

# VIETNAM 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that all people have 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. The 2016 Law on Belief and Religion, which came into effect in January, maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups but shortens the time for recognition at the national or provincial level from 23 to five years. It also specifies the right of recognized religious organizations to have legal personality. Religious leaders, particularly those representing groups without recognition or certificates of registration, reported various forms of government harassment – including physical assaults, arrests, prosecutions, monitoring, travel restrictions, and property seizure or destruction – and denials or no response to requests for registration and/or other permissions. For example, six independent Hoa Hao Buddhists were imprisoned in February on charges of “resisting persons in the performance of their official duties.” There continued to be reports of severe harassment of religious adherents by authorities in the Central Highlands, specifically members of the Evangelical Church of Christ, and in the Northwest Highlands for H’mong Christians and Catholics, as well as for Catholic and Protestant groups in Nghe An Province. Religious group adherents reported local or provincial authorities committed the majority of harassment incidents. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration were reportedly able to practice their beliefs with less government interference, although some recognized groups reported more difficulty gathering together in certain provinces, including the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) (ECVN) in Quang Binh, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Ha Giang, and Hoa Binh Provinces. Others seeking to officially register their groups, including the United Presbyterian Church and the Vietnam Baptist Convention, also reported increased difficulty gathering in some provinces. Members of religious groups said some local and provincial authorities used the local and national regulatory systems to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close government management of their leadership, training programs, assemblies, and other activities. The government registered two religious communities, the Vietnam Full Gospel Denomination and the Vietnam United Gospel Outreach Church, during the year. Registration is the second step in the three-step process towards recognition and does not convey legal status. For the first time since 1998, United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) leader Thich Quang Do took up residence in a UBCV-affiliated pagoda. The government also

allowed renowned Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh to return to the country. Hanh resided at Tu Hieu Pagoda in Hue at year's end, and adherents reported no difficulties visiting him. Hanh also received diplomats and senior government leaders.

There were several reports of registered Cao Dai adherents preventing adherents of the unsanctioned Cao Dai from performing certain religious rituals. There continued to be some incidents of harassment of Catholics by the progovernment Red Flag Association, although the group reportedly dissolved itself in March.

The Ambassador and senior embassy and consulate general officials urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the independent UBCV, Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent and "pure" Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. They sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups and urged an end to restrictions on and harassment of groups without recognition or registration. The Ambassador, Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, and senior embassy officers advocated for religious freedom in visits across the country, including to the Central Highlands. The Ambassador and officials met regularly and maintained recurring contact with religious leaders across the country. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with the chairman of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs in Washington, D.C. in July and raised concerns about implementation of the new law, the status of religious believers detained or imprisoned, and the situation of ethnic religious minority groups. The Ambassador at Large and a senior official from the Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor raised issues of religious freedom during the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Washington in May.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 97 million (July 2018 estimate). According to statistics released by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), 26.4 percent of the population is categorized as religious believers: 14.91 percent is Buddhist, 7.35 percent Roman Catholic, 1.09 percent Protestant, 1.16 percent Cao Dai, and 1.47 percent Hoa Hao Buddhist. Within the Buddhist community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic majority, while approximately 1.2 percent of the total population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism. Smaller religious groups that combined constitute less than 0.16 percent of the population include a devotional form of Hinduism, mostly practiced by an

estimated 70,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area; approximately 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam); 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 (Church of Jesus Christ). Religious groups originating within the country (Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Phat Giao Hieu Nghia Ta Lon) comprise a total of 0.34 percent. A small, mostly foreign, Jewish population resides in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Other citizens say they 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.

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, including groups referred to as Montagnards). 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 any foreigners and stateless persons. The constitution 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 in order to violate the law.

The Law on Belief and Religion and implementing Decree 162, which came into effect on January 1, serve as the primary documents governing religious groups and their activities. At year's end, a decree prescribing penalties for noncompliance with the new law had yet to be finalized. The law reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion and that individuals 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 people, nationalities, or religions; cause public disorder; infringe upon the life, health, dignity, honor and/or property of others; impede the exercise of civic rights and performance of civic obligations; or conduct superstitious activities or otherwise violate the law.

The government recognizes 38 religious organizations and one dharma practice (a set of spiritual practices) that affiliate with 15 distinct religious traditions as defined by the government. The 15 religious traditions are: Buddhism, Islam, Baha'i, Catholicism, Protestantism, Church of Jesus Christ, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Buu Son Ky Huong, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Phat Duong Nam Tong Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao Tam Tong Mieu, Khmer Brahmanism, and Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition. Three additional groups – the Assemblies of God, Ta Lon Dutiful and Loyal Buddhism, and Vietnam Full Gospel Church – have “registration for religious operation” but are not recognized as official organizations.

