



Vietnam

Events of 2023

Vietnam systematically suppresses citizens' basic rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, movement, and religion. Independent labor unions, human rights organizations, and political parties are prohibited. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has ruled the country for almost five decades and severely punishes anyone who challenges its monopoly on power.

The government prohibits independent press and media. Authorities systematically block access to sensitive political websites and social media pages, and they regularly pressure social media and telecommunications companies to remove or restrict content critical of the government or the ruling party.

In early 2023, during a high-stakes anti-corruption investigation related to the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the CPV, forced the resignation of President and former Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and two deputy prime ministers. However, this rare political shakeup did not help improve the country's abysmal rights record.

Freedom of Expression

Critics of the government face police intimidation, harassment, restricted movement, arbitrary arrest and detention, and imprisonment after unfair trials. Police regularly hold political detainees for months without access to legal counsel and subject them to abusive interrogations. Party-controlled courts sentence community leaders, online free speech advocates, and civil society activists to long prison sentences on bogus national security charges.

Vietnam currently holds more than 160 people in prison for peacefully exercising their basic civil and political rights. During the first 10 months of 2023, the courts convicted at least 28 rights campaigners and sentenced them to long prison sentences. They included [Truong Van Dung](#), [Nguyen Lan Thang](#), [Tran Van Bang](#), [Bui Tuan Lam](#), and [Dang Dang Phuoc](#).

At time of writing, police were holding at least 19 other people in pretrial detention on politically motivated charges, including human rights defender [Nguyen Thuy Hanh](#) and former political prisoners [Nguyen Hoang Nam](#) and [Le Minh The](#).

In 2023, Vietnam did not cease its repression of nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists. In May 2023, police arrested leading environmentalist [Hoang Thi Minh Hong](#) on bogus tax evasion charges. Hoang Thi Minh Hong was an Obama Foundation Scholar in 2018, and former United States President Barack Obama praised her environmental leadership. Environmental campaigner [Dang Dinh Bach](#), who was sentenced to prison in January 2022 on politically motivated tax evasion charges, remained behind bars. In August, common prisoners were sent into the cell of [Dang Dinh Bach](#) and prominent political prisoner [Tran Huynh Duy Thuc](#) to intimidate and threaten to use violence against them, family members told the press. Dang Dinh Bach was [reportedly](#) hit on the head from behind for trying to tell his family on a phone call how he was being treated in prison. In September, a court convicted and sentenced [Hoang Thi Minh Hong](#) to three years in prison.

Freedom of Media and Access to Information

The government prohibits independent or privately owned media outlets and imposes strict control over radio stations, television stations, and print publications. Authorities block access to websites, frequently shut down blogs, and require internet service providers to remove content or social media accounts deemed politically unacceptable.

The Vietnamese authorities constantly request social media companies, including Meta (Facebook and Instagram), Google, and TikTok, to remove content that criticizes the government or CPV leaders. According to the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), during the first three months of 2023, Meta “blocked and removed more than 1,096 posts with bad content (a 93% compliance rate [with government requests])”; “Google

removed 1,670 violating videos on YouTube (a 93% compliance rate [with government requests]); and “TikTok removed 323 violating links and removed 47 accounts and channels that often posted bad contents (a 91% compliance rate [with government requests]).”

Similarly, according to the government, in [July](#), “Facebook blocked and removed more than 224 posts that spread wrong information and propagandize to oppose the Party and the States, brand name, individuals and organization (a 90% compliance rate with [government] requests); “Google removed 1,052 violating videos on YouTube, a 91% compliance rate with [government] requests”; and “TikTok removed 19 violating links that published wrong information and pessimistic contents, a 90% compliance rate with [government] requests.”

Human Rights Watch reached out to TikTok, Google, and Meta for comment on the Vietnamese government’s claims about the volume of content taken down from their platforms. TikTok and Google did not respond directly to the Vietnamese government’s numbers and referred Human Rights Watch to their content removal policies and transparency report. Meta did not respond to Human Rights Watch’s inquiry.

In June, [the Washington Post reported](#) that Meta cooperated with the Vietnamese government to stifle free speech. Two former employees of Meta told the newspaper that that Meta “has adopted an internal list of Vietnamese Communist Party officials who should not be criticized on Facebook” and that this list “is kept private even within the company and has not been publicly reported on before.” They also alleged the list is included in guidelines used in controlling online content and “was shaped in large part by Vietnamese authorities.” Meta failed to address these specific allegations in response to the *Washington Post*’s questions.

Freedom of Religion and Belief

The government restricts religious practice through legislation, registration requirements, and surveillance. Religious groups must get approval from, and register with, the government and operate under government-controlled management boards. While authorities allow government-affiliated churches and pagodas to hold worship services, they ban religious activities that they deem contrary to the “national interest,” “public order,”

or “national unity.” In practice, these restrictions include many ordinary religious functions.

