

U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Vietnam

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

VIETNAM

Section I. Freedom of Religion

Both the Constitution and government decrees provide for freedom of worship; however, the Government continued to restrict significantly those organized activities of religious groups that it defined as being at variance with state laws and policies. The Government generally allowed persons to practice individual worship in the religion of their choice, and participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow significantly. However, government regulations control religious hierarchies and organized religious activities, in part because the Vietnamese Communist Party fears that organized religion may weaken its authority and influence by serving as political, social, and spiritual alternatives to the authority of the central Government.

The Government requires religious groups to be registered and uses this process to control and monitor church organizations. Officially recognized religious organizations are able to operate openly, and they must consult with the Government about their religious operations, although not about their religious tenets of faith. In general religious organizations are confined to dealing specifically with spiritual and organizational matters. The Government holds conferences to discuss and publicize its religion decrees.

Religious organizations must obtain government permission to hold training seminars, conventions, and celebrations outside the regular religious calendar, to build or remodel places of worship, to engage in charitable activities or operate religious schools, and to train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy. Many of these restrictive powers lie principally with provincial or city people's committees, and local treatment of religious persons varied widely. In some areas such as Ho Chi Minh City, local officials allowed religious persons wide latitude in practicing their faith, including allowing some educational and humanitarian activities. However, in other areas such as the northwest provinces, local officials allowed believers little discretion in the practice of their faith. In general religious groups faced difficulty in obtaining teaching materials, expanding training facilities, publishing religious materials, and expanding the clergy in training in response to increased demand from congregations.

The Government officially recognizes Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Muslim religious organizations. However, some Buddhists, Protestants, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao believers do not recognize or participate in the government-approved associations and thus are not considered legal by the authorities.

Among the country's religious communities, Buddhism is the dominant religious belief. Many believers practice an amalgam of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucian traditions that sometimes is called Vietnam's "Triple Religion." Three-fourths of the population of approximately 80 million persons are at least nominally Buddhist, visit pagodas on festival days, and have a worldview that is shaped in part by Buddhism. One prominent Buddhist official estimated that 30 percent of Buddhists are devout and practice their faith regularly. The Government's Office of Religious Affairs uses a much lower estimate of 7 million practicing Buddhists. Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom are part of the ethnic Kinh majority, are found throughout the country, especially in the populous areas of the northern and southern delta regions. There are proportionately fewer Buddhists in certain highlands and central lowlands areas, although migration of Kinh to highland areas is changing the distribution somewhat.

A Khmer minority in the south practices Theravada Buddhism. Numbering from perhaps 700,000 to 1 million persons, they live almost exclusively in the Mekong delta.

The Government requires all Buddhist monks to work under a party-controlled umbrella organization, the Central Buddhist Church of Vietnam. The Government opposed efforts by the non-government-sanctioned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) to operate independently, and tension between the Government and the UBCV continued. Several prominent UBCV monks, including Thich Quang Do, were released in wide-ranging government amnesties in September and October 1998. The UBCV's leader, Thich Huyen Quang, remains in administrative detention in an isolated pagoda in Quang Ngai province and has not been allowed to visit his home pagoda in Hue for many years. In March 1999, Thich Quang Do traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to Quang Ngai to meet with Thich Huyen Quang; after 3 days, police detained the monks for questioning. Thich Quang Do was escorted back to his pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City where he continues to practice his religion. Thich Huyen Quang still is residing in Quang Ngai. There are no confirmed reports of a 1998-99 detention of UBCV monks.

There are an estimated 6 to 7 million Roman Catholics in the country (about 8 percent of the population). The largest concentrations are in southern provinces around Ho Chi Minh City, with other large groups in the northern and central coastal lowlands. In 1998 the Government eased its efforts to control the Roman Catholic hierarchy by relaxing the requirements that all clergy belong to the government-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association. Few clergy actually belong to this association.

Authorities allowed the Vatican's ordination of a new archbishop in Ho Chi Minh City in 1998, as well as the ordination of five bishops in other dioceses in 1998 and 1999. A high-level Vatican envoy visited the country in March 1998 and again in March 1999. The Government approved plans for a September 1999 visit by a delegation from the American

Council of Bishops. A number of bishops traveled to Rome for a synod of Asian bishops. Up to 100,000 Catholics gathered in August 1998 at an annual Marian celebration in La Vang in the central part of the country and celebrated their faith freely there.

The local Catholic Church hierarchy remained frustrated by the Government's restrictions but has learned to accommodate itself to them for many years. During 1998 and the first half of 1999, a number of clergy reported a modest easing of government control over church activities in certain dioceses. The Government relaxed its outright prohibition on the Catholic Church's involvement in religious education and charitable activities but still restricted such activity.

