FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom in the World - Vietnam (2002)

Polity:
Appointed governor and partly-elected legislature

Political Rights:
7

Civil Liberties:
6

Status:
Not Free

Population:
na

GNI/Capita:
na

Life Expectancy:
na

Religious Groups:

Ethnic Groups:

Capital:

Additional Info:

Freedom in the World 2006

Freedom of the Press 2005

Nations in Transit 2004

Countries at the Crossroads 2005

Programs:

Visiting Fellows Programs

Exchange Programs

American Volunteers for International Development

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Overview

Signaling its intent to continue carrying out modest but contentious economic reforms, Vietnam's ruling Communist Party (VCP) in March 2001 chose as its leader Nong Duc Manh, a veteran politician with a reputation for stressing pragmatism over ideology. Manh, 60, takes over Vietnam's top leadership post at a time when the party is deeply divided over how far and fast to pursue privatization of large state firms and other marketoriented measures. Moderates seek faster reforms in the hopes of modernizing the impoverished Southeast Asian country and producing enough jobs to stave off social unrest. Party hardliners fear that loosening the state's control over the economy will undermine the VCP's tight grip on power. Meanwhile, authorities responded to unprecedented antigovernment rallies by ethnic minorities in the central highlands by arresting and sentencing some two dozen suspected protest leaders.

Vietnam gained independence from France in 1954 following a century of colonial rule and occupation by the Japanese during World War II. At independence, the country was divided into the French-supported Republic of South Vietnam and the Communist- ruled Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. Following a decade-long war that killed tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians, North Vietnam defeated the U.S.-backed South in 1975 and reunited the country in 1976.

Victorious on the battlefield, the Communist government proved unable to feed its people. The centralized economy grew at anemic rates, and Vietnam had to import rice. The government responded in 1986 by dismantling collectivized agriculture and encouraging small-scale private enterprise.

Spurred by the reforms, Vietnam's economy grew by 7.6 percent per year on average, and gross domestic product (GDP) doubled between 1991 and 2000, according to World Bank figures. The leadership, however, remained ambivalent about the pace and extent of liberalization because the reforms could undermine the government's tight political control. Farmers, now working for themselves, and private sector workers cannot be monitored as easily as those who depend on the state for their livelihood. Moreover, while the government has sold off thousands of small firms, privatization of large companies would likely throw millions out of work, possibly leading to a backlash against the regime. At the same time, the government faces

long-term problems if it fails to modernize the economy and create enough new jobs for the 1.4 million Vietnamese who join the workforce each year.

Manh, the new party leader, is widely viewed as having the ability to forge consensus between the party's conservative old guard and younger, reform-minded cadres. His elevation to the top post came at the VCP's ninth party congress, which nominally set out government policy for the next five years. Manh, who previously headed the national assembly, replaced Le Kha Phieu, 69, a staunch conservative who had blocked many economic reforms sought by younger officials. In choosing Manh, a northerner, and retaining Premier Phan Van Khai and state President Tran Duc Luong, the VCP also preserved the leadership troika's traditional balance between northern, central, and southern Vietnam.

The International Monetary Fund agreed in April to provide Hanoi with a threeyear, $368 million loan package aimed at helping the country restructure 1,800 stateowned enterprises, reform its debt-ridden state-owned banks, and free up trade and capital flows. Amid reduced demand for Vietnamese exports in Japan, the United States, and other key markets, economic growth slowed to 4.8 percent in 2001, according to preliminary World Bank estimates, from 5.5 percent in 2000. Exports make up 46 percent of Vietnam's GDP.

As it grappled with tough economic choices, the government also used soldiers, riot police, and water cannon to disperse an estimated 5,000 protesters from Protestant ethnic-minority groups known collectively as Montagnards, in central Daklak, Gia Lai, and Kontum provinces in early February. The protesters reportedly called for religious freedom, political autonomy for the highlands, and the return of ancestral lands confiscated for coffee plantations. Authorities arrested and in some cases tortured alleged protest leaders and banned gatherings of more than four people in some highland areas, according to the New York-based Human Rights Watch. By November, courts had sentenced at least 24 people to prison terms of up to 12 years on charges of disrupting security. Hill tribespeople routinely complain that many lowland Vietnamese have in recent years migrated to the hills and cleared land and forests to make way for plantations for coffee and other cash crops.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ruled by the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) as a singleparty state, Vietnam is one of the most tightly controlled societies in the world. Authorities jail or harass most dissidents, control all media, sharply restrict organized religion, and prevent Vietnamese from setting up independent political, labor, or religious groups. The regime, however, has in recent years tolerated some grassroots protests over nominally nonpolitical issues and has loosened its control over the day-to-day lives of ordinary Vietnamese.

