



FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom in the World - ↓ Vietnam (2010)

Capital: Hanoi

Population:
87,263,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow

Vietnam received a downward trend arrow due to a serious tightening of space for civil society to comment on and criticize the government, including arrests of reform advocates and an effective ban on private think tanks.

Overview

The state continued to seize land for development in 2009 despite the global economic downturn, and those who protested such moves were harshly punished. The authorities also displayed a growing intolerance for political dissent, cracking down on democracy activists and critical bloggers. In September, a government ban on public criticism of the Communist Party of Vietnam took effect, leading to the closure of the country's only independent think tank.

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 between the two sides erupted in the mid-1960s. A 1973 peace treaty officially ended the war, but fighting did not cease until 1975, when the north completed its conquest of the south. Vietnam was formally united in 1976.

War and poor economic policies mired Vietnam in deep poverty, but economic reforms that began in 1986 drastically transformed the country over the next two decades. Tourism became a major source of revenue, as did the export of foodstuffs and manufactured products. However, political reform and a loosening of the one-party system were rejected by the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Criticism of the government continued to be harshly suppressed, and official corruption remained widespread. To protect the regime's legitimacy, the government began to openly call for an end to corruption, and acknowledged that some reforms were needed. The leadership also focused on closing the widening income gap between rural and urban populations.

At the 10th party congress in April 2006, Nong Duc Manh was reelected as CPV general secretary, and the delegates approved a proposal to allow CPV members to engage in business, partly to attract young entrepreneurs into the party. Nguyen Minh Triet was elected state president by the National Assembly in June, and Nguyen Tan Dung was chosen as prime minister.

After Vietnam secured entry into the World Trade Organization in January 2007, the government embarked on one of the strongest crackdowns against peaceful dissent in recent years, arresting nearly 40 dissidents and sentencing more than 20 to long prison terms. National Assembly elections were held in May of that year, and only 50 of the 500 deputies chosen did not belong to the CPV.

The government's reduced tolerance for open criticism and prodemocracy activism continued through 2008 and 2009. Among other prominent dissidents arrested or sentenced during 2009, Le Cong Dinh, a U.S.-trained lawyer who had defended many democracy supporters, was arrested in June for allegedly distributing antigovernment materials, libeling top political leaders, and colluding with domestic and foreign reactionaries to sabotage the state. In October, nine prodemocracy

activists received prison sentences of up to six years for “spreading propaganda” against the government by hanging banners advocating multiparty democracy and through blogging that criticized the CPV. In other actions during the year, the government forced the closure of Vietnam’s only independent think tank, and the security forces and courts continued to punish residents who objected to state confiscations of land for development.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Vietnam is not an electoral democracy. The CPV, the sole legal political party, controls politics and the government, and its Central Committee is the top decision-making body. The National Assembly, whose 500 members are elected to five-year terms, generally follows CPV dictates. The Vietnam Fatherland Front, an arm of the CPV, vets all candidates. 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. Although senior CPV and government officials have acknowledged growing public discontent, they have mainly responded with a few high-profile prosecutions of corrupt officials and private individuals rather than comprehensive reforms. Vietnam was ranked 120 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International’s 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government tightly controls the media, silencing critics through the courts and other means of harassment. A 1999 law requires journalists to pay damages to groups or individuals found to have been harmed by press articles, even if the reports are accurate. A 2006 decree imposes fines on journalists for denying revolutionary achievements, spreading “harmful” information, or exhibiting “reactionary ideology.” Foreign media representatives cannot travel outside Hanoi without government approval. The CPV or state entities control all broadcast media. 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. A number of newspaper editors and reporters were dismissed in 2009 for reporting on corruption or criticizing official policy. In April 2009, the government temporarily suspended *Du Lich*, a biweekly newspaper, for running articles about the country’s territorial dispute with China on the 30th anniversary of the Vietnamese-Chinese war.

The government restricts internet use through legal and technical means. A 2003 law bans the receipt and distribution of antigovernment e-mail messages, websites considered “reactionary” are blocked, and owners of domestic websites must submit their content for official approval. Internet cafes must register the personal information of and record the sites visited by users. Internet service providers face fines and closure for violating censorship rules. A 2008 decree specifies the types of information that private bloggers may legally post on their blogs. Several political bloggers were harassed, temporarily detained, or jailed during 2009; one, Me Nam, was released 12 days after her August arrest on the condition that she stop blogging, while another, a former army officer and leading prodemocracy activist, was given a five-year prison sentence for publishing subversive articles on the internet. Three more were charged in December and will face trials in January 2010; two of the accused were charged with attempting to overthrow the government, which could result in long prison terms or even death sentences.

Religious freedom remains restricted. All religious groups and most individual clergy members must join a party-controlled supervisory body and obtain permission for most activities. The Roman Catholic Church can now select its own bishops and priests, but they must be approved by the government. Many restrictions on charitable activities have been lifted, and clergy enjoy greater freedom to travel domestically and internationally. However, several religious leaders and adherents remain in prison or face other forms of government harassment. In March 2009, the courts upheld the convictions of eight people for disturbing public order and damaging property while protesting the state’s confiscation of Catholic Church land, and in September a police-backed mob forced Buddhist monks and nuns to leave their monastery in the central highlands.

Academic freedom is limited. University professors must refrain from criticizing government policies and adhere to party views when teaching or writing on political topics. Although citizens enjoy more freedom in private discussions than in the past, the authorities continue to suppress open criticism of the state.

Freedoms of association and assembly are restricted. Organizations must apply for official permission to obtain legal status and are closely regulated and monitored by the government. A small but active community of nongovernmental groups promotes environmental conservation, women's development, and public health. Human rights organizations and other private groups with rights-oriented agendas are banned. In September 2009, Vietnam's only independent think tank, the Institute of Development Studies, closed after a government decree restricted political research to the ruling party only and banned such organizations from publicly criticizing official policy. The institute's researchers had included prominent former state and party officials.

The Vietnam General Conference of Labor (VGCL), closely tied to the CPV, is the only legal labor federation. 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 land confiscations and unfair or harsh working conditions, have become more common. The central leadership uses such demonstrations to pressure local governments and businesses to comply with tax laws, environmental regulations, and wage agreements. Enforcement of labor laws covering child labor, workplace safety, and other issues remains poor. Critics also allege that the government has intentionally kept minimum wages low to attract foreign investment.

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 rarely 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 political prisoners remain behind bars. Nguyen Van Ly, a Catholic priest and prominent prodemocracy activist currently serving an eight-year sentence, is said to be in solitary confinement and suffering from poor health, and is reportedly denied legal counsel.

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.

Land disputes have become more frequent as the government seizes property to lease to domestic and foreign investors. Affected residents and farmers rarely find the courts helpful, and their street protests have resulted in harassment and arrests by the state. The harsh treatment of displaced citizens has stirred criticism from a few former senior party and state officials.

Although economic opportunities have grown for women, 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. A number of cases of international adoption fraud have been exposed in recent years. In September 2009, 16 people—including two heads of provincial welfare centers, doctors, nurses, and government legal officials—were convicted of fraud in obtaining more than 250 babies between 2005 and 2008 and putting them up for international adoption, which typically involves considerable fees and donations by prospective parents.

* 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](http://www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cf...) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.