



Freedom in the World - Vietnam (2003)

Polity:

One party

Political Rights:

7

Civil Liberties:

6

Status:

Not Free

Population:

79,700,000

GNI/Capita:

\$1,996

Life Expectancy:

68

Religious Groups:

Buddhist, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Christian, indigenous beliefs, Muslim

Ethnic Groups:

Vietnamese (85-90 percent), other, including Chinese, Muong, Thai, Meo, Khmer, Man, Cham (10-15 percent)

Capital:

Hanoi

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Overview

Vietnam held parliamentary elections in 2002 that were as tightly controlled as ever, while authorities cracked down on critics ranging from hill tribesmen to cyber-dissidents. The ruling Communist Party's efforts to solidify its tight grip on power came as it faces protests over corruption and land rights as well as a less-docile workforce empowered by its limited but potent market reforms.

Vietnam won independence from France in 1954, after a century of colonial rule followed by occupation by the Japanese during World War II. At independence, the country was divided into the French-backed 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 with reforms in 1986 that dismantled collectivized agriculture and encouraged small-scale private enterprise.

Spurred by the reforms, Vietnam's economy grew by 7.6 percent per year on average, and output doubled, between 1991 and 2000, according to World Bank figures. The Southeast Asian country is now the world's second-biggest rice exporter.

Vietnam's leadership, however, continues to be divided over the pace and depth of privatization and other market reforms. Moderates see deep-rooted reforms as the ticket to modernizing the impoverished country and producing enough jobs to stave off social unrest. Hardliners, though, fear that loosening the state's control over the economy will undermine the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) tight grip on power. They realize that farmers, who now work for themselves, and other private (business) sector workers cannot be monitored as easily as those who depend on the state for their livelihoods. Moreover, while the government has sold off thousands of small firms, privatization of large companies would very likely throw millions out of work, possibly leading to a backlash against the regime.

The CPV in 2001 signaled its intent to continue carrying out reforms, but in a gradual way, when it tapped as its new party leader a veteran politician who has a reputation for stressing pragmatism over ideology. Nong Duc Manh, now 61, is widely viewed as being capable of forging consensus between the party's conservative old guard and younger, reform-minded cadres. His elevation to the top post came that April at the CPV's ninth party congress, which nominally set out government policy for the next five years. In choosing Manh, a northerner, and then in 2002 reelecting Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and state President Tran Duc Luong, the party also preserved the leadership troika's traditional balance between northern, central, and southern Vietnam.

The May 19, 2002, parliamentary elections, meanwhile, offered little suspense, as all candidates for the 498-seat body had been vetted in advance by the CPV. The number of nonparty legislators elected shrank to 51 from 68.

The elections came as the government faced international criticism over its treatment of ethnic minorities in the mountainous central highlands. The watchdog groups Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said in January that they had documented beatings and jailings over the past year of dozens of returning hill tribe refugees who had been deported from Cambodia.

The refugees had fled Vietnam in early 2001 to escape a crackdown on members of hill tribes that came after several thousand mainly Christian hill tribesmen held protests in the highlands demanding more religious freedom, greater land rights, and political autonomy for the region. Vietnamese officials have "systematically arrested and repressed those they believe responsible" for the 2001 protests, Amnesty said in a December report. Hill tribesmen, known as Montagnards, routinely complain that their lands are increasingly being converted by lowland Vietnamese into plantations for coffee and other cash crops.

During the year, the regime also intensified its crackdown on pro-democracy activists. Several government critics were arrested, sentenced to long jail terms, placed under house arrest, or otherwise harassed by Vietnamese authorities.

The government, meanwhile, moved slowly in complying with a three-year, \$368 million loan package extended by the International Monetary Fund in 2001 to help Vietnam restructure 1,800 state-owned firms, reform its debt-ridden state banks, and free up trade and capital flows. Only 79 of the firms slated for privatization were sold off by the first half of 2002.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ruled by the CPV as a single-party state, Vietnam is one of the most tightly controlled societies in the world. The regime jails or harasses most dissidents, controls all media, sharply restricts religious freedom, and prevents Vietnamese from setting up independent political, labor, or religious groups. At the same time, authorities recently have tolerated some grassroots protests over nominally nonpolitical issues and loosened their control over the day-to-day lives of ordinary Vietnamese.

