

VIETNAM 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that all people have the right to freedom of belief and religion. Regulations governing religion permit restrictions on religious freedom in the stated interest of national security and social unity. Government authorities continued to limit the activities of unregistered religious groups, particularly those the government believed to be engaged in political activity, while members of registered groups were able to practice their beliefs with less interference, according to reports. The government continued to restrict the activities of all religious groups in education and health and required authorization for many other activities. Some members of unregistered groups reported various forms of governmental harassment, including, but not limited to, physical assault, short-term detention, prosecutions, monitoring, restrictions on travel, and denials of registration and/or other permissions. Government treatment of religious groups varied widely from region to region and among the central, provincial, and local levels. Religious followers reported local or provincial authorities, rather than central authorities, committed the majority of harassment incidents. Some local and provincial authorities systematically and openly used the local and national regulatory systems to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close governmental management of their leadership structures, training programs, assemblies, and other activities. There were numerous reports of physical assaults, detention, and property destruction in rural provinces, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands.

There were some reports of tensions within the H'mong ethnic group concerning religious observance.

The U.S. President and Secretary of State, in meetings with senior government officials, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. The U.S. embassy and consulate general urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups; sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups; and urged an end to restrictions on and harassment of unregistered groups. U.S. officials maintained regular contact with religious leaders across the country. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom discussed religious freedom concerns with government officials during the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in

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May and met a broad range of registered and unregistered religious groups. The Assistant Secretary traveled to Vietnam in August, where he advocated for improvements to freedom of religion in law and practice.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 94.3 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the government's Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), approximately 95 percent of the population professes religious beliefs. More than half of the population identifies as Buddhist. Within that community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation by ethnic majority Kinh (Viet), while approximately 1.2 percent of the population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism. Roman Catholics constitute 7 percent of the total population; Cao Dai, 2.5 to 4 percent; Hoa Hao, 1.5 to 3 percent; and Protestants, 1 to 2 percent.

Smaller religious groups that together comprise less than 0.2 percent of the population include 50,000 ethnic Cham, who mostly practice a devotional form of Hinduism in the south-central coastal area; approximately 100,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam); an estimated 8,000 members of the Bahai Faith; and approximately 1,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Religious groups originating within the country (Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, To Tien Chinh Giao) and religious groups relatively new to the country (such as Brahmanism) comprise a total of 1.3 million adherents. A small, mostly foreign Jewish population exists in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Other citizens claim 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, which include groups also referred to as Montagnards, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that all people 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 “taking advantage of a belief or religion in order to violate the law.” In addition, the penal code establishes penalties for practices that undermine the state’s national unity policy.

The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the revised Implementation Decree (Decree 92), issued in 2012, serve as the primary documents governing religious practice. Both the ordinance and Decree 92 reiterate citizens’ rights to freedom of belief and religion while also stipulating that individuals may not use the right of belief and religious freedom to undermine peace, national independence, and unification; incite violence or propagate wars; conduct propagation 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, or impede the exercise of civic rights and performance of civic obligations; or conduct superstitious activities or otherwise violate the law.

The CRA is responsible for implementing the 2004 ordinance and administrative modifications outlined in Decree 92 and maintains offices at the central, provincial, and in some areas, local level. Under the decree, all religious groups must submit proposed religious activities for government pre-approval. The national-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.

The ordinance explicitly bans forced renunciations of faith.

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Decree 92 prescribes a multi-stage process to receive national recognition. To operate openly, an unrecognized religious organization must first register (and in practice, obtain approval for) its places of worship, its clerics, and its activities in each local administrative area in which it operates by filing information about its structure, leadership, and activities. Local registration confers the ability to operate in that administrative locality. The next step is national registration, which requires the group to document 20 years of stable religious operation in the country and is granted by the national government through the CRA. National registration requires a license from the CRA. After maintaining national registration for three years, a religious group becomes eligible to apply for legal recognition after electing its leaders through a national convention. The CRA must approve the proposed leadership, structure, and activities. Benefits of recognition include permission to open, operate, and refurbish places of worship; permission to train religious leaders; and permission to publish materials. Each activity also remains further subject to local and national approvals.

At every stage of the registration and recognition application process, the law specifies time limits for an official response, which can be up to 45 days, depending on the scope of the request. Although the law requires government authorities to explain formally any denial in writing, the denial may be for any reason, given the significant discretion the law gives to those authorities. There is no mechanism for appeal.