The degree of government control of church activities varied greatly among localities. In some areas, especially in the south, churches and religious groups operated kindergartens and engaged in a variety of humanitarian projects. At least six priests belonging to the Congregation of the Mother Co-redemptrix reportedly remain imprisoned.

The Government allowed many bishops and priests to travel freely within their dioceses and allowed greater, but still restricted, freedom for travel outside these areas, particularly in many ethnic areas. The Government discourages priests from entering Son La and Lai Chau provinces. Upon return from international travel in 1998, priests and nuns officially were required to surrender their passports; this law reportedly no longer is enforced. Seminaries throughout the country have approximately 500 students enrolled. The Government limits the Church to operating 6 major seminaries and to recruit new seminarians only every 2 years. All students must be approved by the Government, both upon entering the seminary and prior to their ordination as priests. The Church believes that the number of graduating students is insufficient to support the growing Catholic population.

There are approximately 600,000 Protestants in the country (less than 1 percent of the population), with more than half these persons belonging to a large number of unregistered evangelical "house churches" that operate in members' homes or in rural villages, many of them in ethnic minority areas. Perhaps 150,000 of the followers of house churches are Pentecostals, who celebrate "gifts of the spirit" through charismatic and ecstatic rites of worship.

The network of Tin Lanh (Good News) churches, originally founded by the Christian and Missionary Alliance early in the 20th century, generally operated with greater freedom than did the house churches. The roughly 300 Tin Lanh churches in the country are concentrated in the major cities, including Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Hanoi, and in lowland areas. Some 15 Tin Lanh churches in the northern provinces are the only officially recognized Protestant churches.

Reports from believers indicated that Protestant church attendance grew substantially, especially among the house churches, despite continued government restrictions on proselytizing activities. The Government restricts Protestant congregations from cooperating on joint religious observances or other activities, although in some localities there was greater freedom to do so. There is some ecumenical networking among Protestants,

particularly in Ho Chi Minh City.

Based on believers' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including ethnic Hmong (some 120,000 followers) in the northwest provinces and some 200,000 members of ethnic minority groups of the central highlands (Ede, Jarai, Bahnar, and Koho, among others). The house churches in ethnic minority areas have been growing rapidly in recent years, sparked in part by radio broadcasts in ethnic minority languages from the Philippines. This growth has led to tensions with local officials in some provinces. There have been crackdowns on leaders of these churches, particularly among the Hmong in the northwest. The secretive nature of the house churches, particularly among ethnic minorities, has contributed to greater repression against these groups. Provincial officials in certain northwest provinces do not allow churches or pagodas to operate and have arrested and imprisoned believers for practicing their faith nonviolently in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.

The authorities in the northwest provinces severely restrict the religious freedom of evangelical Protestants, including ethnic Hmong and ethnic Tai. Credible reports indicate that more than a dozen Hmong Protestants were imprisoned from January 1998 through June 1999 for participation in religious services and for proselytizing activities. According to credible reports, more than 15 Hmong Christians were imprisoned as of mid-1999 in Lai Chau province, although the exact number cannot be confirmed.

The Government's Office of Religious Affairs estimates that there are 1.1 million Cao Dai followers (just over 1 percent of the population). Some nongovernmental organization (NGO) sources estimate that there may be from 2 to 3 million followers. Cao Dai groups are most active in Tay Ninh province, where the Cao Dai holy see is located, and in Ho Chi Minh City, the Mekong delta, and Hanoi. There are separate sects within the Cao Dai religion, which is syncretistic, combining elements of many faiths. Its basic belief system is influenced strongly by Mahayana Buddhism, although it recognizes a diverse array of persons who have conveyed divine revelation, including Siddhartha, Jesus, Lao-Tse, Confucius, and Moses.

A government-controlled management committee has been established with full powers to control the affairs of the Cao Dai faith, thereby managing the church's operations, its hierarchy, and its clergy. Independent church officials oppose the edicts of this committee as not being faithful to Cao Dai principles and traditions. Despite the Government's statement in 1997 that it had recognized the Cao Dai church legally and encouraged Cao Dai believers to expand their groups and practice their faith, many top-level clerical positions remain vacant, and some believers were detained arbitrarily. In October 1998, the authorities detained two Cao Dai provincial leaders in Kien Giang province, Le Kim Bien and Pham Cong Hien, who sought to meet with U.N. Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance Abdelfattah Amor. They still were being held in June 1999.