The law provides for government control over religious practices and permits restrictions on religious freedom in the interest of “national security” and “social unity.”

The new law reduced the waiting period for a religious group, and its affiliate group or groups, to obtain recognition from 23 years to five years and for the first time specifies that recognized religious organizations and their affiliates are noncommercial legal entities. The law also specifies that religious organizations be allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws, but it does not specify which law prevails in instances in which the law may contradict other laws, or where other laws do not have clear provisions, such as the Law on Education.

The CRA is responsible for implementing religious laws and decrees, and it maintains offices at the central, provincial, and, in some areas, district level. The law lays out specific responsibilities for central-, provincial-, and local-level CRA offices and delegates certain religion-related management tasks to provincial- and local-level people's committees (i.e., local leaders). The central-level CRA 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.

By law, forcing others to follow or renounce a religion or belief is prohibited.

The law requires “religious practices” to register with communal authorities where the “lawful premises for the religious practice is based” and 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 CRA, depending on the geographic extent of the group’s activities. A registration for religious operation allows the group to organize religious ceremonies and religious practice; preach and conduct religious classes at approved locations; elect, appoint, or designate functionaries; repair or renovate the headquarters; engage in charitable or humanitarian activities; and organize congresses to approve its charter. To obtain this registration, the group must submit a detailed application package with information about its doctrine, history, bylaws, leaders, and members and proof it has a legal meeting location. The relevant provincial CRA office or the Ministry of Home Affairs (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 relevant provincial CRA office or the MHA is required 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 since the date of receiving the “registration for religious operation.” The 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 such recognition, the group must submit a detailed application package to the provincial or national level CRA, depending on the geographic extent of the organization. The application dossier must include a written request specifying the group’s structure, membership, geographical scope of operation and headquarters location; summary of history, dogmas, canon laws and rites; list and resumes, judicial records, and summary of religious activities of the organization’s representative and tentative leaders; charter; 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 relevant provincial people’s committee or MHA is required to provide any rejection in writing. Recognition allows the religious group to conduct religious activities in accordance with the religious 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 rights.

The law states that religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and believers have the right to file complaints or civil and administrative lawsuits, or make formal complaints about government officials or agencies (denunciations) under the relevant laws and decrees. The law also states that organizations and individuals have the right to bring civil lawsuits in court regarding the actions of religious groups or believers. There were no specific analogous provisions in the previous laws.

The law provides a separate process for unregistered, unrecognized religious organizations or groups of individuals to receive permission for specific religious activities by submitting an application package to the commune-level people's committee. Current regulations require the people's committee to respond in writing to such an application within 20 working days of receipt. The law specifies that a wide variety of religious activities require advance approval or registration from the authorities at the central and/or local levels. These activities include "belief activities" (defined as traditional communal practices related to ancestor, hero, or folk worship); "belief festivals" being held for the first time; the establishment, split, or merger of religious affiliates; the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); establishment of a religious training facility; 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 require advance approval, but instead require notification to the appropriate authorities. Activities requiring notification include recurring or periodic "belief festivals"; dismissal of clergy; conducting fundraising activities; notification of enrollment figures at a seminary or religious school; the repair or renovation of religious facilities not considered cultural-historical relics; ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious clergy (such as monks); transfers or dismissals of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); conducting operations at an approved religious training facility; routine religious activities (defined as "religious preaching, practicing religious tenets and rites, and management of a religious organization"); and internal conferences of a religious organization.

The law provides prisoners access to 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, or other types of confinement. This use and/or practice must not affect rights to belief/religion or nonbelief/religion of others or go against relevant laws. The decree states the Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of 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 are allowed to conduct educational, health, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws, but the law does not provide clarification as to which activities are permitted. In addition, construction or renovation of religious facilities must be undertaken in accordance with relevant laws and regulations on construction and foreigners participating in religious activities must abide by immigration law.

The law states that publishing, producing, exporting, or importing religious texts must be in accordance with laws and regulations related to publishing. 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. 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 be allocated or leased 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 in order 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. Religious institutions are not permitted 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. Those who disagree with the chairperson's decision may appeal to the minister of natural resources and environment or file 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, but not corporately as a religious establishment.

The renovation or upgrade of facilities owned by religious groups also 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. Private schools are required to follow a government-approved curriculum, which does not allow for religious instruction. The government does not permit religious groups to run private schools; however, some religious groups, such as Catholics and Buddhists, run kindergartens, and some Christian churches have seminaries.

The law no longer requires individuals to specify their religious affiliation on national identification cards.