Under the ordinance the government has regulatory oversight of religious groups, which must be officially registered or recognized as formal religious organizations. The ordinance stipulates that local government authorities must approve the leadership, activities, and the establishment of seminaries or religious classes. Decree 92 requires religious organizations to register their religious leaders and officials with the CRA at the central or provincial level. The decree specifies curriculum guidelines for religious training institutions, and extends the minimum time an organization must be registered before it may qualify for national recognition to 23 years.

Religious organizations must inform appropriate provincial- and central-level authorities of their major celebrations, such as Christmas services, as well as the investiture and transfer of clerics. This is an informational requirement only; the law does not require pre-approval of those services and clerical appointments. Local governments have the authority to require additional forms of permission. While the ordinance encourages religious groups to conduct charitable activities in

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healthcare and education, the law prohibits religious groups from operating health or educational institutions, although kindergartens and preschools are allowed.

Decree 92 and the Law on Land stipulate that recognized religious organizations are permitted to acquire a land use certificate as legal entities, but they must receive a grant of the land by the respective provincial people's committee, which also has the authority to approve or disapprove the construction of new facilities. If a religious organization has not yet obtained full legal status, members of the congregation may acquire a land use title individually, but not as a recognized religious establishment. The renovation or upgrade of religious facilities also requires notification to authorities, although it does not necessarily require a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation. The decree stipulates authorities must respond to a construction permit application within 20 days, although the law does not provide for accountability of authorities if they do not comply with the deadline.

The 2005 prime minister's Directive on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism calls on authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches and to train and appoint pastors. The directive instructs authorities to help unrecognized denominations register their congregations so they can worship openly and move toward fulfilling the criteria for full recognition. The directive instructs authorities in the Central and Northwest Highlands to help groups of Protestants register their religious activities and practice in homes or "suitable locations," even if they do not meet the criteria to establish an official congregation. The directive also instructs local officials to allow unregistered "house churches" to operate as long as they are "committed to follow regulations" and are not affiliated with separatist political movements.

The law requires prior approval by government authorities of the publication of all religious texts. The law states only the Religious Publishing House, or another government approved publishing house, may publish religious books. It permits the Bible to be printed in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'nong, H'mong, C'ho, and English. Other published texts include, but are not limited to, works pertaining to ancestry worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai. Any bookstore may legally sell religious texts and other religious materials.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

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Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and household registration documents. An individual or household may decline to state affiliation. The law allows an individual to change his or her religious affiliation on national identification cards through a set of cumbersome procedures.

Decree 92 includes requirements for noncitizens specializing in religious activities within the country, including those involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership. Religious groups must obtain approval from the CRA at the national level for a religious leader who is not a citizen,

Government Practices

The constitutional right to religious belief and practice continued to be subject to uneven interpretation and inconsistent protection, especially involving ethnic minorities in some provinces of the Central and Northwest Highlands.

Government authorities, particularly at the local level, continued to limit the activities of unregistered religious groups, and members of these and other groups reported physical assaults, excessive use of force, detentions, monitoring, hindering of movement, denials of registrations and other permissions, and other harassment. Victims often reported they suspected the perpetrators of assaults and surveillance were plainclothes police officers (referred to as "plainclothes individuals" below). Nevertheless, in some areas, local authorities tacitly approved activities of unregistered groups, including certain social welfare activities.

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. This included impeding some religious gatherings and blocking attempts by religious groups to proselytize to certain ethnic groups in border regions deemed to be sensitive, including the Central Highlands, Northwest Highlands, and certain Mekong Delta provinces.

According to reports, local authorities established steering committees to implement national directives to suppress the growth of the Duong Van Minh religious group. Group members stated several followers were wanted by the police. In August police and Ministry of Public Security officials from Ha Giang province were reported to detain Duong Van Minh follower Ma Van Pa and interrogated him after he met with U.S. officials.

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Mennonite pastors in Binh Duong Province, Gia Lai Province, and Ho Chi Minh City reported police, local authorities, and plainclothes individuals intimidated, harassed, and physically attacked church leaders and congregants throughout the year. Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang reported police raided his home during a new year's celebration worship service in January, escorted him and his congregants to the police station, and subsequently assaulted them. In March Quang reported that approximately 20 plainclothes individuals struck him and three others with metal tubes when they attempted to visit a house church. Quang reported he was forced to step down from pastoral duties due to continued harassment from the authorities. Pastor Nguyen Manh Hung reported that Ho Chi Minh City police came to his residence in June, July, and September, each time damaging property and, during the September visit, threatening his family.

On July 26, plainclothes individuals reportedly assaulted and threatened Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) leadership during their visit to a house church in Loc Ninh Commune, Dong Hoi City, Quang Binh Province. Reports state provincial authorities sought to disband the house church and local police witnessed the assault but did not intervene. Prior to the visit, ECVN leaders had received permission to visit from the local CRA.

In March and April a pastor of the United World Mission Church reported that plainclothes individuals in Da Nang City attempted to intimidate followers from attending service with threats and assault. The pastor said the church attempted unsuccessfully to register with city authorities several times in recent years.

Local and central authorities continued to call on the H'mong people in the Northwest Highlands, including Tuyen Quang, Cao Bang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen Provinces, to disavow the Duong Van Minh religious group, whose followers advocate for a simplified version of traditional H'mong funeral ceremonies, and to dismantle all *nha don*, public buildings used for funeral rites. On February 6, uniformed police and plainclothes individuals were reported to have destroyed a small *nha don* at Khuoi Vin village in Cao Bang Province and burned all the funeral items inside. Reports state seven villagers were assaulted while trying to prevent or film officials' actions. Members of the Duong Van Minh group stated this was the fifth time local authorities had destroyed a *nha don* in this particular village.

In October a monk affiliated with the unsanctioned Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam reported local authorities and police in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province

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dismantled a pagoda his congregation was constructing. The monk stated that when followers protested, local police used tear gas grenades and struck one person with their batons, leading to his hospitalization.

In February ethnic H'mong members of Protestant churches in Dien Bien Dong District, Dien Bien Province reported that local authorities forced congregants to renounce their faith. They stated local authorities, accompanied by non-Protestant family members, shredded Bibles, seized and destroyed followers' property, and physically assaulted followers. Local authorities reportedly expelled some Christians from their villages. By year's end, there had been no official investigation of the local authorities' actions.

In total the government has granted recognition to 38 religious organizations, 36 of which hold full recognition. These 38 religious organizations were affiliated with 14 distinct religious traditions as defined by the government. The 14 religious traditions are: Buddhism, Islam, Bahai, Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormonism, Hoa Hao, 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, and Khmer Brahmanism. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition.

Both registered and unregistered religious groups stated that government agencies sometimes did not respond to registration applications or approval requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, or at all. Some groups reported they successfully appealed local decisions to higher-level authorities through informal channels.

Several hundred ECVN congregations continued to await action on their applications to register local meeting places, beyond the time periods outlined by Decree 92. Government officials reportedly rarely adhered to the stipulated response times, if they responded at all, and often did not specify reasons for refusals. Authorities attributed the delays and denials to the failure of applicants to complete forms correctly or to provide complete information. Local authorities also cited general security concerns, such as political destabilization or potential conflict between followers of established ethnic or traditional religious beliefs and newly introduced Christian beliefs. Some Protestant house churches stated local authorities used registration requirements to harass followers and exert pressure on the religious groups to cease religious activities.

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Leaders from the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) reported local authorities in some Central Highlands provinces required smaller congregations, some with as many as 100 followers, to combine together into larger groups of up to 1,500 individuals in order to gain official registration. The church leaders called such requests 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.

Some registered and unregistered Protestant groups reported that local authorities pressured newer congregations to affiliate with existing congregations or other, more established denominations. In at least one reported case, authorities offered a congregation a greater level of recognition if its leadership acted more cooperatively with the government.

According to many Catholic bishops, parishes in remote areas with majority ethnic minority populations faced difficulty registering, uneven and inconsistent enforcement of national laws, and a lack of accountability on the part of provincial authorities. In the Central Highland's Kon Tum Province, a Catholic priest stated that in January local authorities planned to demolish an unregistered house church. The priest said that authorities were deterred after more than 1,000 followers rallied in protest on the day the church was scheduled to be taken down. In March the Catholic leadership publicized an internal document from the Kon Tum provincial leadership directing local authorities to close 22 unregistered house churches. In September the Catholic leadership stated that Kon Tum authorities halted the plans and entered into dialogue with the church regarding construction of new worship facilities.

Some Buddhist, Protestant, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao groups did not affiliate with any government recognized or government registered religious organizations, nor did they seek their own registration or recognition. Unregistered Buddhist, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Christian religious groups regularly reported some provincial authorities used local registration laws to pressure, intimidate, threaten, extort, harass, and assault their members.

