

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom in Vietnam remained poor. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and government increasingly sought to regulate and control religious affairs through state-sponsored religious organizations. Authorities detained, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured members and advocates of unrecognized religious communities that sought to operate independently of state control.

The Vietnamese government continued to wield the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) and its implementing decrees to strictly govern religious affairs. In March, Decree No. 95/2023/ND-CP went into effect, replacing two previous implementing decrees—Decree 162 and the punishment decree—which were already restrictive and suppressive, such as by mandating that religious groups report personnel and location changes to the government. This new decree allows authorities to further demand financial records from religious organizations and suspend religious activities for unspecified, vaguely worded “serious violations.”

As of December, USCIRF’s Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) [Victims List](#) included over 80 prisoners whom the Vietnamese government has punished for their religious activities or religious freedom advocacy. In March, the government sentenced Y Krec Bya, a Montagnard Protestant missionary of the independent Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ (CHECC), to 13 years’ imprisonment. In April, authorities imposed an additional charge on [Le Tung Van](#), the 92-year-old head of the independent Peng Lei House Buddhist Church, who is serving his sentence for allegedly “abusing democratic freedoms” under house arrest due to his age and ill health. In May, a court in Tra Vinh Province upheld the verdicts and sentences on similar charges of two Khmer Krom religious freedom activists, [Thach Chuong](#) and [To Hoang Chuong](#).

Ethnic Montagnard and Hmong Christians in the Central and Northwest Highlands remained particularly vulnerable to persecution, including detention, arrest, imprisonment, torture, and forced renunciation of faith. Local authorities actively cracked down

on independent Montagnard Protestants’ religious activities. In January, the government sentenced religious freedom activist [Nay Y Blang](#) to over four years’ imprisonment for his activities and affiliation with the unrecognized CHECC. In March, preacher Y Bum Bya was found dead after police summoned him to meet after reportedly threatening and beating him. In September, Dak Lak authorities detained evangelist Y Thinh Nie for repeatedly refusing to join the state-controlled church, and they held a public denunciation in October to pressure more than 20 Montagnard Christians to join the registered church. Unknown assailants reportedly [shot](#) two Montagnard pastors in Dak Lak for leading independent church. The government also pressured the Thai government to extradite Montagnard religious freedom activist Y Quynh Bdap, who could face severe punishment if returned to Vietnam.

Government repression against unrecognized Buddhist and Cao Dai groups also persisted throughout the year. In March, Tam Binh District police demolished part of Dai Tho Pagoda after arresting its Khmer Krom abbot, Thach Chanh Da Ra, and a follower on the charge of “abusing democratic freedoms.” In November, the Vinh Long provincial court slapped more charges on them, before sentencing additional Buddhists in the same case. In June, police briefly detained popular independent Buddhist monk Thich Minh Tue and his followers in Thua Thien Hue Province. In April, An Giang provincial authorities banned independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from commemorating the death of their founder. The independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam continued to face obstacles and harassment over their religious activities. Police officers and followers of the state-controlled Cao Dai 1997 Sect harassed independent Cao Dai followers, preventing their visits to temples, worship practices, and funeral arrangements. In May, police officers interrogated Tran Van Duc after his April meeting with U.S. consular staff on the ongoing harassment of independent Cao Dai adherents.

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);
- Assess the 2005 U.S.-Vietnam binding agreement to determine whether Vietnam’s backsliding in religious freedom violated the terms of the agreement, and take appropriate actions such as linking the removal of Vietnam’s non-market

economy status with substantive improvements in religious freedom;

- Engage with the Vietnamese government to amend its 2018 Law on Belief and Religion and its implementing decrees to conform to international standards, including by making registration simpler and optional; and
- Facilitate unfettered access for relevant United Nations (UN) agencies and staff to Vietnam, particularly the Central Highlands, to monitor and investigate religious

freedom violations before the late 2025 vote on the 2026 UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) membership.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Advocate for religious freedom improvements in Vietnam, with an emphasis on the release of FoRB prisoners; and
- Reintroduce legislative efforts to improve religious freedom in Vietnam, such as the Vietnam Human Rights Act ([H.R. 3172](#)).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#)
- **Special Report:** [Revisiting the CPC Designation: Improving Accountability and Engaging Productively to Advance Religious Freedom Abroad](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Vietnam is a religiously [diverse](#) country with related demographics [varying](#) greatly across available estimates. As of June, the government officially recognized 43 religious organizations and 16 religions. Religious traditions with a significant presence in the country include Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Vietnam's constitution acknowledges that all religions are equal before the law and that the state must respect and protect FoRB. In practice, however, the government widely restricts religious freedom—especially for members of independent religious groups—through the 2018 LBR, its implementing decrees, and other laws.

Repression of Other Religious Communities

Despite a recent warming of Vatican-Vietnam relations, Vietnamese Catholics continued to face serious challenges to their FoRB—including a longstanding government precedent of expropriating Catholic properties. In May, parishioners of Thanh Hai Catholic Church in Binh Thuan Province protested the government's plan to build a new school on land that the parish reportedly owned. Redemptorist monks in Hanoi also spoke out against the government's project to build a new hospital on the land of the monastery in Thai Ha Parish, which the city authorities expropriated over half a century ago.

The government also continued to persecute groups it deemed as “strange, false, or heretical” religions. For example, in February, the Cao Bang provincial government announced that it had eliminated the activities of the Duong Van Minh religion throughout the province. Similarly, the Dien Bien provincial government also claimed that it had completely eliminated the Ba Co Do religion, an effort the government started in 2017.

International Accountability

In January, Vietnamese authorities tried and sentenced 100 individuals—most of whom are predominately Christian Montagnards—on terrorism charges in response to police station attacks in Dak Lak Province several months earlier. In June, UN Special Rapporteurs, including the Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [wrote](#) to the government of Vietnam to express their concerns over these and other violations of religious freedom, including the criminalization of religious leaders and worship as well as arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, and unexplained deaths in custody, in connection with that 2023 Dak Lak attack and

subsequent mass trial. In August, the UN Special Rapporteurs also [expressed](#) concern over the government's “discriminatory misuse of counter-terrorism law” against Montagnard Christian minorities, which has led to violations including arbitrary arrests and detention, incitement of civilian vigilantes, torture, and forced confessions.

In May, Vietnam went through its fourth cycle of the [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR), a mechanism by which the UNHRC reviews a country's human rights record. The government of Vietnam accepted 271 of 320 recommendations but rejected key ones on protecting religious freedom, including on ending forced renunciation of faith and amending the LBR. In September, human rights groups issued a statement to condemn the government's selective acceptance of the UPR recommendations, arguing that it demonstrates the government's determination to continue repressing unregistered religious groups, human rights defenders, and independent civil society. Vietnam is a member of the UNHRC and is seeking reelection to the UNHRC for the 2026–2028 tenure.

Key U.S. Policy

In August, then Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya traveled to Hanoi and met with the Vice Minister of Home Affairs Vu Chien Thang and the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to discuss advancing religious freedom, among other issues. In September, then President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with CPV General Secretary To Lam in New York, during which then President Biden emphasized the “United States' commitment to ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] centrality and respect for human rights.”

In [March](#) and [September](#), Representative Michelle Steel (R-CA) released statements criticizing the Biden administration for failing to designate Vietnam as a CPC and urging the U.S. Department of State to follow USCIRF's consistent recommendation for CPC. In June, then Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, joined three other Democratic senators in [writing](#) a joint letter to then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, urging the State Department to better address growing human rights concerns—explicitly including religious freedom—and to fully integrate human rights priorities into the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [placed](#) Vietnam on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom.