

VIETNAM 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that all people have the right to freedom of belief and religion. Current law, however, provides for significant government control over religious practices and includes vague provisions that permit restrictions on religious freedom in the stated interest of national security and social unity. In November the National Assembly passed a new Law on Belief and Religion, which is scheduled to come into effect in January 2018. The implementation decree for the new law remained pending release. According to legal experts, the new law maintains many current restrictions such as prescribing a multi-stage registration process, but significantly reduces the waiting period for a religious group to obtain recognition; specifies the right of recognized religious organizations to have legal personality; and streamlines processes for religious groups to obtain recognition or certificates of registration for specific activities. In January the head pastor of an unregistered Degar evangelical church died from injuries sustained during a police beating in December 2015. Government authorities continued to limit the activities of unrecognized religious groups and those without certificates of registration for religious activities, particularly those groups the government believed to be engaged in political activity. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration were reportedly able to practice their beliefs with less interference. The government continued to restrict the activities of recognized religious groups in education and health, although less so than in previous years, and severely restricted such activities by groups without certificates of registration. Religious leaders, particularly those of groups without recognition or certificates of registration, reported various forms of governmental harassment, including physical assault, short-term detention, prosecutions, monitoring, restrictions on travel, property seizure or destruction, and denials of registration and/or other permissions, especially in the Central and Northwest Highlands. Government treatment of religious groups varied 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 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. The government granted The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) official national-level recognition in June. In September authorities permitted the

Catholic Church to open its first institute of higher education in the country since 1975.

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

During their visits, the U.S. President and Secretary of State called for improvements in religious freedom in meetings with senior government officials. U.S. embassy and consulate general officials urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. They sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups, and urged an end to restrictions on and harassment of groups without recognition or registration. U.S. officials maintained regular contact with religious leaders across the country. The U.S. President met with civil society and religious leaders during a visit to the country in May. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom discussed religious freedom concerns with government officials during the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in April. The Ambassador at Large visited the country in March and the Assistant Secretary in May, meeting a broad range of recognized and unrecognized religious groups and advocating for improvements to freedom of religion in law and practice. The embassy and senior U.S. officials submitted recommendations on language for the Law on Religion and Belief to government leaders during the law-drafting process aimed at bringing the text more in line with the country's constitution and international commitments to protect religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 95.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to statistics released by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) in December, approximately 27 percent of the population consists of religious believers. According to previous CRA statistics, 95 percent of the population professes "religious or spiritual beliefs," with more than half of the population identifying as Buddhist. Within that community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic majority, 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 Buddhists, 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 a devotional form of Hinduism mostly practiced by 50,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area; approximately 100,000 Muslims, who are 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 1.4 percent. 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, among others, including groups referred to as Montagnards or Degar). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

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 violating the freedom of belief and religion or taking advantage of a belief or religion in order to violate the law.

The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and implementation 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; proselytize 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.

In November the National Assembly passed the country's first Law on Belief and Religion, which is scheduled to come into effect in January 2018 and will supersede the 2004 ordinance. The government did not release the implementation decree for the new law by the end of the year; the decree will impact the final interpretation and enforcement of the new law and is expected to supersede Decree 92.

The new law continues to provide for significant government control over religious practices and permits restrictions on religious freedom in the stated interest of national security and social unity. "Strictly prohibited" acts include "undermining national defense, national security, national sovereignty, public order, public safety, and the environment," "doing harm to social ethics or others' health, life, dignity, honor, or property," "sowing division among the people," and "abusing belief and religious activities to gain personal benefit."

The new law reduces the waiting period for a religious group to obtain national-level or provincial recognition from 23 years to five years, lessens the number of religion-related procedures requiring advance approval from authorities, aims to clarify the process by which religious organizations can obtain registration for their activities and recognition, and for the first time specifies the right of legal status for recognized religious groups. The law also specifies that religious groups be allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws.

The CRA is responsible for implementing the 2004 ordinance and all other related ordinances, decrees, and regulations, and will be responsible for implementing the new law. The CRA maintains offices at the central, provincial, and in some areas, district level. Current regulations and the new law lay out specific responsibilities for central-level, province-level, and local-level CRA offices, and delegate certain religion-related management tasks to provincial-level and local-level people's committees (i.e. local leaders). The central-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.

Current regulations and the new law state forcing others to follow, or renounce, a religion or belief is prohibited.

Current regulations prescribe a multistage process to obtain recognition. A religious organization must first apply for and obtain a “registration of religious practice” from the commune-level government by providing a dossier of information, including on its structure, leadership, membership, and activities. A registration of religious practice allows a group of individuals to gather at a specified location to “practice worship rituals, pray, or express their religious faith.” After operating lawfully for 20 years under a registration of religious practice, a religious organization is permitted to apply for a “registration for religious operation” with the provincial or national-level CRA, depending on the geographic extent of the group’s activities. A registration for religious operation allows the group to conduct religious ceremonies, services, and preaching at the registered venue; hold congresses to adopt its charter and statutes; elect or designate its leaders and organize training courses on religious tenets; repair and renovate its facilities; and conduct missionary, charity, and humanitarian activities. Three years after obtaining a registration for religious operation, a religious organization becomes eligible to apply for legal recognition after electing its leaders through a national convention. The application for recognition must include information about the organization’s leadership, number of believers, history of operations, tenets and canons, and bylaws. Under current regulations, applications for recognition must be approved by the prime minister (for religious organizations operating in more than one province) or the chairman of the provincial people’s committee (for religious organizations operating within one province).

At every stage of the registration and recognition application process, current regulations specify time limits for an official response, which can be up to 45 days, depending on the scope of the request. Although current regulations require 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.

The new law also prescribes a multistage process for a religious organization to receive recognition. First, an unrecognized religious organization must obtain a certificate of registration for religious activities from the provincial-level CRA (if

the organization will operate only within one province) or national-level CRA (if the organization will operate in multiple provinces). To obtain such registration, the organization must submit a detailed application package with information about its doctrine, history, bylaws, leaders, and members and proof it has a legal meeting location. The relevant CRA office is responsible for approving a valid application for registration within 75 days of receipt. The CRA is required to provide any rejection in writing.

Under the new law, religious organizations with a certificate of registration (“registered religious organizations”) are allowed to preach, organize religious ceremonies, and conduct religious classes at approved locations; organize conferences to approve its charter and bylaws; elect or appoint leaders; repair or renovate religious facilities; and conduct charitable or humanitarian activities. Under the new law, however, a wide variety of these religious activities continue to require advance approval or registration from government authorities. The new law states that all such activities must also comply with other laws governing construction and charitable activities.

The next step is for a registered religious organization to seek recognition. Under the new law, a religious organization is permitted to apply for recognition after it operates continuously for at least five years with legal registration, has developed a legal charter and bylaws, has leaders in good standing without a criminal record, and manages assets and conducts transactions as its own entity. After meeting these requirements, a registered religious organization must submit a detailed application package to the provincial or national-level CRA, depending on the geographic extent of the organization. The application must include information about the structure, membership, location, history, charter, and finances of the organization. The relevant CRA office is responsible for approving a valid application for recognition within 75 days of receipt. The CRA is required to provide any rejection in writing.

Under current regulations, the government has regulatory oversight of religious groups, which must be officially registered or recognized as formal religious organizations. Current regulations stipulate that local government authorities must approve the leadership, activities, and the establishment of seminaries or religious classes, and require religious organizations to register their religious leaders and officials with the CRA at the central or provincial level. Current regulations specify curriculum guidelines for religious training institutions.

Under both current law and the new law, religious organizations have the right to publish religious materials, produce and export religious objects and icons, construct and maintain religious facilities, and accept donations from domestic and foreign sources. Both current law and the new law imply, but do not specify, that these rights apply only to recognized religious organizations. Religious organizations must also follow other laws governing publishing.

Current regulations do not specify whether religious organizations have legal personality. The new law, however, states a recognized religious organization will attain the status of a “noncommercial legal person” from the date of its recognition. There is no provision for registered but unrecognized religious organizations to attain such legal personality. Organizations previously recognized before the implementation of the new law will retain their recognized status and organizations with certificates of registration before the implementation of the new law will retain their certificates of registration. Affiliates of a recognized organization are permitted to apply for their own legal personality.

The new law specifies that religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and believers have the right to file complaints or civil and administrative lawsuits, or make denunciations (formal complaints about government officials or agencies) under the relevant laws and decrees. The new law also states that organizations and individuals have the right to bring civil lawsuits in court regarding the actions of religious groups or believers. There are no specific analogous provisions in the current regulations.

The 2005 prime ministerial Directive on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism instructs authorities to help unrecognized and unregistered Protestant congregations to register so they can worship openly and work to attain recognition. The directive specifically 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 in the Central Highlands, central Vietnam, and the southern Annamese Mountains region to allow unrecognized “house churches” to operate as long as they are “committed to abide by the law” and are not affiliated with separatist political movements or “Degar Protestantism.” CRA officials stated during the year that the 2005 directive would remain in place after the new law comes into force.

Both current regulations and the new law provide a separate process for unregistered, unrecognized religious organizations or groups of individuals to

receive permission for specific religious activities by submitting an application package to the commune-level people's committee. Current regulations require the people's committee to respond in writing to such an application within 15 working days of receipt, while the new law requires a response in writing within 25 days of receipt.

Both current regulations and the new law specify that a wide variety of religious activities require advance approval or registration from the national-level CRA, provincial-level CRA, or local authorities. Under the new law, these activities continue to include "belief activities" (defined as traditional communal practices related to ancestor, hero, or folk worship); "belief festivals" being held for the first time; the establishment, split, or merger of religious affiliates; the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); establishment of a religious training facility; conducting religious training classes; holding major religious congresses; organizing religious events, preaching, or evangelizing outside of approved locations; traveling abroad to conduct religious activities or training; and joining a foreign religious organization.

According to current regulations, certain religious activities do not require advance approval, but instead must be notified to the appropriate authorities. Activities requiring notification include recurring or periodic "belief festivals;" dismissal of clergy; conducting fundraising activities; notification of enrollment figures at a seminary or religious school; and the repair or renovation of religious facilities not considered cultural-historical relics. Under the new law, additional activities requiring notification and not advance approval include the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious clergy (such as monks); transfers or dismissals of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); conducting operations at an approved religious training facility; routine religious activities (defined as "religious preaching, practicing religious tenets and rites, and management of a religious organization"); and internal conferences of a religious organization.

Both current law and the new law specify that religious organizations must follow numerous other laws for certain activities. Current law and the new law specify that religious organizations be allowed to conduct educational, health, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws. In addition, both current law and the new law state that construction or renovation of religious facilities must abide by relevant laws and regulations on construction, and foreigners participating in religious activities must abide by immigration law.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public and private schools. Private schools are required to follow a government-approved curriculum, which does not allow for religious instruction.

Both current law and the new law specify that publishing, producing, exporting, or importing religious texts must be in accordance with laws and regulations related to publishing. The Law on Publishing requires all publishers be licensed public entities or state-owned enterprises. Publishers must receive prior approval by government authorities for the publication of all documents, including religious texts. By decree, only the Religious Publishing House may publish religious books. In practice, however, other licensed publishers print books related to religion. Publishers have received permission to print the Bible in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ong, 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 sell legally published religious texts and other religious materials.

