FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom in the World - Vietnam (2004)

Polity:
One party

Political Rights:
7

Civil Liberties:
6

Status:
Not Free

Population:
80,800,000

GNI/Capita:
$410

Life Expectancy:
72

Religious Groups:
Buddhist, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Christian, indigenous beliefs, Muslim

Ethnic Groups:
Vietnamese (85-90 percent), other [including Chinese, Muong, Thai, Meo, Khmer, Man, and Cham] (10-15 percent)

Capital:
Hanoi

Additional Info:

Freedom in the World 2006

Freedom of the Press 2005

Nations in Transit 2004

Countries at the Crossroads 2005

Programs:

Visiting Fellows Programs

Exchange Programs

American Volunteers for International Development

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Overview

Vietnam's authoritarian rulers continued in 2003 a crackdown, begun two years earlier, that has seen dozens of religious and political dissidents detained or jailed. Many are ethnic minorities from the Central Highlands region who protested for greater religious freedom or tried to flee to Cambodia. Authorities have also targeted urban intellectuals who used the Internet to call for political reforms or share information with overseas Vietnamese.

Vietnam won independence from France in 1954 after a century of colonial rule followed by occupation by the Japanese during World War II. At independence, the country was divided into the Western-backed Republic of South Vietnam and the Communist-ruled Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. Following a decade-long war that killed tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians, North Vietnam defeated the U.S.-backed South in 1975 and reunited the country in 1976.

Victorious on the battlefield, the Communist government proved unable to feed its people. The centralized economy grew at anemic rates, and fertile Vietnam had to import rice. The government responded with reforms in 1986 that dismantled collectivized farms and encouraged small-scale private enterprise. Spurred by the reforms, Vietnam's economy grew by 7.6 percent a year on average, and output doubled between 1991 and 2000, according to World Bank figures. The Southeast Asian nation is now the world's second-biggest rice exporter.

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 2001 signaled its intent to continue market reforms, but at a gradual pace, when it tapped as its new party leader Nong Duc Manh, now 62, who is known for stressing pragmatism over ideology. In choosing Manh, a northerner, and then in 2002 reelecting Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and state President Tran Duc Luong, the party also preserved the leadership troika's traditional balance between northern, central, and southern Vietnam.

While economic liberalization has muddled along, political reforms have been ruled out entirely, as evidenced by Vietnam's May 2002 parliamentary elections. The CPV vetted all candidates for the 498-seat body, and the number of nonparty lawmakers shrank to 51 from 68.

The government's latest crackdown on dissent began in 2001 after several thousand mainly Christian hill tribesmen held protests in the Central Highlands demanding greater religious freedom, increased land rights, and political autonomy for the region. More than 70 hill tribesmen, known as Montagnards, are serving lengthy prison terms for participating in protests or trying to flee to Cambodia, according to the New York-based Human Rights Watch. The organization released what it said were letters by church leaders in Dak Lak province detailing recent rights violations by officials, including beatings of church leaders, destruction of churches, and widespread confiscation of villagers' farmland. Hill tribesmen routinely complain that their lands increasingly are being converted by lowland Vietnamese into plantations for coffee and other cash crops.

Meanwhile, urban intellectuals seeking political reforms continued to be arrested, sentenced to long jail terms, placed under house arrest, or otherwise harassed by Vietnamese authorities.

Vietnam's leadership continues to be divided over the pace and depth of privatization and other market reforms. Moderates see deep-rooted reforms as the ticket to modernizing the impoverished country and creating enough jobs to stave off social unrest. Hard-liners, though, fear that further loosening the state's control over the economy will undermine the tight grip on power held by the ruling CPV. They realize that farmers, who now work for themselves, and other private sector workers cannot be monitored as easily as those who depend on the state for their livelihood. Moreover, while the government has sold off thousands of small firms, privatization of large companies would very likely throw millions out of work, possibly leading to a social backlash.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) as a single-party state, Vietnam is one of the most tightly controlled countries in the world. The CPV's powerful Central Committee is the peak decision-making body in Vietnam, and the National Assembly generally follows the party's dictates when it comes to passing laws. Assembly delegates, however, influence legislation, question state ministers, air grassroots grievances, and, within limits set by the party, debate legal, social, and economic matters. They also regularly criticize officials' performance and governmental corruption and inefficiency. The party-controlled Fatherland Front, however, vets all assembly candidates and allows only CPV cadres and some independents to run.

Eager to portray itself as representing the masses, the regime not only allows the National Assembly to be used as an outlet for grassroots complaints, but also has tried to address bread-and-butter concerns with a 1998 decree that directs local officials to consult more with ordinary Vietnamese. In many provinces, however, complaints by villagers reportedly get bogged down in the bureaucracy.