Hoa Hao, considered by its followers to be a "reform" branch of Buddhism, was founded in the southern part of the country in 1939. Hoa Hao is a privatistic faith that does not have a priesthood and rejects many of the ceremonial aspects of mainstream Buddhism. Hoa Hao

followers are concentrated in the Mekong delta, particularly in provinces such as An Giang, where the Hoa Hao were dominant as a political and religious force before 1975. According to the Office on Religious Affairs, there are 1.3 million Hoa Hao believers; church-affiliated expatriate groups suggest that there may be 2 million. A group of 160 Hoa Hao delegates held a congress in May 1999 in An Giang with government approval. However, some Hoa Hao followers do not recognize the validity of this congress, since they see it as subject to government control and oversight.

The Hoa Hao have faced restrictions on their religious and political activities since 1975 because of their previous armed opposition to the Communist forces. Since 1975 all administrative offices, places of worship, and social and cultural institutions connected to the faith have been closed, thereby limiting public religious festivals. Believers continue to practice their religion at home. The lack of access to public gathering places has contributed to the Hoa Hao community's isolation and fragmentation. At least one religious gathering of Hoa Hao in An Giang province was allowed in late 1998. The authorities also prohibit the distribution of the sacred scriptures of the Hoa Hao, and believers say that a number of church leaders continue to be detained. One prominent Hoa Hao activist, Tran Huu Duyen, was released in the September 1998 prisoner amnesty.

Mosques serving the country's small Muslim population, estimated at 100,000 persons, operate in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and several provinces in the southern part of the country. The Muslim community comprises ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Cham in the southern coastal provinces, and migrants originally from Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Most practice Sunni Islam.

The Muslim Association of Vietnam was banned in 1975 but authorized again in 1992. It is the only official Muslim organization. Association leaders say that they are able to practice their faith, including daily prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Government no longer has a policy of restricting exit permits to prevent Muslims from making the Hajj. About 1 dozen Muslims made the Hajj to Mecca during 1998.

There are a variety of smaller religious communities. An estimated 8,000 Hindus are concentrated in the south. There are reports that some ethnic Chams on the south central coast also practice Hinduism.

There are several hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) who are spread throughout the country, primarily in the Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi areas.

The prominent position of Buddhism does not affect religious freedom for others adversely, including those who wish not to practice a religion. The secular government does not favor a particular religion. Of the country's 80 million citizens, 14 million or more reportedly do not appear to practice any organized religion. Some sources define strictly those considered to be practicing Buddhists, excluding those whose activities are limited to visiting pagodas on ceremonial holidays; using this definition, the number of nonreligious persons would be

much higher--perhaps up to 50 million persons.

The status of respect for religious freedom was mixed during the period covered by this report. In some respects, conditions for religious freedom improved. In many areas, Buddhists, Catholics, and Protestants reported an increase in religious activity and observance. However, at the same time, government restrictions remained, and worshipers in several Buddhist, Catholic, and Cao Dai centers of worship reported that they believed that undercover government observers attended worship services and monitored the activities of the congregation and the clergy.

The release of at least eight prominent religious prisoners as part of a wide-ranging prisoner amnesty in autumn 1998 was a positive development. Among these were five UBCV monks, including two of the most senior-ranking, Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy; Catholic priests Dinh Viet Hieu and Nguyen Chau Dat; and Hoa Hao Buddhist Tran Huu Duyen.

However, operational and organizational restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of most religious groups remain in place. While there were releases of religious prisoners, including others in addition to the eight prominent ones, detention and imprisonment of other persons for practicing religion illegally continued. The arrest and harassment of several dozen ethnic minority Protestants since January 1998, especially Hmong Christians in the northwest, came to light during the past year. Many of these abuses, which have been going on for several years, were committed by provincial leaders. Members of other religious communities also reported being harassed by the authorities, for example, the two Cao Dai leaders in Kien Giang province who have been detained by police since October 1998.

In April 1999, the Government issued a new decree on religion that prescribes the rights and responsibilities of religious believers. Similar to the Government's 1991 decree on religion, the decree also states for the first time that no religious organization can reclaim lands or properties taken over by the State following the end of the 1954 war against French rule and the 1975 Communist victory in the south. The decree also states that persons formerly detained or imprisoned must obtain special permission from the authorities before they may resume religious activities.

There were credible reports that Hmong Protestant Christians in several northwestern villages were forced to recant their faith and to drink blood from sacrificed chickens mixed with rice wine. Hmong church leaders told a North American church official that one Hmong Christian, Lu Seo Dieu, died in prison in Lao Cai province from mistreatment and lack of medical care. This report could not be confirmed. Prison conditions are poor in remote regions, and prison conditions, in general, are harsh.