There are separate provisions of the law for 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. Current 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**

On February 9, a court in An Giang Province sentenced six independent Hoa Hao Buddhists – Bui Van Trung, Bui Van Tham, Nguyen Hoang Nam, Le Thi Hong



Hanh, Le Thi Hen, and Bui Thi Bich Tuyen – to two to six years in prison on charges of “resisting persons in the performance of their official duties.” Bui Van Trung was additionally charged with “causing public disorder.” Le Thi Hen’s sentence was later suspended due to health concerns, and authorities had not yet forced Bui Thi Bich Tuyen to report to prison. According to the indictment by the People’s Procuracy of An Phu District in November 2017, the defendants “disturbed the public order and impacted the safety and order of the traffic, causing a traffic jam on national route 91C by hindering, obstructing, pushing, and screaming to provoke and denounce transportation police.” According to Radio Free Asia, the basis of the charges against Trung was that in April 2017 family members and friends attempted to hold an unregistered death anniversary commemoration in Trung’s home prayer hall.

On April 5, a court in Hanoi sentenced independent Hoa Hao follower and religious freedom and human rights activist Nguyen Bac Truyen and Protestant Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton to 11 years and 12 years in prison, respectively, for “carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the administration.” Both had been associated with a group called the Brotherhood for Democracy and were tried with several other prominent human rights activists. Truyen ran the Vietnamese Political and Religious Prisoners Friendship Association and, among other activities, advocated for the rights of independent and unregistered Hoa Hao followers. Ton was a long-time advocate for human rights and religious freedom. He had been a member of Interfaith Council in Ho Chi Minh City, a group composed predominately of representatives of unregistered religions.

The family members of Ma Seo Sung, a H’mong Protestant man who died in police custody in 2017, were forced by local authorities to leave their homes during the year after repeated harassment, including threats of arrest, from local authorities in Buon Ma Thuot, Dak Lak Province, after they publicized details of Ma Seo Sung’s death, according to individuals close to the family. The family said commune police arrested Ma Seo Sung in 2017 under suspicion of “searching for a new Christian homeland.”

On April 12, a court in Thai Nguyen Province sentenced four Falun Gong practitioners to a total of nine years’ imprisonment for theft. According to independent media, local authorities confiscated their assets (including drums, loudspeakers, and drumsticks) when they practiced spiritual exercises in a park. Subsequently, the four practitioners reportedly came to the authorities’ office and took back their assets without consent.

Many independent and unsanctioned religious leaders who participated in the 2018 Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference in Thailand reported they faced harassment upon their return to Vietnam, including Chang A Do, a local leader and member of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam who was harassed and threatened with arrest in October by Communist Party representatives from the central and local governments, and by police and plainclothes individuals in Doan Ket Village, Dak Ngo Commune, Tuy Duc District, Dak Nong Province, according to a nongovernmental organization (NGO). Government officials also prevented several from leaving the country to attend the event.

On October 3 and 4, commune and district police in Krong Pac District, Dak Lak Province, convened a public denunciation of Ksor Sun, Pastor Y Nuen Ayun, and Y Jon Ayun, all members of the Evangelical Church of Christ, according to an NGO. Police accused the individuals of going against the government and the Communist Party of Vietnam. Police reportedly said these individuals should be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison, and if they wanted to remain in the community, they must leave the Church of Christ.

In June staff working for the warden of Gia Trung Prison, Mang Yang District, Gia Lai Province, beat Pastor A Dao of the Evangelical Church of Christ, who advocated for religious freedom for his fellow church members in the Central Highlands, according to an NGO report.

Members of various ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands collectively known as Montagnards stated government officials continued to assault, monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily arrest, and discriminate against them, in part because of their religious practices. Officials stated that “Degar” Christians incited violent separatism by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands from 2001 through 2008. State-run media published articles cautioning individuals that Degar Protestantism aimed to undertake antigovernment activities.

In some cases, Montagnards stated ongoing social and religious persecution drove them to flee to Cambodia and Thailand, where some sought asylum. Several such asylum seekers in Thailand reported local-level (communal) Vietnamese authorities continued to harass them remotely, through social media and by harassing, intimidating, and in some cases threatening and physically assaulting family members back home.

In Song Ngoc Catholic parish, Vinh Diocese, Nghe An Province, there were multiple incidents of plainclothes individuals harassing parishioners and priests,

assaulting parishioners, and damaging church property and the property of parishioners, according to Catholic representatives and NGOs.

In April plainclothes individuals assaulted parishioners of Dong Kieu parish at Dien My Commune, Nghe An Province, according to Catholic representatives and NGOs.

On December 25, police from Nan San Commune, Si Ma Cai District, Lao Cai Province in the Northwest Highlands, reportedly stopped a Christmas celebration of the H'mong Gospel Missionary Church and assaulted adherent Hang Seo Pao for holding an unsanctioned gathering. Church members said they had applied to local authorities for permission to hold the gathering but were denied.