The constitution states the government owns and manages all land on behalf of the people. According to the new law, land use by religious organizations must conform to the Land Law and its related decrees. The Land Law recognizes licensed religious institutions and schools may acquire land use rights and be allocated or leased land. The law specifies religious institutions are eligible for state compensation if their land is seized under eminent domain. The law allows provincial-level people's committees to seize land via eminent domain in order to facilitate the construction of religious facilities.

The current law states provincial-level people's committees may grant land-use certificates for a "long and stable term" to religious institutions if they have permission to operate, the land is dispute-free, and the land was not acquired via transfer or donation after July 1, 2004. According to the law, religious institutions are not permitted to exchange, transfer, lease, donate, or mortgage their land use rights. In the case of land disputes involving a religious institution, the law gives the chairperson of the provincial-level people's committee the authority to settle disputes. The law allows parties who disagree with the chairperson's decision to appeal to the minister of natural resources and environment or to file a lawsuit in court.

In practice, if a religious organization has not obtained recognition, members of the congregation may acquire a land use title individually, but not corporately as a 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. Decree 92 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 ministerial 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.

Individuals are no longer required to specify their religious affiliation on national identification cards. During the year, the government began issuing new cards, which no longer listed religious affiliation.

Separate provisions of the new law exist for foreigners legally resident in the country to request permission to conduct religious activities, teach, attend local religious training, or preach in local religious institutions. The law requires religious organizations or Vietnamese individuals to receive government permission in advance of hosting or conducting any religious activities involving foreign organizations, foreign individuals, or travel abroad. Current regulations also contain requirements for foreigners conducting religious activities within the country, including those involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership, to seek permission for their activities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In January the head pastor of an unregistered Degar evangelical church died from injuries sustained during a police beating in December 2015. Religious leaders, particularly those of unregistered groups and those from ethnic minorities, reported various forms of governmental harassment, including physical assaults, short-term detention, prosecutions, monitoring, restrictions on travel, property seizure or destruction, and denials of registration and/or other permissions, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. Government authorities continued to limit the activities of unrecognized religious groups and those without certificates of registration for religious activities, particularly those the government believed to be

engaged in political activity, while members of recognized groups or those with registrations were able to practice their beliefs with less interference, according to reports. The government continued to restrict the activities of recognized religious groups in education and health, although less so than in previous years, and severely restricted such activities by unrecognized groups. 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, were responsible for the majority of harassment incidents, often by the use of suspected plainclothes police officers. Some local and provincial authorities 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. The government granted Mormons recognition in June. In September authorities permitted the Catholic Church to open its first institute of higher education since 1975, in Ho Chi Minh City.

Pastor Ksor Xiem, head pastor of the unregistered Montagnard Degar Evangelical Church in Ayun Pa District, Gia Lai Province, died in January from what a nongovernmental organization (NGO) said were internal injuries sustained during a police beating in December 2015. District public security officials reportedly ordered the pastor to report to the local police station on Christmas Eve where they demanded he renounce his faith. Police reportedly “used various tools to beat him up” after the pastor refused to comply. He lost consciousness and was returned to his family. Authorities reportedly interfered with the funeral and later threatened other church members with prison should they fail to cease all religious activities. The government stated Ksor Xiem died due to disease.

In February activists and independent media stated guards at the An Phuoc prison in Binh Duong Province, where Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh was serving his 11-year prison sentence for “undermining state unity,” treated Chinh inhumanely by putting him in solitary confinement, beating him, and serving him rotten food. His wife, Tran Thi Hong, also reported the guards attempted to beat him to prevent him from telling her about poor prison treatment. Chinh conducted a hunger strike from August 8-28 to protest poor prison conditions. Hong stated that in September Chinh and other prisoners found bits of glass and copper wire in their prison food. Hong reported in December that officials transferred Chinh from his prison in Binh Duong Province to Xuan Loc Prison in Dong Nai Province and for two days refused to disclose his new location to his family. She reported authorities denied Chinh a Bible in prison. Gia Lai Province officials stated Chinh

was imprisoned for violating the law and stated Hong's reports were inaccurate and politically motivated.

Hong reported local police in Pleiku, Gia Lai Province repeatedly detained, harassed, assaulted, and threatened her throughout the year. On March 30, police temporarily detained Hong and her son, locked them out of their house, and confiscated several personal belongings while they were on their way to meet with the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. On April 14, Pleiku police detained and reportedly beat her after she refused to report the contents of her meeting. Hong reported that during a police interrogation session on May 12, four female officers pinned her to the ground, repeatedly pinched and pulled her skin, and struck her in her head, knees, legs, hands, and feet. On May 13, four female officers reportedly physically struck her for three hours and forced chopsticks into her mouth when she refused to sign a confession paper prepared by police. On May 27 and 28, police reportedly broke into her home and forced her to attend interrogation sessions at a local police station. Local police also reportedly summoned Hong for questioning every day from June 1 through June 10. In May and June Hong held two hunger strikes to protest this treatment. Police harassment, including regular home searches and seizures of her personal property such as her cell phone, continued through July and August. In November Hong reported at least 10 police officers surrounded her home and prevented her and her children from leaving during the U.S. Ambassador's visit to Pleiku. Hong reported in December police officers prevented her from attending Christmas services.