Police authorities routinely question persons who hold dissident religious or political views. In May 1999, two prominent pastors of the unsanctioned Assemblies of God, pastors Tran Dinh "Paul" Ai and Lo Van Hen, were detained and questioned by police after a Bible study session that they were conducting in Hanoi was raided by local police. Ai was questioned daily for more than 2 weeks regarding his religious activities, and Lo Van Hen, a member of the Black Tai ethnic minority, was returned to Dien Bien Phu for further questioning by

police. Both were released before the end of May 1999 and allowed to return home.

There were numerous reports that police arbitrarily detained persons based on their religious beliefs and practice. A 1997 directive on administrative detention gives security officials broad powers to monitor citizens and control where they live and work for up to 2 years if they are believed to be threatening "national security." In their implementation of administrative detention, authorities held some persons under conditions resembling house arrest.

The Penal Code, as amended in May 1997, established penalties for offenses that are only vaguely defined, including "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." In some cases, particularly involving Hmong Protestants, when authorities charge persons with practicing religion illegally they do so using provisions of the Penal Code that allow for jail terms up to 3 years for "abusing freedom of speech, press, or religion." There were reports that officials fabricate evidence, and some of the provisions of the law used to convict religious prisoners contradict international covenants such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

There are no precise estimates available of the number of religious detainees and religious prisoners. There reportedly are at least 10 religious detainees, held without arrest or charge; however, the number may be greater. These persons include Le Kim Bien and Pham Cong Hien, the two Cao Dai leaders in Kien Giang province; Le Minh Triet (Tu Triet), a Hoa Hao leader detained at a government house in the south; and a number of Hmong and other ethnic minority Protestant detainees. The authorities use administrative detention as a means of controlling persons whom they believe hold dissident opinions. Anecdotal reports indicate that small groups of Protestants are detained briefly--sometimes for only a few days, at other times for weeks or months. Some persons are subject to prolonged detention without charge. Bien and Hien reportedly have been detained in Kien Giang province since October 1998 without being charged with a crime.

According to rough estimates, there are from 30 to 50 religious prisoners. This number is difficult to verify with any precision because of the secrecy surrounding the arrest, detention, and release process. The following persons reportedly continue to be held as religious prisoners: UBCV monks Thich Thein Minh and Thich Hue Dang; Catholic priests Mai Duc Chuong (Mai Huu Nghi), Pham Minh Tri, Nguyen Van De, Pham Ngoc Lien, Nguyen Thien Phung, and Nguyen Minh Quan; and a still larger number of Hmong Protestant Christians. Credible reports from multiple sources suggest that up to 30 Hmong Protestants have been imprisoned in Lai Chau and Lao Cai provinces after being charged with "teaching religion illegally" or "abusing the rights of a citizen to cause social unrest." Although not all these arrests can be confirmed, officials acknowledge that the following Hmong Christians have been sentenced and imprisoned under the section of the Penal Code that prohibits "abusing the freedom of religion": Sung Phai Dia, Vu Gian Thao, Ly A Giang, Giang A To, and Giang A Cat.

Unconfirmed reports from the central highlands suggest that some local officials have extorted cattle and money from Protestants in those areas. It is unclear whether their religious

affiliation or other factors were the causes of these alleged crimes. Provincial officials in Ha Giang and Lai Chau provinces in the north have sought to pressure Hmong Christians to recant their faith.

The Government bans and actively discourages participation in "illegal" religious groups, including the UBCV, Protestant house churches, and unapproved Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. The Government restricts the number of clergy that the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, and Cao Dai churches may train. Restrictions are placed on the numbers of Buddhist monks and Catholic seminarians. Protestants are not allowed to operate a seminary or to ordain new clergy.

The Government restricts and monitors all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities. On some occasions, large religious gatherings have been allowed, such as the La Vang celebration. Within the past year, the Hoa Hao also have been allowed to have several public activities.

Religious and organizational activities by UBCV monks are illegal, and all UBCV activities outside private temple worship are proscribed. Protestant groups in central and southern provinces and some groups of Hoa Hao believers not affiliated with the group that held the May 1999 congress have petitioned the Government to be recognized officially. They have been unsuccessful thus far. Most evangelical house churches do not attempt to register because they believe that their applications would be denied, and they want to avoid government control.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. The Government restricts persons who belong to dissident and unofficial religious groups from speaking about their beliefs. It officially requires all religious publishing to be done by government-approved publishing houses. Many Buddhist sacred scriptures, Bibles, and other religious texts and publications are printed by these houses and allowed to be distributed to believers. The Government allows, and in some cases encourages, links with coreligionists in other countries when the religious groups are approved by the Government. The Government actively discourages contacts between the illegal UBCV and its foreign Buddhist supporters, and between illegal Protestants, such as the house churches, and their foreign supporters. Contacts between the Vatican and the domestic Catholic Church are permitted, and the Government maintains a regular, active dialog with the Vatican on a range of issues, including organizational activities, the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations, and a possible papal visit. The Government allows religious travel for some, but not all, religious persons; Muslims are able to undertake the Hajj, and many Buddhist and Catholic officials also have been able to travel abroad. Persons who hold dissident religious opinions generally are not approved for foreign travel.

