



Freedom in the World - Vietnam (2009)

Capital: Hanoi

Population: 86,200,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

Two journalists who had reported on high-level government corruption were found guilty in October 2008 of “abusing freedom and democratic rights”. Tensions over land use, sometimes between the government and religious groups, continued throughout the year. Former prime minister Vo Van Kiet, who was considered the architect of Vietnam’s economic reform and sometimes a blunt critic of the authorities, died in June. In November, the government announced strict enforcement of its two-child rule in an effort to control population growth.

Vietnam won full independence from France in 1954, but it was divided into a Western-backed state in the south and a Communist-ruled state in the north. Open warfare erupted between the two sides by the mid-1960s, and fighting persisted for more than a decade. A peace treaty in 1973 officially ended the war, but fighting did not cease until 1975, when North Vietnam claimed victory over the South. The country was formally united in 1976.

War and poor economic policies mired Vietnam in deep poverty, but economic reforms that began in 1986 have drastically transformed the country. Tourism is a major source of revenue, as is the export of foodstuffs and manufactured products; a stock market opened in 2000. However, political reform has not followed partial economic liberalization; criticism of the government is harshly suppressed, and official corruption is widespread. To protect the legitimacy and survival of the regime, recent governments have all declared anticorruption efforts a top priority and acknowledged that reform is needed within the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The leadership has also focused on closing the widening income gap between rural and urban populations in the country.

At the 10th congress of the CPV in April 2006, Nong Duc Manh was reelected as the party’s general secretary, a post he has held since 2001. Also that year, the CPV approved a proposal to allow members to engage in business, partly to attract young entrepreneurs into the party. In June 2006, Nguyen Minh Triet, head of the CPV in Ho Chi Minh City, was elected state president by the National Assembly, while Nguyen Tan Dung, a deputy prime minister, became prime minister.

To sustain economic growth, Vietnam needs foreign investment and access to the U.S. and other overseas markets. Restrictions on political activity eased as Vietnam prepared for accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, after Vietnam became the WTO’s 150th member in January 2007, the government embarked on one of the strongest crackdowns against peaceful dissent in recent years, with nearly 40 dissidents arrested and more than 20 sentenced to long prison terms in 2007.

About 900 candidates competed in the May 2007 National Assembly elections. Of the 500 deputies chosen, only 50 did not belong to the CPV. In August 2007, the National Assembly approved the new cabinet of Prime Minister Nguyen, which included two relatively young deputy prime ministers with strong economic expertise and fluency in English. The prime minister also reduced the number of ministries, from 26 to 22, for his 28-member cabinet.

Vo Van Kiet, who had served as prime minister from 1991 to 1997 and was considered the chief architect of market-based reforms, died in June 2008; he had also called for national reconciliation

in the run-up to the 2007 elections and urged CPV leaders to speak with political dissidents. Two prominent political dissidents, Thich Huyen Quang and Hoang Minh Chinh, died from natural causes during the year.

Rising food and fuel prices and the global credit crisis caused Vietnam's economy to slow during 2008, posing significant challenges for millions of low-income Vietnamese. While the government's population control measures have become more relaxed in recent years, the global economic slowdown renewed concern about the need to sustain economic growth, create jobs, and ensure social stability; in November, the government announced a strict enforcement of its two-child policy. Land disputes, which have become more frequent as the government appropriates land to lease to domestic and foreign investors, continued in 2008; victims rarely enjoy legal recourse, and the authorities have harassed or arrested participants of public demonstrations against these practices.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Vietnam is not an electoral democracy. Politics and the government are controlled by the CPV, and its Central Committee is the top decision-making body. The CPV is the sole legal political party, and no opposition parties are permitted. The National Assembly, consisting of 500 members elected to five-year terms, generally follows the party's dictates in legislation; all candidates for the assembly are vetted by the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an arm of the CPV, regardless of whether they are CPV members or independents. Delegates to the Assembly can speak about grassroots complaints, influence legislation, question state ministers, and debate legal, social, and economic issues, within limits set by the party. The president, elected by the National Assembly for a five-year term, appoints the prime minister, who is confirmed by the legislature.

Corruption and abuse of office are serious problems. Citizens complain about official corruption, governmental inefficiency, opaque bureaucratic procedures, and unreasonable land seizures. Although senior party and government officials have publicly acknowledged growing public discontent, the government has mainly responded with a few high-profile prosecutions of officials and private individuals rather than with comprehensive reforms. Vietnam was ranked 121 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 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 or the CPV's monopoly on power—are silenced using the courts or other forms of harassment. Foreign media representatives cannot travel outside Hanoi without government approval. Publications deemed offensive or inaccurate are subject to an official ban. 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. Under a 2006 decree, journalists face large fines for transgressions of censorship laws, including denying revolutionary achievements, spreading "harmful" information, or exhibiting "reactionary ideology." In October 2008, journalists Nguyen Viet Chien of the newspaper *Thanh Nien* and Nguyen Van Hai of the newspaper *Tuoi Tre* were sentenced to two years in prison and reeducation without detention, respectively, for reporting in 2006 on a major corruption case in which senior officials used development funds to gamble on European football matches. Two police officers were also accused of leaking unauthorized information on the scandal to the media; one was given a one-year jail sentence, and the other received an official warning.