A significant number of registered religious groups reported their ability to meet openly for worship had improved in recent years. For example, two major Protestant groups reported they had greater freedom to organize religious activities,

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including seminary classes. The government, however, continued to require religious groups to register their activities in advance and used this requirement to restrict and discourage participation in certain unregistered religious groups, including unsanctioned Buddhist, Protestant, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao groups.

In March leadership of the unsanctioned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)-affiliated An Cu pagoda in Da Nang said plainclothes individuals prevented followers from attending a full moon ceremony by covering the roads to the pagoda with nails.

Religious believers, particularly members of organizations that had not applied for or been granted legal registration, continued to report intimidation by local security officials about attending religious services. In a number of instances, local officials forced church gatherings to disperse, advised or required groups to limit important celebrations in scope or content, closed unregistered house churches, or pressured individuals to renounce their religious beliefs and cease religious activities.

Members of the Interfaith Council reported police in Thua Thien-Hue Province prevented 10 council members from attending a March event honoring the former Republic of Vietnam at Phuoc Thanh pagoda. The council, which included representatives of unsanctioned Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai groups, stated that police threatened the delegation, pressured the owner of a local guest house to expel them, and confiscated the license and identification papers of their drivers. On the day the celebration had been scheduled, approximately 40-50 people, including police, reportedly surrounded the pagoda.

In April press reports and independent Cao Dai followers reported local authorities in Phu Yen Province razed an independent Cao Dai temple despite protests from local followers. In May the independent Cao Dai Nhon Sanh group reported local authorities and government-sanctioned Cao Dai followers prevented them from organizing a conference at a Cao Dai holy site in Tay Ninh Province, physically barring them from entering and throwing paint on them. The independent Cao Dai group did not obtain official permission to organize their conference. In September authorities at Ho Chi Minh City's Tan Son Nhat Airport reportedly confiscated Cao Dai Master Hua Phi's passport and prevented him from travelling abroad for a religious freedom conference.

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Falun Gong practitioners reported in August and October that Ho Chi Minh City authorities and plainclothes police prevented them from practicing in a local park, at times using threats, playing loud music, or physically assaulting followers.

Authorities continued to deny prisoners and detainees the right to worship, although the constitution guarantees in principle the right of prisoners to practice their beliefs. Family members said prison guards prevented Protestant Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh from praying and reading the Bible. Some prisoners, however, were allowed to read the Bible and practice their beliefs while incarcerated.

Ho Chi Minh City authorities continued to negotiate with leadership of the UBCV-affiliated and unsanctioned Lien Tri Pagoda as well as a nearby Catholic church and convent to vacate their land to facilitate an urban development project. Leaders of the pagoda and church said authorities were using the redevelopment as a pretext to force them to move and to raze the buildings. Both sides reported that local authorities offered compensation and alternative sites, although the religious institutions said the compensation was inadequate and the sites offered were in remote areas. Pagoda Abbot Thich Khong Tanh continued to release public statements critical of government restrictions on religious organizations.

Although the law prohibits nongovernment publishing of religious materials, in practice some private, unlicensed publishing houses unofficially printed and distributed religious texts without active government interference.

In September volunteers with the Catholic group Books for Parishes stated that the police harassed them by issuing traffic tickets and repeatedly inspecting their belongings while they were establishing free libraries in Con Cuong District, Nghe An Province.

The government continued to restrict the number of students who could enroll in Catholic and Protestant seminaries to numbers the churches' leadership said were inadequate to meet demand. Catholic and Protestant leadership stated, however, the number of students permitted to enroll had increased compared to prior years.

Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Bahai, and Buddhist groups were allowed to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities. Students continued to participate in training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy organized at pagodas nationwide during summer holidays.

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In August the government approved the establishment of the Vietnamese Catholic Institute, which church leaders expected would be the first faith-based, degree-granting educational institution in Vietnam.

Montagnards in the Central Highlands stated the government continued to monitor, interrogate, and discriminate against them, in part due to suspicions they were affiliated with Protestant organizations tied to separatist political organizations. In March, April, and May state-owned media published a series of articles discouraging citizens from affiliating with Degar Protestantism, a Montagnard Protestant group. Some Montagnards also reported throughout the year that local authorities seized their land and withheld social services in part due to their religious beliefs. In some cases, Montagnards stated that ongoing social and religious persecution drove them to flee to Cambodia. Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Human rights activists reported plainclothes police kept Hoa Hao follower and rights activist Nguyen Bac Truyen and his family under close surveillance throughout the year. In August Truyen said that police prevented him from leaving his home to meet with foreign officials. Other activists reported local police in An Giang Province kept Hoa Hao activists Mai Thi Dung and Vo Van Buu under close surveillance following Dung's release from prison in April.

