



Freedom in the World - Vietnam (2006)

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

7

Civil Liberties:

5*

Status:

Not Free

Population:

83,300,000

GNI/Capita:

\$480

Life Expectancy:

72

Religious Groups:

Buddhist (9.3 percent), Catholic (6.7 percent), Hoa Hao (1.5 percent), Cao Dai (1.1 percent), Protestant (0.5 percent), Muslim (0.1 percent), other (80.8 percent)

Ethnic Groups:

Kinh [Viet] (86.2 percent), Tay (1.9 percent), Thai (1.7 percent), Muong (1.5 percent), Khme (1.4 percent), Hoa (1.1 percent), Nun (1.1 percent), Hmong (1 percent), other (4.1 percent)

Capital:

Hanoi

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Ratings Change

Vietnam's civil liberties rating improved from 6 to 5 due to slight improvements in religious freedom.

Overview

Prime Minister Phan Van Khai made a state visit to the United States in June 2005, the first such official visit by a Vietnamese head of state since the end of the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, the government appeared to allow slightly greater religious freedom during the year.

Vietnam won independence from France in 1954. At independence, the country was divided into the Western-backed Republic of South Vietnam and the Commu-nist-ruled Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. A war erupted between the two sides, and U.S. military support for South Vietnam persisted for more than a decade. The two sides signed a peace treaty in 1973, officially ending the war, and the United States agreed to immediate and total withdrawal of troops. The last U.S. troops left on March 29, 1973. In 1975, North Vietnam claimed victory over the South and united the country the following year.

Poor economic policies on the heels of decades of war left the tattered country in deep poverty. In 1986, the government began economic reforms, and the country has since been on a steady path of economic growth. Tourism is a major source of revenue, as is the export of foodstuff and manufactured products, and a stock market opened in 2000. Nevertheless, Vietnam's leadership continues to be divided over the pace and depth of privatization and other market reforms. Also, political reform has not followed economic change: official corruption and abuses are widespread, despite the prosecution of a few high-ranking officials, and the government continues to suppress religious freedom, the media, and any criticism of the state.

In 2001, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) elected Nong Duc Manh as its new leader. The following year, Phan Van Khai was chosen as prime minister and Tran Duc Luong as state president. The appointment of these three men from northern, central, and southern Vietnam preserved the leadership troika's traditional regional balance. In the May 2002 parliamentary elections, all three were appointed to second five-year terms.

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The United States has been pressuring Hanoi to improve its human rights record through high-profile government reports, and the U.S. Congress even attempted to link economic aid to the release of political and religious prisoners. Apparently in response to this pressure, in 2005, the government stopped disrupting open celebration of Catholic masses with more than 1,000 congregants. Priests were reportedly able to travel freely in

the country. Vietnam, with an estimated 5 million to 8 million followers, has the second largest Roman Catholic population in Southeast Asia, after the Philippines. The number of religious prisoners is estimated to have dropped from 45 to 6, and a new religious ordinance relaxed many restrictions on religious groups, including allowing charitable activities and freer movement of clergy across the country.

During a trip by Prime Minister Khai in June to the United States-the first such official visit by a Vietnamese head of state since the end of the Vietnam War-a bilateral agreement to expand religious freedom was signed. The visit was well publicized in Vietnam and highlighted by the government media as a new page in bilateral relations.

As the number of private entrepreneurs continues to increase-and many more CPV members and their families become involved in business-the CPV will consider allowing membership for private entrepreneurs at the 10th party congress in April 2006.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Citizens of Vietnam cannot change their government democratically. Politics and the government are controlled by the CPV, the sole political party, and its Central Committee is the top decision-making body in Vietnam. The National Assembly, consisting of 498 members elected to five-year terms, generally follows the party's dictates in legislation. Delegates to the parliament can speak about grassroots complaints, influence legislation, question state ministers, and debate legal, social, and economic issues-within limits set by the party. In 1999, a former high-ranking party member, Tran Do, was expelled from the CPV after openly calling for more democracy and freedom of expression.