Throughout the year, local authorities in Trung Lap Ha Commune, Cu Chi District, Ho Chi Minh City, told members of the UBCV Lien Tri home pagoda to stop praying and to remove all banners and UBCV Buddhist flags. The authorities said persons attending the ceremony could continue to gather but could not give offerings, pray, or administer rituals, as their location was unregistered. According to one adherent, in August and September plainclothes police surveilled the pagoda and prevented monks from leaving.

A senior pastor of an unregistered Protestant church reported that local authorities did not allow his organization to organize summer camps for children in the Central Highlands and Northern Highlands and asked some members not to worship in Quang Ngai, Ninh Thuan, Dak Lak, and Dak Nong Provinces.

Members of the military were not permitted to read the Bible or practice religious rites at any time while on active duty; they had to take personal leave to conduct such activities, religious freedom experts reported. The Association for the Protection of Freedom of Religion reportedly sent a petition to the government in 2015 requesting soldiers be allowed to attend church while on duty; however, the association still had yet to receive a response. There were no clear regulations for religious expression in the military, with individual unit commanders having significant discretion, experts reported.

Authorities continued to deny some prisoners and detainees the right to religious practice. Officers at the Nam Ha detention facility, Phu Ly District, Ha Nam Province, continued to refuse to allow a priest to visit Catholic prisoner Ho Duc Hoa, according to Hoa's family. Prison authorities stated this was due to the lack of appropriate facilities inside the prison for the priest to perform services. Other

prisoners continued to report they were allowed to read the Bible or other religious materials and practice their beliefs while incarcerated. According to an NGO, independent Hoa Hao adherent Bui Van Trung was able to have a censored version of the Hoa Hao scripture in prison.

Registered Protestant, Buddhist, and Cao Dai leaders reportedly did not face the same difficulties as independent or unregistered Protestant, Buddhist, and Cao Dai leaders. Media carried reports of registered religious groups celebrating festivals without impediment.

On December 18, Joseph Vu Van Thien was installed as the new Archbishop of Hanoi at a ceremony attended by Catholic leaders from Vietnam and the Vatican and by members of the diplomatic corps. The prime minister also received a high-level Vatican delegation on December 18.

On September 24, local and central authorities permitted a Cao Dai festival commemorating the Holy Goddess Mother to be held at the Cao Dai Holy See. The festival drew the participation of hundreds of thousands of adherents and pilgrims, including foreign religious representatives, foreign diplomats, and international academia. Senior officials of Tay Ninh Province and the CRA also attended the festival.

The government stated it continued to monitor the activities of certain religious groups because of their political activism and invoked national security and solidarity provisions in the constitution and penal code to override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom. For example, the government impeded some religious gatherings and blocked attempts by religious groups to proselytize certain ethnic groups in border regions deemed sensitive, including the Central Highlands, Northwest Highlands, and certain Mekong Delta provinces.

Government treatment of foreigners seeking to worship or proselytize varied in practice from locality to locality. Foreigners were generally able to meet and conduct services. Municipal officials allowed multiple foreign religious congregations to meet. Some foreign religious congregations said they could conduct charitable activities with tacit, but not official, permission.

State-run media and progovernment websites sometimes equated particular Christian denominations and other religious groups with separatist movements, blaming them for political, economic, and social problems, particularly in remote areas in the Northwest and Central Highlands where there was a high concentration

of ethnic minorities. Progovernment websites repeatedly accused these groups of being “cover” for or “tools” of “hostile forces to act against the state,” “disrupt the great solidarity” or “destroy the [Vietnamese] culture” and warned the public not to be “fooled.” Many progovernment websites and blogs criticized various religious groups and believers who were critical of the authorities or engaged in any activities that the authorities deemed sensitive, including protests against China, the cybersecurity law, land confiscation, or various social and economic issues. Groups attracting the most vociferous criticism on these sites included priests and Catholics in the central part of the country, particularly in Nghe An Province, Falun Gong practitioners, and Protestants in the Central Highlands.

Catholic priests in the central part of the country continued to help organize a series of demonstrations calling for stronger environmental protection. Many Catholic churches in these provinces held demonstrations in June to protest draft laws on special administrative economic zones and a new restrictive cybersecurity law. Priests continued to assist parishioners in filing complaints and lawsuits against the government for financial compensation for losses suffered in the aftermath of a 2016 industrial disaster in the region. State-run media and progovernment blogs continued to publish material defaming priests who assisted activists and victims of the 2016 Formosa incident in which a steel mill discharged toxic waste into the sea, leading to a massive fish kill in the central part of the country. Priests who helped victims were reportedly pressured by authorities to leave their parishes. In February the Bishop of Vinh Diocese transferred Father Dang Huu Nam, who had served in Phu Yen Parish near the steel mill for three years. State-run media quoted the bishop as saying he was not pressured to make this decision.