During the year, the family of imprisoned Hoa Hao and land rights activist Tran Thi Thuy reported prison officials at An Phuoc Prison in Binh Duong Province had repeatedly denied her medical treatment for a tumor on her uterus and an open wound on her abdomen, despite repeated requests. Thuy reportedly was told she would not receive treatment unless she "confessed" to the crime of "carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration," of which she was convicted in 2011. Police had taken Thuy to a police hospital in September 2015 and in March, but the hospital and prison officers reportedly refused to share Thuy's medical records with her family. Thuy's family reported she continued to be forced to work in poor conditions in prison, and stated family members also were regularly harassed by police.

On April 6, hundreds of police officers equipped with guns, tear gas, and batons reportedly raided a Catholic church in Huong Phuong Parish, Quang Binh Province, ahead of the parish's Week of Adoration. At least three parishioners reported injuries and others reported suffering from tear gas exposure. Multiple

parishioners reportedly were detained temporarily. In December 2015, authorities had prevented parishioners from setting up a decorative gate for the church in celebration of Christmas.

Members of ethnic minority groups collectively known as Montagnards (or Degar) in the Central Highlands stated the government continued to monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily arrest, and discriminate against them, in part because of their religious practices. During the year, senior Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and provincial officials continued to say certain Montagnard church congregations in Kon Tum and Gia Lai Provinces, including churches linked to Degar (or Dega) Christianity, were affiliated with the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO), a group that opposed the government during and after the Vietnam War. Officials also said Degar Christians incited violent separatism by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands from 2001 through 2008. Montagnards stated Degar Christianity was a peaceful religious denomination without links to any separatist movement. Some Protestant church leaders and Montagnards also stated that local authorities seized their land or property in part because of their religious beliefs. These leaders stated local authorities discriminated against their followers, threatening to exclude them from state-run social welfare programs and rations of salt and fertilizer allocated to ethnic minority villages if adherents did not denounce their faith. According to Human Rights Watch, provincial authorities routinely directed officials to organize public renunciations of Degar Christianity or other “unauthorized Christian beliefs” among ethnic minority communities. Leaders and members from these unregistered congregations reported police harassment, such as being detained for questioning, increased surveillance, and confiscation of cell phones and Bibles. Other Montagnard Christians who were affiliated with nationally recognized denominations reported in March they were allowed to congregate and worship with few restrictions. In some cases, Montagnards stated ongoing social and religious persecution drove them to flee to Cambodia and Thailand, sometimes seeking asylum. Local officials reportedly harassed and intimidated family members of individuals seeking asylum in Thailand. For example, district and provincial police raided the Gia Lai Province home of a Degar Christian seeking asylum in Thailand while his wife and children were praying, accusing the family of plotting to escape the country. Officials confiscated personal papers, Christian hymn books, a smart phone, and 56 million dong (\$2,460). Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

From February 12 to 13, local authorities in Quang Ngai Province detained Mennonite Pastor Y Pui Ya, reportedly for teaching the Bible to approximately 100 ethnic minority students, primarily from the Kor and H're ethnic groups.

Following his March meeting in the Central Highlands with the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Pastor Y Nuen from the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ in Dak Lak Province (from the Ede ethnic minority) reported provincial police detained and questioned him for several days in April, and kept a close watch on him afterwards. Y Nuen stated Dak Lak Province authorities detained his brother Y Jon Auyn from January 13-21 in a prison in Krong Pac District and repeatedly assaulted him. Y Nuen reported another brother was also detained overnight and assaulted by police, and that his wife had been repeatedly questioned by police for their religious activities.

On June 12, approximately 30 police officers and local officials from the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Women's Union, and Communist Youth League reportedly broke into a Catholic house church in Muong Khuong District, Lao Cai Province, disturbing a Sunday Mass. Police assaulted one individual who tried to film the incident and took him to a local police station for questioning. On May 28, local police officers blocked all paths leading to the house church to prevent villagers from attending another Sunday Mass. According to social media reports, authorities banned local priest Nguyen Van Thanh from conducting services at the church.

On May 7, Catholic priest Nguyen Van The reportedly was assaulted repeatedly by plainclothes security officials with iron rods and batons in Son Duong District, Tuyen Quang Province after he organized a community service event for ethnic minorities. Activists reported The frequently criticized local officials' economic projects as hurting the livelihoods of the Tay and other ethnic minority groups in the area.

On multiple occasions in January and February plainclothes police officers in Lam Dong Province reportedly attacked human rights activist and Catholic former prisoner of conscience Tran Minh Nhat and his family members with stones, causing head injuries. From January through April local police reportedly verbally threatened his family members, prevented him from travelling to receive medical treatment, burned his crops, killed his livestock, and sprayed his house with pesticides. Nhat continued to give interviews to foreign media outlets and post on social media about religious freedom, which authorities reportedly had warned him repeatedly against doing.

In September independent Hoa Hao and human rights activist Nguyen Bac Truyen reported a group of suspected plainclothes police punched and kicked him and his wife on the street in Ho Chi Minh City while they were returning home from a place of worship. The government stated it had no record of such an incident. In December Truyen reported MPS officials detained him and his wife for four hours, separately questioning them on their relationship with imprisoned human rights defender Nguyen Van Dai.

On March 29, suspected plainclothes police reportedly assaulted and threatened Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) leaders during their visit to a house church in Loc Ninh Commune, Dong Hoi, Quang Binh Province, assaulting and spraying fermented shrimp paste on congregants. This incident was the most recent in a series of attacks against the ECVN by suspected plainclothes police since early 2015.

On July 31, authorities at Tan Son Nhat Airport in Ho Chi Minh City reportedly stopped Mennonite Pastor Pham Ngoc Thach and confiscated his passport when he was boarding a flight to attend the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference in Timor-Leste. Police issued him a document stating he was ineligible to travel overseas for national security reasons. Authorities reportedly prevented Cao Dai Popular Council Representative Nguyen Van Phuc from attending the same conference, and temporarily detained and questioned independent Hoa Hao adherent Bui Van Tham upon his return from the conference.