State-owned Vietnam Television broadcasts to the entire country. Vietnam acquired its own dedicated satellite in April 2008. Although satellite television is officially restricted to senior officials, international hotels, and foreign businesses, many homes and businesses have satellite dishes. All print media outlets are owned by or are under the effective control of the CPV, government organs, or the army, although several newspapers have attempted to push the limits of permissible coverage.

Although the number of internet users continues to increase, the government maintains tight control of the internet through legal and technical means. A 2003 law bans the receipt and distribution of antigovernment email messages, websites considered "reactionary" are blocked, and owners of domestic websites must submit their content for official approval. Cyber cafés are

required by law to register the personal information of and record the sites visited by users. Internet service providers face fines and closure for violating censorship rules. Ho Thi Bich Khuong, a leading internet writer advocating farmers' rights, was sentenced in April 2008 to two years in prison and three years of administrative detention for publishing reports on foreign websites about human rights violations in Vietnam. A government decree issued in December specifies the types of information that private bloggers may legally post on their blogs.

Religious freedom is still restricted, but the situation has improved in recent years due to international pressure and greater integration with the global economy. All religious groups and most individual clergy members 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 for most activities, including personnel decisions and building renovations. A small number of religious leaders and adherents remain in prison or face other forms of government harassment. In recent years, the Catholic Church has been allowed to select its own new bishops and priests, although they must still be approved by the government, and clergy members have enjoyed greater freedom to travel both domestically and internationally.

Academic freedom is limited. University professors must refrain from criticizing government policies and adhere to party views when teaching or writing on political topics. The state appears to act most harshly against prominent prodemocracy activists. Private citizens can generally speak freely in private discussion without fear of repercussions.

Freedoms of association and assembly are restricted. Human rights organizations and other private groups with rights-oriented agendas are banned; a small but active community of nongovernmental groups promotes environmental conservation, women's development, and public health.

The Vietnam General Conference of Labor (VGCL), closely tied to the CPV, is the only legal labor union. All trade unions are required to join the VGCL. In recent years, the government has permitted hundreds of independent "labor associations" to represent workers at individual firms and in some service industries. Farmer and worker protests against local government abuses, including perceived unlawful actions to take away their land, and unfair or harsh working conditions have become more common. The central leadership uses such public demonstrations to pressure local governments and businesses to comply with tax laws, environmental regulations, and wage agreements. Enforcement of child labor, workplace safety, and other labor laws remains poor. In February 2008, workers at a Taiwanese-owned factory threatened to strike if their demand for a 20 percent wage hike was not met. After more than a month of negotiations, the strike was averted at the end of March when the factory owner agreed to a 10 percent wage increase.

Vietnam's judiciary is subservient to the CPV, which controls courts at all levels. Defendants have a constitutional right to counsel, but lawyers are scarce and many are reluctant to take on human rights and other sensitive cases for fear of harassment and retribution by the state. Defense attorneys cannot call or question witnesses and are only infrequently permitted to request leniency for their clients.

Police can hold individuals in administrative detention for up to two years on suspicion of threatening national security. The police are known to abuse suspects and prisoners, and prison conditions are poor. Many have been imprisoned for their political and religious beliefs; though there have been fewer arrests and more releases of religious prisoners in recent years. The death penalty is applied mainly for violent crimes, but it has been handed down in cases involving economic or drug-related offenses.

Ethnic and religious minorities face discrimination in mainstream society, and some local officials restrict their access to schooling and jobs. Minorities generally have little input on development projects that affect their livelihoods and communities. Human rights groups have accused the government of arresting more than 350 Montagnards ("mountain dwellers" in French) since 2001, and many are given long prison terms for protesting against land seizures and demanding greater religious freedom (many are Catholic).

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. In 2007, hundreds of farmers from the Mekong Delta region surrounded a government building in Ho Chi Minh City to demand the return of their land. In March 2008, Bui Kim Thanh, an activist who defended victims of land confiscation, was arrested and committed to a mental hospital. Authorities reportedly harassed and arrested some members of large gatherings of Catholics in 2008 who were taking part in prayer vigils in front of disputed properties.

Economic opportunities have grown for women, but they continue to face discrimination in wages and promotion. Many are victims of domestic violence, and thousands of women each year are trafficked internally and externally and forced into prostitution. In April 2008, police arrested members of a gang responsible for smuggling 30 babies to China where they were sold between July 2007 and early 2008.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*