Party leader Nong Duc Manh, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, and state President Tran Duc Luong are Vietnam's three most powerful leaders, although relatively little is known about how policy is actually decided. The VCP's 150-member central committee is theoretically the country's peak decision-making body, while the

politburo's fivemember standing committee oversees day-to-day political affairs. In addition, the partycontrolled Fatherland Front, a supervisory body, helps shape state policy. The 1992 constitution formally gave the VCP a leading role in running the country.

The 450-member national assembly generally does not initiate legislation or reject government bills. Delegates, however, have in recent years vigorously debated economic, legal, and social matters, aired local and provincial grievances, and criticized government corruption and inefficiency. Legislators also sharply question ministers in televised sessions. The Fatherland Front vets all national assembly candidates and allows only VCP members and some independents to run. Some 85 percent of delegates in the current national assembly are VCP members.

While sharply restricting political rights, the government has increasingly tried to address grassroots complaints under a 1998 decree directing local authorities to consult more with the public. In many provinces, however, complaints get bogged down in bureaucratic shuffling, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* of Hong Kong reported in May. Hanoi issued the decree in the wake of protests by several thousand farmers in northern Thai Binh province in 1997 over high taxes and embezzlement by local officials.

Hanoi has also increasingly tolerated small protests and other informal complaints over local grievances, which most often concern land compensation. Farmers and other groups have in recent years staged small protests outside the national assembly building and government and party offices. Thousands of Vietnamese also register grievances each year by letter or in person. In addition to land matters, citizens complain about government inefficiency, official corruption, economic policy, and opaque bureaucratic procedures.

Vietnam's judiciary is characterized by a "lack of independence," according to the U.S. State Department's February 2001 report on Vietnam's human rights record in 2000. Reports suggest that "party officials, including top leaders, instruct courts how to rule on politically important cases," the report said. Bolstering the party's control, judges serve only limited terms that are subject to review, and party-run councils select the courts' lay assessors. The assessors help decide cases but have no legal training.

In ordinary criminal cases, authorities often ignore legal safeguards in the criminal procedure code and hold many detainees for up to one year without trial, the U.S. State Department report said. The report also noted that judges often ignore the constitutional rule that defendants are innocent until proven guilty. Moreover, Vietnam's shortage of lawyers prevents many criminal suspects from obtaining legal counsel.

Police routinely arrest and detain suspects without written warrants and at times shackle, beat, or torture detainees and inmates, according to Human Rights Watch. Prison conditions are harsh, though not life threatening, according to the U.S. State Department report. It noted that many prisons are overcrowded, have poor sanitation, and do not give prisoners enough food.

The government holds some political prisoners, including religious dissidents, although there are no accurate figures on their number. Amnesty International believes that Vietnamese jails hold more than 20 political prisoners. The government denies holding any prisoners on political grounds.

In addition to jailing dissidents, authorities force some dissidents to live and work only in designated places, the U.S. State Department report said. They do this under a broad 1997 decree authorizing "administrative detention" without trial for Vietnamese whose offenses do not amount to criminal acts. There are no figures on the number of people subject to administrative detention, which can last up to two years.

To monitor the population, the government relies on a household registration system and on block wardens, who use informants to track individual activity. Authorities, however, have largely scaled back their surveillance of ordinary Vietnamese, focusing instead mainly on political and religious dissidents, according to the U.S. State Department report.

The party and government tightly control all media, and authorities have punished journalists and newspapers for violating official guidelines on permissible coverage. To this end, officials have jailed reporters or placed them under house arrest, taken away their press cards, and closed down newspapers, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported in March. Faced with the threat of punishment, journalists practice self-censorship on sensitive political matters. Newspapers criticize state policies but not the VCP and its monopoly on power nor individual government leaders.