In January authorities charged three individuals in connection with a December 2015 assault on Catholic priest Dang Huu Nam of Phu Yen Parish, Nghe An Province, which required his hospitalization. The local police chief and one of his deputies were suspended for their suspected role in the assault. On August 4, Hanoi police took Nam to the Cau Giay District police station and reportedly interrogated him about his links to “antistate” group Viet Tan and his role in organizing environmental demonstrations. Catholic activists reported the Nghe An Province People’s Committee issued an official note on October 7 urging that Bishop Nguyen Thai Hop reassign Nam to a position outside of the province and accusing Nam of manipulating parishioners, slandering the government, and collaborating with Viet Tan. During the year, Nam had helped organize a series of demonstrations against provincial officials and an international steel company over fish deaths and environmental pollution along the coastline of several provinces in Central Vietnam.

On August 12, Nguyen Van Minh, an independent Hoa Hao follower arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years in prison, was released after serving his full term. On October 30, Bui Van Trung, an independent Hoa Hao follower arrested in 2012 and sentenced to four years in prison for “resisting persons in the performance of their official duties,” was released after serving his full prison term.

On May 17, authorities granted amnesty and early release to Catholic priest Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, approximately three months before the end of his eight-year jail term for “conducting propaganda against the State.”

In April independent Hoa Hao followers and activists reported that local authorities, police, and suspected plainclothes police in An Giang, Dong Thap, Vinh Long, and Can Tho Provinces established checkpoints to monitor and prevent followers from travelling to participate in a major religious commemoration. In An Giang Province, traffic police reportedly stopped adherent Nguyen Cong Thu and a group of suspected plainclothes police reportedly beat him until he lost consciousness. In Dong Thap Province, police prevented former prisoner of conscience and Hoa Hao follower Duong Thi Tron from leaving her house. Other followers reported local authorities threatened to punish them if they joined commemorative services held at other adherents’ houses.

In April the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV)-affiliated Phu Phong Evangelical Church in Binh Dinh Province reported local authorities mobilized forces to seize a plot of land adjacent to the church’s sanctuary for the construction of a public garden, without prior approval of the congregation. Church leaders said this action was the most recent in a series of government seizures of church property at that location. Church members reported unidentified individuals entered the church sanctuary on April 13, destroyed church property, and attacked several followers, causing minor injuries. The government confirmed that local authorities had confiscated a portion of the church’s land in 1975 for community purposes and decided in 2014 to build a park on the land. Local authorities said they considered, but ultimately rejected, the church’s request for return of the land, and communicated this decision to the church on March 30. The government stated church members had disrupted public order on April 13 and denied officials had injured any followers.

On January 2, bloggers and activists reported nearly 200 local officials, police, and suspected plainclothes police in Thua Thien-Hue Province broke into the Thien An

Catholic Monastery. These individuals reportedly threatened, insulted, and physically attacked several residents, and chopped down trees on the monastery's property. The authorities reportedly attempted to pressure the monastery into surrendering the monastery's land for a tourism project. On May 29, authorities reportedly dismantled religious structures on a disputed parcel of land, including a crucifix built by monastery residents in 2015 in an attempt to reinforce the monastery's land claim. On June 20, according to media reports, local authorities mobilized 200 people and bulldozers to destroy property and structures of the abbey. Per media reports, local authorities since 2015 have attempted to expand an entertainment complex owned by two local corporations into land claimed by the monastery.

Multiple Buddhist clergy of the recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha who supported land rights activists or were outspoken about suspected corruption within the organization reported local authorities continued to harass them and members of their pagodas in Bac Giang and Ha Nam Provinces and Hanoi. They reported the harassment included intimidation of monks and nuns, expulsion by force of clergy from their buildings, suspected plainclothes police breaking into religious buildings, the destruction of pagoda property, and theft of cash donations from villagers.

Mennonite pastors of unregistered churches in Binh Duong Province, Quang Ngai Province, and Ho Chi Minh City reported that police, local authorities, and suspected plainclothes police monitored, intimidated, and harassed church leaders and congregants throughout the year.

In March independent Cao Dai followers reported a group of recognized Cao Dai leaders, local authorities, and police in Long An Province entered a local independent Cao Dai temple without permission, locked the premises, and told the independent followers to surrender the temple to authorities. After the independent Cao Dai followers refused, the group left without incident. In June authorities and police in Quang Ngai Province reportedly came to the houses of several independent Cao Dai congregants to question them about the recent visit of an independent Cao Dai activist, Master Hua Phi, to their houses.

Independent Hoa Hao followers reported authorities in An Phu District, An Giang Province, harassed dozens of adherents before, during, and after an April 29 religious commemoration. Authorities reportedly verbally threatened, interrogated, and assaulted multiple Hoa Hao followers. Adherents also reported police in An Giang and Dong Thap Provinces harassed and blocked them from

attending a June 22 religious ceremony at Quang Minh Pagoda, physically assaulting several followers, including Mai Thi Dung, an independent Hoa Hao activist, and her daughter, several days before the group's founding anniversary. Vo Van Buu, Dung's husband, reported individuals tried to prevent the family from traveling to attend services to commemorate the anniversary in another province. The government stated Quang Minh Pagoda was not registered as a place of worship and that independent Hoa Hao followers organized illegal activities, disrupted order in the area, and did not register with authorities as visitors as required by law. The government stated that certain adherents insulted and attacked police during the above mentioned incidents.