Two Buddhist clergy, both members of the recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, reported local authorities harassed them and members of their pagodas in Bac Giang Province and Hanoi. They reported the harassment included intimidation of monks and nuns, expulsion by force of clergy from their buildings, plainclothes individuals breaking into religious buildings, the destruction of pagoda property, and theft of cash donations from villagers.

Activists reported police continued to harass family members of imprisoned Protestant pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, including by barring them from receiving visitors, displacing them from their home, placing them under heavy surveillance, and confiscating and destroying their personal belongings. Restrictions on the family's movement at times prevented Pastor Chinh's four children from attending school.

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As in previous years, UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do reported authorities permitted him to leave the Thanh Minh Monastery, where he resides, only for quarterly medical check-ups. 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. In August UBCV follower Le Cong Cau said that airport security in Thua Thien Hue Province prevented him from traveling to Ho Chi Minh City to meet with the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

In October independent Hoa Hao followers stated that authorities in Dong Thap Province prevented them from visiting Hoa Hao activist Duong Thi Tron after her release from prison. Followers said that the police instructed Tron's family not to organize a gathering in the days leading up to her release.

In July Catholic clergy reported unidentified individuals wearing masks threw stones, bricks, and shrimp paste at the residence of Catholic priest Father Phan Van Loi in Hue, actions they stated were in retaliation for his human rights and religious freedom advocacy. Plainclothes individuals reportedly harassed him in March during his meeting with a Buddhist leader. Although Catholic clergy reported the incident to local authorities, the police did not initiate an investigation.

Church members reported Ho Chi Minh City authorities continued to hold the passport of Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan, the head of the unregistered United Gospel Outreach Church, which was first confiscated in 2013. They said authorities permitted his personal travel abroad but confiscated the passport after each trip.

Leaders of some unregistered Protestant denominations continued to report that local authorities in the Central Highlands discriminated against their followers, threatening to exclude them from state-run social welfare programs if adherents did not denounce their faith.

Protestant and Catholic groups reported ongoing restrictions or prohibitions of religious groups operating medical and educational facilities such as hospitals and parochial schools. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools seized from the Catholic Church in past decades.

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In some cases local authorities permitted religious organizations to operate social services. For example, in Hanoi, city officials allowed Protestant house churches to operate drug rehabilitation centers.

Most representatives of registered religious groups reported adherence to a religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernmental civil, economic, and secular life, although some religious leaders said unofficial policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the government hampered advancement of religious adherents within those organizations. The official resumes of the top four CPV leaders stated they followed no religion.

Practitioners of various religions served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Many registered 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 CPV. High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter and attended Vesak activities commemorating the birth of the Buddha.

Local authorities sometimes prevented individuals from changing religious affiliation on national identification cards, according to reports from religious groups. The government announced in December it would begin issuing a new type of identity card which would no longer specify religious affiliation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Members of the Duong Van Minh religious group, who are primarily ethnic H'mong, reported some tensions with other H'mong who practice different traditional burial rites.

There were reports non-Christian family members participated in harassment of Christians. In February ethnic H'mong members of Protestant churches in Dien Bien Dong District, Dien Bien Province stated that local authorities, accompanied by non-Protestant family members, shredded Bibles, seized and destroyed followers' property, and physically assaulted followers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The President and Secretary of State, in meetings with senior government officials, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Other visiting senior U.S. officials raised religious freedom concerns during their meetings with government officials and civil society representatives. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom discussed religious freedom concerns with government officials at the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in May, and traveled to the Northwest Highlands to discuss religious freedom with local officials and a wide range of registered and unregistered groups, including groups with ethnic minority members. On a separate visit in August, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor advocated for improvements to freedom of religion in law and practice. Senior U.S. officials submitted to government leaders recommendations for revisions to the draft Law on Religion and Belief to bring the text in line with the country's constitution and international commitments to protect religious freedom.

The Ambassador and embassy officials 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 religious groups; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. The Ambassador and embassy officials raised specific cases of government harassment against Catholics, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups, the Duong Van Minh religious group, and Protestant churches with the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Public Security. Embassy 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 peacefully resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious organizations.

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 CRA, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces.

The Ambassador and consulate general officials traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, to monitor religious freedom,

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meet with religious leaders, and stress to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship. Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general had frequent contact with many leaders of religious communities.