Vietnam's constitution and criminal code both contain broad national security and anti-defamation provisions that restrict free speech, further hampering the press. Moreover, a media decree took effect in July that authorized fines for several offenses including republishing previously banned stories, intentionally providing false information to the media, and publishing articles containing pornography or "superstitious attitudes," Human Rights Watch said. The media are also constrained by a 1999 law that requires journalists to pay damages to individuals or groups who are harmed by reportage, even if the reports are true. The Haiphong Agricultural Materials and Transport Company sued Hanoi's Capital Youth newspaper in 2000 for harming the company's prestige with a series of investigative articles; the case is pending. In a practice that raises questions about the credibility of Vietnam's media, government agencies and private firms often give journalists cash in order to encourage positive reporting, the March Review article noted.

Vietnamese freely use the Internet. The government, however, blocks some politically sensitive sites and authorizes the state-owned Vietnam Data Communications company, the sole Internet access provider, to monitor sites accessed by subscribers. An August decree authorized fines for illegal Internet use while legalizing private Internet service providers. Vietnam has 82,000 Internet subscribers and an increasing number of public access cybercafes in major cities, according to 2000 government figures.

The regime sharply restricts religious freedom by tightly regulating religious organizations and clergy and cracking down on dissident religious groups and their leaders. The government requires all religious groups to register and get permission to hold training seminars, conventions, and special celebrations; build or remodel places of worship; carry out charitable activities or run religious schools; and train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy, the U.S. State Department report said. If they comply, registered groups are allowed to operate openly and their followers can worship freely.

Similarly, all clergy must join a party-controlled umbrella group, one of which exists for each religion the state recognizes: Buddhism; Roman Catholicism; Protestantism; Islam; Cao Daism, a synthesis of several religions; and the Hoa Hao faith, a reformist Buddhist church. The government restricts the number of Buddhist monks and Catholic seminarians, prohibits ordination into the Cao Dai priesthood, and prevents Protestants from running a seminary or ordaining new clergy, according to the U.S. State Department report.

For years, the government has tried to undermine the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Officials released several prominent UBCV monks in 1998 but continue to harass group members. Since 1981, the government has held Thich Huyen Quang, the UBCV's supreme patriarch, under limited detention at his pagoda in Quang Nai Province. Buddhists make up three-quarters of Vietnam's population.

Authorities reportedly also sometimes beat, detain, or otherwise harass members of independent Protestant house churches, according to the U.S. State Department report. They also enforce closure orders, in effect since 1975, on Hoa Hao places of worship, the report added. Hoa Hao followers fought the Communist forces during the Vietnam War.

Domestic violence against women reportedly is relatively common, but authorities do not vigorously enforce relevant laws, the U.S. State Department report said. Despite some government initiatives, trafficking of women for the purpose of forced prostitution, both within Vietnam and to China and Cambodia, continues to be a serious problem, the report added. Women are increasingly active in business but they continue to face discrimination in employment and wages, according to the report. They are also underrepresented in government and politics.

Ethnic minorities face discrimination in mainstream society, and local officials reportedly sometimes restrict minority access to schooling and jobs, the U.S. State Department report said. Minorities also can rarely take part in planning development projects that affect them, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported in January.

In the workplace, the government bars independent trade unions and weakly enforces child labor and other labor laws, according to the U.S. State Department report. Union leaders do have input on some health, safety, and minimum wage decisions, but focus mainly on increasing worker productivity, resolving disputes without strikes, and setting up social activities. In any case, with 70 percent of the

workforce engaged in agriculture, most Vietnamese workers are not unionized.

Workers have staged dozens of strikes in recent years, generally against foreign and private companies. In most cases, workers did not follow a legally mandated conciliation and arbitration process with management. At the same time, the government prohibits strikes in 54 occupational sectors and businesses.

Some 40,000 children between the ages of 8 and 14 work illegally either part-time or full-time, according to government estimates. Officials routinely require inmates to produce food and other goods for use in prisons for little or no pay, the U.S. State Department report said.

For many Vietnamese, particularly those in the private sector, the government's economic reforms have improved living standards and reduced official intrusions into their daily lives. However, only 1 million to 1.5 million of Vietnam's 40 million workers are in the private sector, a World Bank official told a June government-business forum.