According to a report by the Interfaith Council, in January security officials prevented Pure Hoa Hao followers from attending a ceremony celebrating the birthday of the Hoa Hao founder in An Giang Province. The report stated that authorities in Vinh Long, An Giang, Dong Thap, and Can Tho asked Hoa Hao followers not to come to the ceremony. Security officials in these provinces closely followed Hoa Hao members, and in some cases detained them in their own houses. In particular, security officials verbally harassed or assaulted older Hoa Hao members and threatened them not to come to the ceremony.

During the year, the government continued efforts to implement national directives to suppress the growth of the Duong Van Minh religious group, asserting the group was a threat to national security, political stability, and social order in the Northwest Highlands provinces of Cao Bang, Bac Can, Thai Nguyen, and Tuyen Quang. Local and central authorities continued to call on the ethnic minority H'mong people in these provinces to disavow the group, whose followers advocate a simplified version of traditional H'mong funeral ceremonies and to dismantle all *nha don*, public buildings used for funeral rites by the group. Duong Van Minh adherents reported approximately 200 police and plainclothes security officials destroyed a *nha don* on August 29 in Thang Muoi village in Ham Yen District, Tuyen Quang Province and assaulted and injured eight followers. Adherents reported security officials in Tuyen Quang, Cao Bang, Bac Kan, and Thai Nguyen Provinces destroyed seven *nha don* between August 29 and September 9. Duong Van Minh followers said they sent complaints to local, provincial, and central-level government officials in September but had not received a response by year's end. The government stated the Duong Van Minh group was not a "lawful religious organization," that the *nha don* were "illegally built for political purposes," and that followers had intimidated and acted violently against local officials.

In total, the government has granted recognition to 38 religious organizations and one dharma practice (a set of spiritual practices) affiliated with 15 distinct religious traditions as defined by the government. The 15 religious traditions are: Buddhism, Islam, Bahai, Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormonism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, 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, Khmer Brahmanism, and Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition.

Both registered and unregistered religious groups stated government agencies sometimes did not respond to registration applications or approval requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often did not specify reasons for refusals. Some groups reported they successfully appealed local decisions to higher-level authorities through informal channels. A few religious leaders reported authorities sometimes asked for bribes to facilitate approvals. 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.

In January Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang reported local authorities in District 2, Ho Chi Minh City, rejected his congregation's application for registration without providing specific reasons.

Local authorities in some Central Highlands provinces reportedly continued to pressure smaller SECV congregations, some with as many as 100 followers, to combine into larger groups of up to 1,500 individuals in order to gain official registration. 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 local authorities, particularly in the Central Highlands, continued to pressure newer congregations to

affiliate with existing congregations or other, more established denominations. Pastors reported during the year this practice was widespread in ethnic minority villages in Gia Lai and Kon Tum Provinces. In at least one reported case, authorities continued to offer a congregation a greater level of recognition if its leadership acted more cooperatively with the government.

On August 19, police in Dak Nong Province questioned a local pastor about his father's activities in the United States and pressured him to combine his three churches in order to centralize control over religious activity, according to an NGO report. The pastor stated he remained under close monitoring by local authorities. The government stated local police had lawfully questioned the pastor about his unregistered charitable activities and said his father had fled the country illegally and made false statements about religious freedom in Vietnam.

According to many Catholic bishops, parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations faced difficulty registering with provincial authorities, uneven and inconsistent enforcement of national laws, and a lack of accountability on the part of provincial authorities. Catholic leaders stated the most problematic regions were in the Central Highlands (Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Kon Tum, and Lam Dong Provinces), the Northwest Highlands, and Hoa Binh Province.

In March Catholic leaders in Kon Tum Province reported their dialogue with local officials regarding authorities' plans to close unregistered house churches had improved compared to 2015, but noted provincial and certain district-level authorities still refused to approve requests to establish new parishes, refused the Church's appointments of local priests, and placed arbitrary restrictions on Church activities. Kon Tum Province authorities stated in March they were in the process of approving eight new parishes. Catholic leaders said, however, provincial officials routinely sought to "negotiate" during the approval process to reduce the size of churches.

During the year, Catholic leaders stated they hoped to expand beyond their current four parishes in Hoa Binh Province, but said local officials refused to register additional parishes and physically prevented parishioners from attending masses; national-level officials reportedly told Church leaders to "be patient." Priests reported officials in Ha Nam Province continued to refuse to allow the Church to rebuild its original compound around the Basilica of So Kiem.

Some Buddhist, Protestant, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao groups, such as the UBCV and Pure Hoa Hao, 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, such as members of the Interfaith Council, regularly reported some provincial authorities used local registration laws as a pretext to pressure, intimidate, threaten, extort, harass, and assault them, and discouraged their members' participation in the groups.

During the year, the CRA announced it had granted national-level registrations to three Catholic orders, the Congregation of the Phat Diem Lovers of the Holy Cross, Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and Dominican Sisters of St. Rose of Lima. Catholic leaders reported the Dien Bien Province People's Committee officially approved during the year the Church's 2007 application to recognize the Dien Bien parish. During the year, the SECV and ECVN, the two largest evangelical Christian Churches in Vietnam, announced authorities granted local registrations to 23 congregations, including two in Gia Lai Province in the Central Highlands.

Multiple registered and unregistered religious groups reported their ability to meet openly for worship had improved in recent years. For example, a group of independent Hoa Hao followers in An Giang Province reported during the year that they were able to hang portraits of their founder in a location visible from the street, without official harassment.