The police monitor, harass, and sometimes violently crack down on religious groups operating outside government-controlled institutions. Unrecognized religious groups—including independent Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Christian, and Buddhist groups—face constant surveillance, harassment, and intimidation. Followers of independent religious groups are subject to public criticism, forced renunciation of faith, pretrial detention, interrogation, torture, and imprisonment. As of September 2021, Vietnam [acknowledged](#) that it had not officially recognized about 140 religious groups with approximately 1 million followers.

Children’s Rights

Violence against children, including sexual abuse, is a serious problem in Vietnam, including at home and in schools. Numerous media reports have described cases of guardians, teachers, or government caregivers engaging in sexual abuse and physically beating children.

According to [Children Bureau Chief Dang Hoa Nam](#), “in the first four months of 2023, telephone calls to national number 111 [for reporting child abuse] with content related to school violence had increased 11%” compared to the first four months of 2022.

Vietnam has sought to combat violence against children by organizing campaigns in various provinces, including a month of actions for children in June, providing trainings to local authorities and school staff, carrying out awareness-raising campaigns, and organizing training sessions for children.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

Violence against women and girls, including sexual abuse, is pervasive in Vietnam. According to [UN Women](#), “The National Study on Violence against Women in Viet Nam in 2019 shows that nearly 2 in every 3 women (nearly 63 per cent) have experienced one or more forms of physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence as well as controlling behavior by a husband/partner in their life. More than 90 per cent of women who

experienced sexual and/or physical violence by their husband/partner did not seek any help from formal services or authorities.”

According to [state media](#), in cases of domestic violence in Vietnam, 74 percent of victims are women and 11 percent of victims are children.

In July, the 2022 revised Law on Prevention and Combatting Domestic Violence came into effect. The revised law provides additional protections for victims of domestic violence. It increases the number of acts that constitute domestic violence from 9 to 16, provides victims of domestic violence with additional rights, and increases punishment for abusers.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In recent years, the Vietnamese government has taken modest steps to recognize the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, including by removing prohibitions on same-sex relationships and legal gender change. In 2022, the health ministry formally declared that being gay or transgender is not a disease.

In June, the National Assembly passed a [resolution](#) stating that it will give its opinion on the Gender Change Law project at its eighth session in October 2024.

Key International Actors

US-Vietnam relations strengthened significantly over the year. On September 10, President Joe Biden visited Hanoi. During this visit, the US elevated its relations with Vietnam to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” but said little about Vietnam’s worsening rights record. A US-Vietnam human rights dialogue in November did not result in any notable pledges or changes to policy. The US is Vietnam’s largest export market and counts among its citizens the largest overseas Vietnamese community in the world, which accounts for a significant portion of family remittances sent to Vietnam.

Vietnam seeks to balance its relationship with the US and China, but Vietnam’s relationship with China remains complicated. One week before Biden arrived, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong welcomed the Chinese Communist Party’s International Department head Liu Jianchao

and pledged continued close friendship between the two parties. In June, Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh visited Beijing.

However, territorial tension between the two countries continues, with Vietnam regularly and strongly opposing China's unilateral actions in disputed areas of the South China Sea. In July, Vietnam banned the movie "Barbie" because one scene displayed a map that Hanoi viewed as the nine-dash line map used by China to claim sovereignty over the disputed areas, which has been rejected by Vietnam.

August 2023 marks the three-year anniversary of the bilateral free trade agreement between the European Union and Vietnam (EVFTA). In April, a [delegation from the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights](#) visited Vietnam and expressed serious concerns about the human rights situation in the country, urging Vietnam to respect its human rights obligations, including pursuant to its commitments under the EVFTA.

The EU discussed human rights concerns with Vietnam during a series of bilateral meetings, including the human rights dialogue, and mentioned Vietnam in statements at the UN Human Rights Council. Despite Vietnam's utter disregard for the EU's public and private diplomacy, the bloc has yet to consider taking more persuasive measures, such as targeted sanctions or the suspension of the EVFTA.

In [August](#) and [September](#), the EU and other local delegations urged Vietnam to halt imminent executions.

In 2023, Australia and Vietnam celebrated the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relationship. Vietnamese leaders welcomed Australia's Governor-General David Hurley in April, [Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in June](#), and Minister of Foreign Affairs Penny Wong in August. In July, Australian citizen and pro-democracy activist Chau Van Kham was released after more than four years of [arbitrary detention](#). But Chau Van Kham's co-defendants, Vietnamese activists [Nguyen Van Vien and Tran Van Quyen](#), remain behind bars. Vietnam and Australia held discussions about potentially upgrading their relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in the near future.

Japan remains Vietnam's [most important bilateral aid donor](#) and its fourth largest trading partner. In 2023, Vietnam and Japan celebrated the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. In May, Prime Minister Pham

Minh Chinh visited Japan and met Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Japan [pledged](#) another 61 billion Yen (about US\$407 million) in development aid for Vietnam. In November, during [Vietnam President Vo Van Thuong's visit to Japan](#), the two countries upgraded their relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." As in previous years, Japan refrained from publicly commenting on Vietnam's poor human rights record.