Progovernment blogs published multiple articles criticizing Catholic priests and parishioners who were vocal in their opposition to the government on a variety of issues, including a cybersecurity law that human rights groups and others said could lead to violations of freedom of expression and other human rights, accusing them of receiving money from and “colluding with hostile forces with the purpose of inciting public disorder and acting against the Communist Party and State.”

In August police and local authorities in Hue surrounded the local UBCV temple and reportedly harassed, intimidated, and intercepted members of the Buddhist Youth Movement as they organized the movement’s annual summer camp.

Multiple Buddhist clergy of the recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha who supported land rights activists or were outspoken about suspected corruption

within the organization reported local authorities continued to harass them and members of their pagodas, including in Bac Giang Province and in Hanoi. They said harassment included intimidation of monks and nuns, expulsion by force of clergy from their buildings, suspected plainclothes police breaking into religious buildings, the destruction of pagoda property, and theft of cash donations from villagers. Central government authorities agreed to allow at least one of these individuals, a Sangha nun, to return to her pagoda if she ceased petitioning the government.

In November UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do stated he left the government-sanctioned Thanh Minh Monastery in Phu Nhuan District, Ho Chi Minh City, of his own accord to travel to his home province to bless a pagoda for his family. Do subsequently returned to Ho Chi Minh City and took up residence in the UBCV-affiliated Tu Hieu Pagoda, the first time he had been able to live in a UBCV pagoda since 1998. Earlier reports, primarily on social media, said Do's superior monk, Thich Thanh Minh, had been pressured by authorities and asked Do to leave because his presence caused political and economic problems for the monastery.

Other UBCV leaders stated the government continued to monitor their activities and restrict their movements, although they were able to meet with some foreign diplomats, visit other UBCV members, and maintain contact with associates overseas. General Secretary Le Cong Cau of the UBCV reported local police closely watched him and prevented him from traveling outside Hue.

Throughout the year, Falun Gong practitioners reported harassment by authorities in numerous provinces and cities, including Cao Bang, Lang Son, Son La, Nghe An, Hue, Lam Dong, Dong Thap, Ca Mau, Ho Chi Minh City, Nha Trang, Quang Ngai, Hue, and Hanoi. Harassment included local authorities asking them to leave the parks where practitioners had gathered and other public spaces, where individuals were blaring loud music and throwing items such as fermented fish sauce on practitioners.

State media reported authorities at different levels in the Northwest Highlands, including Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen Provinces, continued to state the Duong Van Minh religious group was a threat to national security, political stability, and social order. Authorities said eliminating membership in the group was a priority. During the year, authorities in Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang, and Bac Can collectively reportedly destroyed 38 structures used to store funerary objects used by the Duong Van Minh group and burned the funerary

objects inside. Authorities in these provinces and Thai Nguyen also reportedly encouraged schoolchildren not to follow the Duong Van Minh religion.

Throughout the year, there were numerous reports of harassment of H'mong Protestants in the Northwest and Central Highlands. Local officials in several provinces in the Central Highlands, including Doan Ket Village, Dak Ngo Commune, Tuy Duc District, Dak Nong Province, denied household registration, which is necessary for all Vietnamese citizens, to approximately 700 H'mong Christian individuals who had migrated there in recent years, according to an NGO and H'mong Protestant sources. As a result, many of their children were unable to go to school.

Some registered and unregistered Protestant groups continued to report local authorities, particularly in the Central Highlands, pressured newer congregations to affiliate with older, well-established congregations. Pastors said this practice was widespread in ethnic minority villages in Gia Lai and Kon Tum Provinces. Authorities reportedly also pressured smaller Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) congregations, some with as many as 100 followers, to combine into larger groups of up to 1,500 in order to be registered. Church leaders again stated such requests were unreasonable, saying many of the congregations were composed of a variety of ethnic minority groups with different languages and incongruent worship practices. Mountainous terrain and lack of infrastructure in the rural highlands prevented other SECV churches from sustaining the required minimum number of followers necessary to qualify for local registration.

Religious leaders expressed mixed views on the new Law on Belief and Religion. Some religious groups and experts continued to state the new law was a step forward in certain areas for religious freedom, including the reduced registration/recognition time and granting legal personality to religious groups. Some religious groups and experts expressed concern that a more precise legal approach and registration process could make the operations of religious groups – including registration of meeting points and clergy, expansion, and proselytization – more difficult. Religious leaders and experts continued to emphasize that the two implementing decrees, one still in draft form, and actual implementation of the law, particularly at the local level, would be critical, and expressed frustration at the uneven implementation to date.