In May the abbot of the unregistered UBCV-affiliated An Cu Pagoda in Da Nang reported local authorities and police intimidated and banned him from traveling to Ho Chi Minh City to meet with his patriarch, Thich Quang Do, and from traveling to Hue to attend a service in honor of Buddha's birthday in the same month. Police reportedly kept a close watch on his pagoda throughout the year and prevented adherents from coming to it on major Buddhist holidays.

Religious believers, particularly members of organizations that had not applied for or been granted legal registration, continued to report intimidation by local security officials for 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.

Falun Gong practitioners reported in August that Hanoi plainclothes police prevented them from practicing in a local park, spraying water on them to force them to leave.

According to representatives of Shen Yun, a Falun Gong-affiliated performing arts group banned in China, authorities cancelled their license to hold performances from December 22 to January 8, 2017. Shen Yun representatives said the Chinese government pressured the Vietnamese government to rescind the performance license.

Members of the military reportedly were not permitted to read the Bible or practice religious rites while on duty, and had to take personal leave to conduct such activities, according to religious freedom experts. There are no clear regulations for religious expression in the military, with individual unit commanders having significant discretion, experts reported.

In some cases, authorities continued to deny some prisoners and detainees the right to worship. MPS officials refused to allow lawyer and Protestant prisoner of conscience Nguyen Van Dai access to a Bible for the first eight months of his pre-trial detention. Police finally permitted his wife to send him a Bible in July. Other prisoners reported they were allowed to read the Bible or other religious materials and practice their beliefs while incarcerated.

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 leaders stated, however, the number of students permitted to enroll continued to increase compared to the past several 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.

In September the Catholic Institute of Vietnam, the Church's first new institute of higher education since 1975, opened its first master's level class in Ho Chi Minh City. Catholic leaders, however, said they had only received a permit for the institute to conduct educational activities, and still faced hurdles receiving land permits. Church leaders stated they hoped the government eventually would allow them to operate religious secondary schools.

Although the law prohibits publishing of all materials, including religious materials, without government approval, in practice some private, unlicensed

publishing houses unofficially printed and distributed religious texts without active government interference.

On September 8, media sources and Abbot Thich Khong Tanh of the UBCV's Lien Tri Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City reported local authorities evicted the pagoda's residents and razed the building. Municipal leaders had long planned to redevelop the Thu Thiem neighborhood, where the pagoda was located, into an extension of the city's urban core. Local authorities said they attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate with pagoda leadership, including offers of what they said were significant compensation and a new building to replace the pagoda. Authorities said they moved religious items to a storage facility, that Tanh said was unsuitable, before razing the pagoda. Tanh said authorities threatened on multiple occasions over several years to evict the pagoda's residents on short notice unless they accepted compensation and relocation to the new site. Tanh rejected the proposed replacement building as unsuitable, said authorities were using the redevelopment plan as a way to dislodge the group, and sought reconstruction of the pagoda at the original location or a replacement location closer to the original site. Reportedly the monks were living in various locations throughout Ho Chi Minh City.

Relocation discussions between authorities and leaders of the Dong Men Thanh Gia (Lovers of the Holy Cross) Thu Thiem Catholic Convent and Thu Thiem Catholic Church continued at year's end.

In January authorities in Cua Lo Town, Nghe An Province, requested the Mai Linh Catholic congregation dismantle a soccer field it had built on parish land, stating it was built illegally. According to the Catholic Church, local authorities improperly had issued land use certificates for this parish land to two families, while refusing to recognize the Church's land use rights for the remaining plots. Parishioners said local authorities planned to sell the land for personal profit.

The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres in Hanoi reported a local property development company sought to construct an apartment building, using land use certificates improperly issued by city officials, on convent land seized by authorities in 1954. In late July the company reportedly agreed to suspend construction temporarily pending further talks with the sisters and local authorities. On September 27, a state-run pharmacy company blocked with barbed wire a path linking the convent complex to a nearby plot of land the sisters had used as a warehouse and for vegetable gardens.

In March followers of the unregistered Church of Christ in Kon Tum Province (from the Halang ethnic minority) and the Evangelical Church of Christ in Dak Lak Province reported local authorities kept a close watch on them, questioned them on their religious practices, and sometimes banned them from gathering for worship in house churches, including preventing a local Christmas gathering in 2015. Church followers reported police questioned and harassed them after meeting U.S. officials. The government stated that local authorities met with church leaders to remind them of religious regulations but denied any harassment.

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. Government representatives stated in March that he was not under house arrest and was free to leave the pagoda at any time; UBCV members affirmed he could travel outside the pagoda, but only if he refrained from engaging in religious activity. 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. From April to August, Le Cong Cau, the General Secretary of the UBCV Hoa Dao Institute, reported local police in Thua Thien-Hue Province prevented him from traveling to Ho Chi Minh City to meet with Thich Quang Do and foreign diplomats, although he reportedly met Thich Quang Do in September. Between March and May, Cau reported local police interrogated him on a number of occasions, investigating him for “abusing democratic freedoms.”

In January Catholic activists reported Nghe An Province officials refused to allow Cardinal Reinhard Marx, Chairman of the German Bishops’ Conference, to visit Bishop Nguyen Thai Hop in the Vinh Diocese.

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; the passport was first confiscated in 2013. They said authorities permitted his personal travel abroad but confiscated the passport after each trip.

During the year, authorities lifted travel restrictions on certain religious leaders. Catholic priest Trinh Ngoc Hien reported Hanoi authorities had granted him a passport at the end of 2015 after many years of refusing to do so. A Baptist pastor reported Ho Chi Minh City authorities granted him a passport and allowed him to travel abroad for the first time in 10 years.

