Vietnam to allow relevant United Nations (UN) Special Procedures unfettered access to the country to monitor and investigate religious freedom and other human rights violations; and
 - Direct the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to highlight and monitor the conditions of religious prisoners of conscience and to advocate for their wellbeing in prison and release.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Support legislative efforts to improve religious freedom in Vietnam, including by reintroducing the Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R.3001).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Vietnam in 2021](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Overview of Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution Globally](#)

Background

Vietnam is a religiously [diverse](#) country with related demographics [varying](#) greatly across research studies and reports. Religious traditions with a significant presence in the country include Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Catholicism, and Protestantism. As of December, the government had officially [recognized](#) a total of 16 religions and 43 religious organizations. Many groups, however, refused to register for fear of persecution or concern over their independence, which has led state-controlled and independent religious groups to compete for representation.

Vietnam's [constitution](#) states that citizens "can follow any religion or follow none" and that "all religions are equal before the law." The constitution also mandates respect and protection for freedom of belief and religion. However, it allows authorities to [restrict](#) human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of "national defense, national security, social order and security, social morality, and community well-being." Vietnam's [2018 LBR](#) contains similar provisions permitting restrictions on the right to religious freedom.

Legal and Policy Developments

In June, the government [introduced](#) two draft decrees to implement the LBR, one of which would replace the current implementing Decree 162/2017/ND-CP and [increase](#) control and suppression of registered religious activities. In addition, the punishment decree would [impose](#) harsh administrative punishments—including heavy fines, suspension of religious activities, and forced dissolution of religious organizations—on groups for vaguely and broadly defined "violations." The Vietnamese Communist Party's Vietnam Fatherland Front and the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) [organized](#) consultation sessions and conferences on the draft decrees. Experts warned that if passed in their current form, the two decrees could further restrict religious freedom in Vietnam.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience and Prison Conditions

Conditions for religious prisoners of conscience remained dire in 2022. For example, renowned religious freedom advocate and Hoa Hao Buddhist [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#) remained in prison, serving an 11-year sentence while suffering from heart, liver, and other health conditions. Authorities transferred him to Gia Trung prison in Gia Lai Province, where he was reportedly subjected to forced labor. [Phan Van Thu](#), founder of the An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist group, died while serving a life sentence in prison after reportedly succumbing to an unspecified medical issue in November. In May, court authorities in Dak Lak Province sentenced Montagnard Protestant [Y Wo Nie](#) to four years' imprisonment for reporting religious persecution to international organizations. Furthermore, despite the government's [announcement](#) in April that it would deliver religious books to 54 prisons, former prisoners [reported](#) that access to religious scriptures—especially those in [ethnic minority languages](#)—remained severely [lacking](#). They also reported poor prison conditions and that prison authorities often banned religious practices such as public or group prayers.

International Accountability

In October, Vietnam was [elected](#) to a three-year term (2023–2025) as a member on the UNHRC, despite [widespread](#) and [deep](#) concerns over the country's human rights record. The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization [expressed](#) concern over Vietnam's UNHRC candidacy due to the country's systematic violation of the rights of its citizens—particularly indigenous peoples—including its religious freedom violations through enforcement of the LBR. Four prominent international human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, [voiced](#) concerns about the country's human rights situation and called on the government to "ensure compliance with obligations under the ICCPR and other international human rights law" in accordance with its pledges. They also called on Vietnam to invite all UN special procedures and allow them "full and unfettered access to the country" to monitor human rights situations. Also in October, following that UNHRC election, six UNHRC special rapporteurs, including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, [sent](#) a Joint Allegation Letter (JAL) to the Vietnamese government concerning its human rights violations. The JAL raised specific concerns over the LBR's restrictions on religious freedom that affected independent, unregistered religious groups, including Khmer-Krom Theravada Buddhists.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2022, officials with the administration of President Joseph R. Biden, including [Secretary of the State Antony J. Blinken](#) and [Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman](#), [raised](#) Vietnam's human rights issues and its international human rights obligations with their Vietnamese counterparts. Marking the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief on August 22, the U.S. Embassy and six other Western embassies in Vietnam [issued](#) a joint statement condemning "continuing acts of violence targeting individuals, including those belonging to religious minorities, on the basis of religion or belief." The 26th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue convened in Hanoi in November, during which U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain [raised](#) religious freedom concerns. In May, Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ), and other members of the House of Representatives [sent](#) a letter to President Biden, urging him to raise religious freedom and other human rights concerns with Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh during the U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [placed](#) Vietnam on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom. While USCIRF has recommended Vietnam's designation as a CPC every year since 2002—finding that despite some notable areas of improvement, "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom within the meaning of IRFA persist—the State Department had previously designated it as a CPC only in 2004 and 2005.