The government organized multiple conferences and training sessions on the new law throughout the year at the local, provincial, and national levels, including a public presentation in May for Hanoi-based diplomats and government

implementers. Religious leaders in remote areas of An Giang Province stated they had received training on the new law and that it had been translated into local languages. Religious leaders continued to note existing laws and regulations on education, health, publishing, and construction were restrictive toward religious groups and would need to be revised to allow religious groups greater freedom to conduct such activities in practice.

Religious leaders and academics said the new law continued to enshrine in the country's legal framework significant restrictions and bureaucratic controls over religious activity. Many religious leaders expressed concern the law continued to give significant discretion to the government regarding approving or denying various types of applications. Some observers continued to say the new law was not in place to protect religious freedom but rather to serve and cater to the rules of the Communist Party. Groups also stated the law should allow religious organizations to conduct activities without the need for government approvals.

Registered and unregistered religious groups continued to state government agencies sometimes did not respond to registration applications or approval requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often did not specify reasons for refusals. Some groups reported they successfully appealed local decisions to higher-level authorities through informal channels. Several religious leaders reported authorities sometimes asked for bribes to facilitate approvals. Authorities attributed the delays and denials to the failure of applicants to complete forms correctly or provide complete information. Religious groups said the process to register groups or notify activities in new locations was particularly difficult.

Churches affiliated with the ECVN had difficulty registering with local authorities in Quang Binh, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, and Hoa Binh Provinces. The ECVN stated that more than 1,000 affiliates and a total of 500 of its meeting points were recognized, although there were many more it wished to register. Church leaders said that local authorities permitted individuals to gather without incident at unregistered meeting points in numerous provinces. Numbers were not available for the south.

Local authorities continued to cite general security concerns, such as political destabilization or potential conflict between followers of established ethnic or traditional religious beliefs and newly introduced Christian beliefs, as reasons to deny approval.



According to many Catholic bishops, parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations continued to face difficulty registering with provincial authorities, uneven and inconsistent enforcement of national laws, and a lack of accountability on the part of provincial authorities. Catholic leaders again stated 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, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai.

Hoa Binh authorities continued to deny Luong Son parish's application to become a parish-affiliate of Hoa Binh Diocese and did not respond to a similar request from Vu Ban parish, Catholic representatives reported. Authorities said the Long Son application was not complete and Vu Ban was a new parish, which the Church continued to dispute, according to Catholic authorities.

Some Buddhist, Protestant, and Cao Dai groups chose not to affiliate with any government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations, nor did they seek their own registration or recognition. Unregistered Buddhist, Cao Dai, and Christian religious groups, including members of the Interfaith Council, continued to regularly report some provincial authorities used local registration laws as a pretext to pressure, intimidate, threaten, extort, harass, and assault them, and discouraged their members' participation in the groups.

On November 9, plainclothes police in Lam Dong reportedly set fire to a storage room at the coffee plantation of Hua Phi, an unregistered Cao Dai master, the day after he met with foreign diplomats in Ho Chi Minh City. The storage room was completely destroyed, but no casualties were reported.

On September 11, the CRA granted a "certificate of registration for religious activities" to Vietnam Full Gospel Denomination at a ceremony in Ho Chi Minh City. On December 14, the CRA granted a "certificate of registration for religious activities" to the Vietnam United Gospel Outreach Church, also in Ho Chi Minh City.

The ECVN and the unregistered Vietnam Baptist Convention both reported increased difficulty gathering in well-established meeting points during the year, including in Bac Giang and Thanh Hoa Provinces. In their rejections of applications and disruptions of religious services, local authorities noted that they viewed prior gatherings as illegal and explained the meeting points had not fulfilled requirements for organizing and conducting religious gatherings. For example, they had "no legal representatives who coordinate with the authorities in

exercising the state management of religious activities in line with the law” or failed “to meet order and safety requirements.”

Throughout the year, independent Hoa Hao followers and activists reported local authorities, police, and suspected plainclothes police in several provinces, including An Giang, Vinh Long, and Dong Thap, and in Can Tho City established checkpoints to monitor and prevent them from travelling to the unregistered Quang Minh Pagoda, to participate in a major religious commemoration. Local authorities reportedly said the government would not allow Hoa Hao followers to commemorate anniversaries related to the life of Prophet Huynh Phu So.