Vietnam's 498-member National Assembly generally does not table legislation or pass laws the party opposes. Delegates, however, question state ministers, air grassroots grievances, and debate legal, economic, and social matters. They also criticize officials' performance and governmental corruption and inefficiency. The party-controlled Fatherland Front, however, vets all assembly candidates and allows only CPV members and some independents to run.

In addition to using the National Assembly as an outlet for grassroots complaints, the regime has also tried to address bread-and-butter concerns with a 1998 decree that directs local officials to consult more with ordinary Vietnamese. In many provinces, however, complaints get bogged down in bureaucratic shuffling, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* of Hong Kong reported in 2001.

The leadership increasingly has also allowed farmers and others to hold small protests over local grievances, which most often concern land seizures. Thousands of Vietnamese also try to gain redress each year by writing letters to or personally addressing officials. In addition to land matters, citizens complain about official corruption, economic policy, governmental inefficiency, and opaque bureaucratic procedures. Underscoring these concerns, the Berlin-based Transparency International watchdog group ranked Vietnam in a three-way tie as the 16th most corrupt out of 102 countries covered in its annual survey of corruption for 2002.

Vietnam's judiciary is "subservient to the CPV," with the party closely controlling the courts at all levels and reportedly telling judges how to rule in political cases, according to the U.S. State Department's global human rights report for 2001, released in March 2002. Even in ordinary criminal cases, defendants often lack time to meet with their lawyers and to prepare and present an adequate defense, while defense lawyers are sometimes permitted only to appeal for clemency for their clients, according to Amnesty International. Moreover, many criminal suspects are unable to obtain counsel at all because of Vietnam's shortage of lawyers.

Jails are overcrowded, and inmates lack sufficient food, although prison conditions generally are not life threatening, the U.S. State Department report said. The report noted, however, that guards sometimes badly mistreat prisoners and frequently beat them. Similarly, Amnesty International said in November that it had documented dozens of cases of Vietnamese prisoners who were denied adequate medical care, shackled as a form of punishment, or held in solitary confinement for long periods.

Vietnamese jails hold some political prisoners, including religious dissidents, although there are no accurate figures on the number of prisoners of conscience. Their ranks include Le Chi Quang, a 32-year-old lawyer who received a 4-year jail sentence in November after he posted on the Internet articles critical of the government. Another political prisoner, Nguyen Khac Toan, received a 12-year sentence in December, after a trial that lasted less than a day, for allegedly passing information to overseas Vietnamese activist groups and helping farmers draft petitions to the government, according to Amnesty International. The government denies holding any prisoners on political grounds.

In addition to jailing dissidents, officials place restrictions on where some dissidents can work or live, confining some to house arrest, the U.S. State Department report said. They do this under a broad 1997 decree authorizing "administrative probation" for up to two years without trial for Vietnamese whose offenses are deemed to be punishable, without quite warranting "criminal responsibility."

To monitor the population, the regime relies on a household registration system and on block wardens, who use informers to track individual activity. Officials, 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.

All media are tightly controlled by the party and government. Officials have punished journalists who overstepped the bounds of permissible reporting by jailing or placing them under house arrest, taking away their press cards, or closing down their newspapers, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported in 2001. The media are also kept in check by a 1999 law that requires journalists to pay damages to groups or individuals that are found to be harmed by press articles, even if the reports are true. At least one suit has been filed under this law, although it was withdrawn. In this stifling environment, journalists practice self-censorship on sensitive political and economic matters.