The Government does not designate persons' religion on passports, although citizens' "family books," which are household identification books, list persons' religious and ethnic affiliation.

The law prohibits foreign missionaries from operating in the country. Proselytizing by

citizens is restricted to regularly scheduled religious services in recognized places of worship. Immigrants and noncitizens must comply with the law when practicing their religions. Catholic and Protestant foreigners exercise leadership in worship services that are reserved for foreigners.

The Government Office on Religious Affairs hosts periodic meetings to address religious issues according to government-approved agendas that bring together leaders of diverse religious traditions.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not disadvantage persons in civil, economic, and secular life, although it likely would prevent advancement to the highest government and military ranks. Avowed religious practice bars membership in the Communist Party, although anecdotal reports indicate that a handful of the 2 million Communist Party members are religious believers.

The Government remained sensitive about international and nongovernmental organization investigations. In October 1998, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Abdelfattah Amor, visited Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Tay Ninh province. He met with government officials and representatives of the government-sanctioned Central Buddhist Church, the Catholic Church, Cao Dai, a Protestant church, and the small Muslim community. However, security officials prevented Amor from meeting several senior representatives of the non-government-sanctioned UBCV, including Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do, despite his repeated requests to do so.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

In general there are amicable relations among the various religious communities. During wartime in the 1960's in the central and southern parts of the country, there were strong tensions between Buddhists and Catholics. These were sparked in part by repressive policies against Buddhists by the then-government. In Ho Chi Minh City, there are nascent efforts at informal ecumenical dialog among leaders of disparate religious communities.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy actively and regularly raised concerns about violations of religious freedom with many government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security, the Government's Office on Religion, and other government offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and provincial capitals. Embassy officials also meet and talk with leaders of all of the major religious groups, both recognized as well as unregistered.

The Ambassador has raised religious freedom issues with the Prime Minister, senior cabinet ministers including the foreign minister, senior government and Communist Party advisors,

the head of the Government's Office on Religion, deputy ministers of foreign affairs and public security, and the chairpersons of provincial people's committees around the country, among others. Other embassy and consulate officials have raised U.S. concerns on religious freedom with Assistant Secretary and Deputy Assistant Secretary-rank officials of the ministries of foreign affairs and public security and with provincial officials. The Embassy maintains regular contact with the key offices that follow human rights issues in the Government. Embassy officers have informed government officials that progress on religious issues and human rights has an impact on the degree of full normalization of bilateral relations. The Embassy's public affairs officer distributed information about U.S. concerns about religious freedom to Communist Party and government officials, as well as coordinated seminars with a leading government foreign affairs institute on how religion influences American public life and culture.

Representations by the Embassy generally focus on specific restrictions of religious freedom. These issues include detention and arrest of religious figures and restrictions on church organizational activities, such as training religious leaders, ordination, church building, and foreign travel of religious figures. In several cases, the Embassy's interventions on issues of religious freedom have resulted in improvement of the situation of persons whose religious freedom has been restricted. The release of eight religious prisoners in the autumn of 1998, including Thich Quang Do, Thich Tue Sy, Reverend Nguyen Chau Dat, and Hoa Hao Buddhist Tran Huu Duyen, as well as other prominent advocates of human rights including Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que, followed long-term and direct advocacy on their behalf. Embassy advocacy on behalf of detained Protestant Christians in the northwest provinces may have contributed to the release of several of these persons.

Representatives of the Embassy have met on several occasions with leaders of all the major religious communities, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, maintain a regular dialog with NGO's. An embassy official visited a prominent religious leader in 1999 while he was detained administratively. On several occasions, embassy officers have met with prominent religious prisoners after their release from prison.

The Department of State has commented publicly on the conditions for religious freedom in Vietnam on several occasions. In March 1999, following the Government's criticism of U.N. Special Rapporteur Amor's report, department press guidance noted U.S. support for the work of the U.N. Special Rapporteur in monitoring religious freedom throughout the world and urged Vietnam to allow open and free expression of religion. Both the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi urged the Government to allow Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Robert Seiple to visit the country, and this visit took place in July 1999.

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