On April 18, public security officials in Ko M’Leo Hamlet, Hoa Thang Commune, Buon Ma Thuot City, Dak Lak Province, came to a house church of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ, interrogated adherents about their religious activities, and told them not to worship in a group or teach the Bible because the church was not registered, according to an NGO. On April 27, public security officials in Ea Yong A Hamlet, Ea Yong Commune, Krong Pac District, Dak Lak Province, reportedly “invited” a churchgoer to the ward official’s office for interrogation on his religious activities and the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ. The officials forbade him to worship at home, attend services of the Evangelical Church of Christ, or attend other unregistered Protestant churches. During May and June public security officials in Tot Bioch Village, Chu Se Town, Gia Lai Province, and in Buon Ho Town, Dak Lak Province, monitored suspected evangelical Christians, interrogated them about their religious activities, and told them to recant their faith, according to an NGO.

Leaders and members of unregistered congregations reported police harassment, such as being detained for questioning, undergoing increased surveillance, and having their cell phones and Bibles confiscated. There were reports of severe harassment in Dak Lak, Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Binh Phuoc, Tra Vinh, and Phu Yen Provinces, among others.

In Muong Khuong District, Lao Cai Province, local authorities continued to prevent Catholic priests from conducting services in certain areas. A priest stated that authorities targeted him and his parishioners on July 31 after they visited parishioners in Cao Son and La Pan Tan Village at unregistered meeting points. Before the visit, the priest said he filed a registration request with the local authorities but received no response.

Although the law prohibits publishing of all materials, including religious materials, without government approval, in practice some private, unlicensed publishing houses continued to unofficially print and distribute religious texts without active government interference. Other licensed publishers printed books on religion. Publishers had permission to print the Bible in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ngong, H'mong, C'ho, and English. Other published texts included, but were not limited to, works pertaining to ancestor worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai.

On March 2, authorities permitted a showing of the film “Walk With Me,” a documentary on the doctrine of Zen Buddhism master Thich Nhat Hanh. The film was reportedly shown in more than 60 theaters throughout the country.

Some Protestant church leaders, Montagnards, and followers of Duong Van Minh stated that local authorities seized their land or property partly due to their religious beliefs or that they received less compensation for seized land than others not affiliated with these groups. Provincial authorities routinely dispersed religious gatherings and directed officials to organize public renunciations of Degar Christianity or other “unauthorized Christian beliefs” among ethnic minority communities.

In July 2017, the Thua-Thien Hue Provincial People’s Committee met representatives of the Thien An Monastery and Catholic Archdiocese of Hue to try to resolve a nearly 20-year-old land dispute related to the Thien An Monastery. At the end of the year, the dispute remained unresolved; both sides stated they welcomed the opportunity for dialogue.

During the year, Venerable Thich Khong Tanh and monks from the Lien Tri Pagoda, which district authorities in Ho Chi Minh City demolished in 2016, were still living at dispersed locations throughout the city. Tanh reported local authorities refused to offer any site to rebuild the pagoda other than the one previously offered in the Cat Lai area of Ho Chi Minh City, which Tanh said he found inappropriate.

On November 9 in Da Nang City, Son Tra District authorities in Da Nang City demolished the unregistered An Cu house pagoda, affiliated with the UBCV, after three years of land-use negotiations failed.

Relocation discussions between authorities and leaders of the Dong Men Thanh Gia (Lovers of the Holy Cross) Thu Thiem Catholic Convent and Thu Thiem Catholic Church continued at year's end.

On September 19, the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Natural Resources and Environment announced the city had granted land-use certificates to more than 800 religious entities consisting of a total area of more than 200 hectares (500 acres). The city reportedly aimed to issue land-use certificates to all local religious groups by the end of 2019. Local authorities granted the Kon Tum Archdiocese a land-use certificate during the year.

The government continued to restrict the number of students permitted to enroll in Catholic and Protestant seminaries. The churches' leadership said the numbers allowed were inadequate to meet demand. ECVN leaders said 23 students graduated from their Bible school in the last five years. The government continued to permit them to recruit new students every two years.

On December 17 in Ho Chi Minh City, the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church organized the opening ceremony of its first domestic Christian Bible College.

Authorities permitted Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Baha'i, and Buddhist groups to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities, and religious leaders noted increased enrollment in recent years. Students continued to participate in training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy organized at pagodas nationwide during summer holidays.

Some religious leaders faced travel restrictions, and leaders and followers of certain religious groups faced restrictions on movement by government authorities. On May 14, border guards in Bo Y Border Gate, Kon Tum Province, prohibited Catholic Redemptorist Father Dinh Huu Thoai from exiting the country without providing justification for his travel.

In January, February, and May, independent Cao Dai follower Hua Phi reported local authorities did not allow him to leave Lam Dong Province for travel to Ho Chi Minh City for medical treatment. He said he was allowed to seek treatment later in the year.

During the year, authorities lifted travel restrictions on certain religious leaders. Authorities again permitted Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh to visit Danang and Hue,

his second annual visit after a decade outside the country. Hanh resided at Tu Hieu Pagoda in Hue at year's end, and adherents reported no difficulties visiting him.