In August Catholic priest Phan Van Loi in Hue reported a group of unidentified individuals threw waste and stones into his house and onto his roof. On a separate occasion, another group of unidentified individuals poured glue into his house's lock, requiring him to saw off the lock. Loi stated authorities took these actions in retaliation for his activism for religious freedom and human rights.

Throughout the year, Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang reported suspected security officials in Ho Chi Minh City threw rocks, waste, and rotten eggs at Mennonite churches and Quang's home.

Protestant and Catholic groups reported legal restrictions on operating faith-based medical and educational facilities made them wary of attempting to open hospitals or parochial schools, despite government statements welcoming religious groups to expand participation in health, education, and charitable activities. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools seized from the Catholic Church in past decades.

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. In Kon Tum and Gia Lai Provinces, officials allowed the Catholic Church to operate several dormitories and orphanages for ethnic minority children and to operate ambulances.

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. Practitioners of various religions served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Many nationally recognized 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. The official resumes of the top four CPV leaders stated they followed no religion.

Religious leaders reported that religious adherents faced significant obstacles to pursuing careers in the government or CPV, particularly in security or military-related jobs. While Catholics and Protestants could serve in the enlisted ranks (including during temporary mandatory military service), commissioned officers could not be religious believers and religious adherents were excluded through the

military recruitment process. The Association for the Protection of Freedom of Religion reportedly sent a petition to the government in 2015 to request that soldiers be allowed to attend church while on duty, but did not receive a government response.

Government treatment of foreigners seeking to worship or proselytize varied in practice from locality to locality. In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, municipal officials allowed multiple foreign religious congregations to meet and conduct charitable activities with tacit, but not official, permission. Members of a foreign evangelical Protestant congregation in Da Nang reported authorities prevented them from renting meeting space from a private business and threatened to revoke the business' license if it did not stop hosting religious meetings. Municipal officials reportedly said that foreign worshippers were not allowed to meet in their private residences and that the congregation could only meet at a registered church.

Religious activists reported that blogs run by suspected security officials posted an increased number of articles critical of the Catholic Church and Christianity during the year. Such articles criticized specific Catholic clergy by name and included calls for expelling Christians from Vietnam. These reports increased in October, after Catholic priests and parishioners in Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces organized multiple demonstrations to protest pollution linked to an international steel company.

In September an academic affiliated with the MPS publicly criticized Christianity at a National Assembly-hosted forum, defended government actions to monitor and control Catholic and Protestant churches, and stated that Christian denominations had to become "more Vietnamese" before they could be accepted in the country.

A wide range of senior and provincial-level government officials stated during the year that Vietnam fully respected the religious freedom of its citizens and criticized reports of religious freedom abuses and travel restrictions as inaccurate. 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.

Multiple religious groups stated the new Law on Belief and Religion was a modest step forward for religious freedom. Some Protestant pastors and Catholic media outlets stated the law would reduce government control over religious life for recognized and registered groups, including by simplifying procedures for such organizations to conduct religious activities. A coalition of independent, unrecognized religious organizations welcomed a new provision allowing individuals in pretrial detention to read religious books and practice religious beliefs. Leaders of expatriate churches said they appreciated new provisions allowing them to register their congregations. Multiple religious groups welcomed provisions reducing the waiting period for a registered religious group to obtain recognition from 23 years to five years.

Other religious leaders and international human rights organizations said the new law enshrined in the country's legal framework significant restrictions and bureaucratic controls over religious activity. Many religious leaders expressed concern the law continued to give significant discretion to the government regarding approving or denying various types of applications. According to news reports, an August letter from the Catholic National Bishops Conference spoke of several positive aspects of the law but said the law did not address building new houses of worship. A press report stated activists said the law would make it easier for the government to violate religious freedom and expressed concern about provisions on land use and the requirement for permission to train religious personnel. In an interview with Radio Free Asia, Catholic priest Phan Van Loi of the Interfaith Council said the new law was not in place to protect religious freedom but rather to serve and cater to the rules of the Communist Party. Religious leaders noted existing laws and regulations on education, health, publishing, and construction were restrictive toward religious groups and would need to be revised to allow religious groups greater freedom to conduct such activities in practice. The UBCV and independent Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Khmer Krom Buddhist communities also stated the law's definition of religion was not consistent with the ICCPR and criticized the government for excluding them from the process of legislative consultation. These groups also stated the law should allow religious organizations to conduct activities without the need for government approvals. Certain Protestant leaders said the new legal framework could make it more difficult for religious groups to proselytize and expand into new districts.

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.

Starting in May, Catholic priests in Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces helped organize a series of demonstrations calling for stronger environmental protections and criticizing an international steel company over fish deaths and pollution along the coastline of several provinces in Central Vietnam. The priests also assisted parishioners in filing complaints and lawsuits against the government for financial compensation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. President, Secretary of State, and Ambassador, 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 April. The Ambassador at Large traveled to Hanoi and the Central Highlands in March 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 May, 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 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 MPS, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces.

The Ambassador and officials at the embassy and consulate general 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 and registered religious groups; and

urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. Embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases of government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups, the Duong Van Minh religious group, and ethnic-minority house churches with the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial and local-level authorities. U.S. government 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 resolve peacefully outstanding land rights disputes with religious organizations. The Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officials, and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom strongly encouraged transparent negotiations between local authorities and UBCV Abbot Thich Khong Tanh regarding the Lien Tri Pagoda throughout the year until officials demolished it in September. After the demolition, U.S. government officials continued to encourage Tanh and local authorities to negotiate regarding a new location.

The U.S. President met with civil society and religious leaders during a visit to the country in May. The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officials traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, to monitor religious freedom, 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, including recognized, registered, and unregistered organizations.