Although senior party and government officials have publicly acknowledged growing public discontent with official abuses and corruption, the government has mainly responded with a few high-profile prosecutions of government officials and private persons. Thousands of people seek redress each year by writing letters to or personally addressing officials. Citizens generally complain about official corruption, economic policies, governmental inefficiency, opaque bureaucratic procedures, and unreasonable land seizures. Vietnam was ranked 107 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government tightly controls the media. Journalists who overstep the bounds of permissible reporting-for example, by writing about sensitive political and economic matters and the CPV's dictatorship-are brought to court, sent to prison,

or harassed. Publications deemed offensive or inaccurate are subject to official bans. A 1999 law requires journalists to pay damages to groups or individuals found to be harmed by press articles, even if the reports are accurate. At least one suit was filed under this law, although it was later withdrawn. Media reports on high-level governmental corruption and mismanagement provide a small outlet for public grievances.

Television is the dominant medium. Vietnam Television broadcasts to the whole country, and there are many provincial television stations. Satellite television is officially restricted to senior officials, international hotels, and foreign businesses, but many Vietnamese homes and businesses pick up some foreign stations via satellite. Some foreign channels, including CNN and the Discovery Channel, are broadcast via cable. About two million Vietnamese have access to the internet, which is tightly controlled by the government. A 2003 law bans the receipt and distribution of antigovernment e-mail messages, websites considered "reactionary" are blocked, and the government requires owners of domestic websites to submit their web content for official approval. In July 2005, the director of a publishing company was reportedly told to resign for his plans to publish a memoir, written by former deputy prime minister Doan Duy Thanh, that is critical of the CPV.

Religious freedom is restricted. All religious groups and most individual clergy must join a party-controlled supervisory body. One such body exists for each religion that the state officially recognizes-Buddhism; Roman Catholicism; Protestantism; Islam; Cao Daiism, a synthesis of several religions; and the Hoa Hao faith, a reformist Buddhist church. Religious groups must obtain permission to build or refurbish places of worship; run religious schools or do charitable work; hold conventions, training seminars, and special celebrations; and train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy. Appointments for Catholic bishops must be approved by the state. A Protestant seminary was reopened in 1973. Cao Daiists have largely been barred since 1975 from ordaining new priests.

Academic freedom is limited. University professors must adhere to party views when teaching or writing on political topics and refrain from criticizing government policies. In July 2004, a former academic was given a 19-month prison sentence for "abusing the right to democracy and freedom" and breaking a house arrest order made in October 2001. Also in July 2004, Pham Que Duong, a 73-year-old military historian, faced trial for signing a petition calling for reforms and measures against graft.

Freedom of association and assembly is limited. Human rights organizations and other private groups with rights-oriented agendas are banned, but a small number of nongovernmental groups promote environmental conservation, women's development, and public health. The leadership increasingly allows farmers and others to hold small protests to voice local grievances. The Vietnam General Conference of Labor (VGCL) is the only legal labor union, and it is closely tied to the CPV. All trade unions are required to join the VGCL and must obtain government approval to be created. In recent years, the government has permitted hundreds of independent "labor associations" to represent workers at individual firms and in some service industries. However, enforcement of child

labor, workplace safety, and other labor laws is poor.

Vietnam's judiciary is subservient to the CPV, which controls courts at all levels. Defense lawyers cannot call or question witnesses and sometimes are permitted only to appeal for leniency for their clients. While defendants have a constitutional right to counsel, scarcity of lawyers often makes this right impossible to enforce. Many lawyers reportedly are reluctant to take on human rights and other sensitive cases because they fear harassment and retribution by the state.

The police are known to abuse suspects and prisoners, and prison conditions are poor. The death penalty is applied mainly for violent crimes, but it has been handed down in cases involving economic and drug-related offenses. Vietnam has a number of persons in prisons for their political and religious beliefs. Fewer arrests and the release of religious prisoners in the past year reflect a small improvement.

Ethnic and religious minorities face unofficial discrimination in mainstream society, and some local officials restrict minority access to schooling and jobs. Minorities generally have little input into development projects that affect their livelihoods and communities. For example, 70 Montagnards ("mountain dwellers" in French) are serving long jail sentences for participating in demonstrations to protest land seizures and to demand greater religious freedom (many are Catholic). Vietnam is fast becoming the top producer of coffee beans in the world, and lands seized from the highland Montagnards are often turned over to lowland Vietnamese to grow commercial crops like coffee beans.

Ordinary Vietnamese, particularly those living in major cities, are increasingly free of government intrusion into their daily lives, including their choice of work, place of residence, and participation in economic and religious activities.

Economic opportunities have grown for women, but they continue to face discrimination in wages and promotion. Many women are victims of domestic violence, and thousands are trafficked internally and externally each year and forced into prostitution.