Protestant and Catholic groups continued to report that legal restrictions and 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 to expand participation in health, education, and charitable activities. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools seized from the Catholic Church in past decades, although Catholic leaders noted modest progress with local authorities in land disputes around the country. The majority of educational facilities owned and run by religious groups continued to be kindergartens and preschools.

In several cases, local authorities permitted religious organizations to operate social services and to gather for training. For example, in Hanoi and surrounding areas, city officials continued to allow Protestant house churches to operate drug rehabilitation centers, and a church affiliated with the Full Gospel Church in Quoc Oai, a district of Hanoi, noted progress in dealing with local authorities and expanding drug treatment operations following authorities' acceptance of the Full Gospel Church's Registration of Religious Operation. The registration had eased the affiliated church's operations in areas outside Quoc Oai as well, according to the church leader.

Most representatives of religious groups continued to report 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 more disadvantageous. Practitioners of various registered religions served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Many nationally recognized religious organizations, such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, as well as other clergy and religious followers, were members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella group for government-affiliated organizations under the guidance of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter and attended Vesak activities commemorating the birth of the Buddha. The official resumes of the top three CPV leaders stated they followed no religion.

While Catholics and Protestants could serve in the enlisted ranks (including during temporary mandatory military service), commissioned officers were not permitted

to be religious believers. Religious adherents continued to be customarily excluded through the military recruitment process.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were several reports of registered Cao Dai adherents preventing adherents of the unsanctioned Cao Dai from performing certain religious rituals. Registered Cao Dai members prevented the family of unsanctioned Cao Dai adherent Le Van Nha from burying him in the Cuc Lac Thai Binh Cemetery on January 7, according to a report prepared by the unregistered Cao Dai. Unregistered Cao Dai also accused the registered group of demolishing graves of unregistered Cao Dai in the Cuc Lac Thai Binh Cemetery. The group also reported that in January registered Cao Dai adherents prevented an unregistered Cao Dai follower from conducting the ninth-day posthumous rites for her husband unless she used a clergy member from the registered group in Ninh Phuoc Village, Ninh Thanh Ward, Tay Ninh City, Tay Ninh Province.

There continued to be some incidents of harassment of Catholics by the progovernment Red Flag Association, although the group reportedly dissolved itself in March. On February 23, social media carried reports that members of the Red Flag Association at an elementary school at Dien Doai Commune, Dien Chau District, Nghe An Province, intimidated and beat Catholic parents meeting with the school's leadership to get more information about the expulsion of their children after they refused to pay additional school fees.

The Catholic Institute continued to meet at the Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese's Pastoral Center located next to the St. Joseph Grand Seminary, while discussing a suitable permanent location with the city government. The current venue limited the institute's ability to accept new students because it received more applications than it could accommodate in the space.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Representatives from the Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of government officials and CPV leaders, including the president, prime minister, and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the CRA, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and in various provinces and cities. They stressed to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship.

The Ambassador and other officials at the embassy and consulate general urged 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; sought greater freedom for recognized and registered religious groups; advocated access to religious materials and clergy for those incarcerated; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. Embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases of abuse, as well as government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups, and ethnic minority house churches, with the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial- and local-level authorities. U.S. government officials called for the increased registration of church congregations around the country and for improvement in registration policies to make them more uniform and transparent. U.S. government officials also urged the government to resolve peacefully outstanding land-rights disputes with religious organizations.

The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with the Chairman of the CRA in Washington, D.C. in July and raised concerns about implementation of the new law, the status of religious believers detained or imprisoned, and the situation of ethnic religious minority groups. The Ambassador at Large and a senior official from the Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor raised issues of religious freedom during the annual U.S. Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Washington.

Representatives of the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom visited Vietnam in November and met with government officials from the MFA and the CRA as well as with registered and unregistered religious groups to discuss implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion and advocate for increased religious freedom, including allowing both registered and unregistered groups to exercise their rights freely, seeking accountability for reports of government harassment, and resolving lands-rights issues.

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officials met with religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious groups and attended religious ceremonies to demonstrate support for religious freedom. On December 11, the Ambassador and the Consul General visited Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in Tu Hieu Pagoda in Thua Thien, Hue. On September 24, the Consul General addressed an estimated one hundred thousand attendees at the registered Cao Dai Holy Mother Goddess Festival in Tay Ninh Province and underscored the U.S. commitment to religious freedom. Senior embassy and consulate officials at every

level traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, to monitor religious liberty and meet with religious leaders. Representatives of the embassy and consulate general maintained frequent contact with many leaders of religious communities, including recognized, registered, and unregistered organizations.