The media, nevertheless, are sometimes permitted to report on high-level governmental corruption and mismanagement. The regime, however, strictly prohibits the media, or ordinary Vietnamese, from promoting democracy, questioning the CPV's leading role, or criticizing individual governmental leaders or the regime's human rights record. These restrictions are backed up by tough national security and anti-defamation provisions in the constitution and criminal code.

The government allows Vietnamese access to the Internet, but blocks some politically sensitive sites and requires service providers and cyber cafe owners to monitor their customers' use of the Internet. In 2002, the government also ordered all domestic Web sites to obtain licenses. Vietnam has some 150,000 Internet users, according to official figures.

The regime sharply restricts religious freedom by tightly regulating religious organizations and clergy and cracking down on independent religious groups and their leaders. All religious groups must register with the government. They also must get permission to build or remodel places of worship; run religious schools or do charitable work; hold conventions, training seminars, and special celebrations; and train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy, according to the U.S. State Department report.

As a result of these regulations, religious groups generally have trouble expanding schools, obtaining teaching materials, publishing religious texts, and increasing the number of students training for the clergy, the U.S. State Department report said. Among the hardest hit by the regulations are the Cao Daiists, who are prohibited

from ordaining new priests, and Protestants, who are barred from running seminaries and ordaining new clergy; the regulations are enforced most strictly in the northwestern provinces and central highlands, the report added.

Officials also enforce closure orders, in effect since 1975, on Hoa Hao places of worship, according to the U.S. State Department report. Amnesty International said in October that members of the Hoa Hao faith have been jailed over the past year on charges that the London-based rights group believes are linked solely to their religious practices. Hoa Hao followers fought the Communist forces during the Vietnam War.

Both religious groups and most individual clergy must join a party-controlled supervisory body, one of which exists for each religion the state recognizes. These are: Buddhism; Roman Catholicism; Protestantism; Islam; Cao Daim, a synthesis of several religions; and the Hoa Hao faith, a reformist Buddhist church.

Officials frequently jail, arrest, or otherwise harass worshipers who belong to independent religious groups that refuse to join one of the supervisory bodies, according to Amnesty International. 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. Buddhists make up three-quarters of Vietnam's population.

Authorities reportedly also subject underground Protestant worshipers in the central highlands and northwestern provinces to "severe abuses," according to the U.S. State Department report, including jailing some congregants and shutting down some churches. Meanwhile, ethnic Hmong converts to Christianity, particularly in the northern provinces of Lao Cai and Lai Chau, have complained since the late 1980s that they are often jailed, harassed, and otherwise pressured to abandon their religious faith by provincial officials, according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Vietnamese women are increasingly active in business, but they continue to face unofficial employment and wage discrimination, according to the U.S. State Department report. They also hold relatively few senior positions in government and politics.

Domestic violence against women reportedly is relatively common, and officials do not vigorously enforce relevant laws, the U.S. State Department report said. Despite some governmental initiatives to protect women trafficking of women and girls, both within Vietnam and into China and Cambodia, continues to be a serious and growing problem, the report added. Women are trafficked for both labor and sexual exploitation. Meanwhile, roughly 40,000 Vietnamese children between the ages of 8 and 14 are working illegally full- or part-time, according to official figures.

Vietnam's ethnic minorities face unofficial discrimination in mainstream society, and local officials reportedly sometimes restrict minority access to schooling and jobs, according to the U.S. State Department report. Minorities also generally have

little input into development projects that affect them, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported in 2001.

In the workplace, the government prohibits independent trade unions and only weakly enforces child labor and other labor laws, the U.S. State Department report said. Despite the ban on free trade unions, hundreds of independent "labor associations" have been permitted to represent many workers at individual firms and in some service occupations. In any case, the vast majority of Vietnamese workers are small-scale farmers in rural areas who are not unionized in any way.

Workers have staged dozens of strikes in recent years, generally against foreign and private companies. The government has tolerated the strikes even though in most cases the workers have not followed a legally mandated conciliation and arbitration process with management. The regime's ban on independent trade unions extends to all private groups, such as human rights organizations, whose agenda touches on politics.