The leadership increasingly also allows farmers and others to hold small protests over local grievances, which often concern land seizures. Thousands of Vietnamese also try to gain redress each year by writing letters to or personally addressing

officials. In addition to land matters, citizens complain about official corruption, economic policies, government inefficiency, and opaque bureaucratic procedures. In an October speech to the National Assembly, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung acknowledged "public discontent" with officials, "especially due to corruption, wastefulness, embezzlement of state property, harassment of people, dishonesty, fraud, and weak discipline."

The government made a show of addressing these concerns in 2003 in Vietnam's largest-ever corruption case, which involved an organized-crime empire in the south. The three-month trial of 155 officials and organized-crime figures ended in June with 16 officials receiving prison terms for taking bribes and other offenses and a southern gang leader and five of his cronies sentenced to death for murder and other gangland-related crimes. The Berlin-based Transparency International's 2003 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Vietnam in a six-way tie for 100th place out of 133 countries rated.

All media in Vietnam are tightly controlled by the party and government. Officials have punished journalists who overstepped the bounds of permissible reporting by jailing or placing them under house arrest, taking away their press cards, or closing down their newspapers. The media also are kept in check by a 1999 law that requires journalists to pay damages to groups or individuals that are found to be harmed by press articles, even if the reports are accurate. At least one suit has been filed under this law, although it was withdrawn. While journalists cannot report on sensitive political or economic matters or openly question the CPV's single-party rule, they sometimes are allowed to report on high-level governmental corruption and mismanagement.

The regime tightened its control over Internet use in May by formally banning Vietnamese from receiving or distributing antigovernment e-mail messages and by setting up a special body to monitor Internet communications and prosecute violators. The government also requires owners of domestic Web sites to submit their Web site content to the government for approval. Authorities also block nearly 2,000 Internet Web sites, according to the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontieres.

The regime sharply restricts religious freedom by regulating religious organizations and clergy and cracking down on independent religious groups and their leaders. All religious groups and most individual clergy must join a party-controlled supervisory body, one of which exists for each religion that the state recognizes--Buddhism; Roman Catholicism; Protestantism; Islam; Cao Daiism, a synthesis of several religions; and the Hoa Hao faith, a reformist Buddhist church. Besides registering, religious groups must get permission to build or refurbish places of worship; run religious schools or do charitable work; hold conventions, training seminars, and special celebrations; and train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy.

As a result of these regulations, religious groups generally have trouble expanding schools, obtaining teaching materials, publishing religious texts, and increasing the number of students training for the clergy. Cao Daiists have largely been barred since 1975 from ordaining new priests, although some new priests recently have

been ordained, while Protestants are generally prohibited from training new clergy. In a positive development in this area, officials in January agreed to allow Protestants in southern Vietnam to reopen a long-closed seminary, according to Compass Direct, a U.S.-based news service that reports on persecution of Christians. Meanwhile, the government effectively maintains veto power over Vatican appointments of Roman Catholic bishops in Vietnam.

The regulations particularly affect groups that are unable or unwilling to obtain official recognition, including some Buddhist and Hoa Hao religious bodies from the former South Vietnam and underground Protestant house churches. Unregistered groups are considered illegal and often face harassment. For years, the government has tried to undermine the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Officials have released several prominent UBCV monks in recent years, but continue to harass church members. Buddhists make up three-quarters of Vietnam's population, although it is not known how many belong to the UBCV.

Amnesty International said in 2002 that several members of the Hoa Hao faith recently had been jailed on charges that the London-based rights group believes are linked solely to their religious practices. Ethnic minority, underground Protestant worshippers in the Central Highlands and northwestern provinces also face severe abuses. Local officials in some provinces reportedly at times jail worshippers, forbid Protestant gatherings, withhold government food rations from believers, and bar children of Protestant families from attending school beyond the third grade.

Vietnamese officials reportedly launched a new campaign in February to convince ethnic minority Protestants in at least some northwestern provinces to renounce their faith, providing incentives such as money or goods to those who abandon their religion. Hmong and other ethnic minority Protestants, particularly in the northern provinces of Lao Cai and Lai Chau and in the Central Highlands, have complained for years that they are at times jailed, harassed, or otherwise pressured by local officials to abandon their religious faith. At the same time, unregistered religious groups in some parts of Vietnam are allowed to worship with little or no interference.

Academic freedom is limited, as university professors must stick to party views when teaching or writing on political topics.

Despite the many restrictions on their rights, ordinary Vietnamese, particularly those living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, increasingly are free of government intrusion into their daily lives. The regime continues to rely on informers, block wardens, and a household registration system to keep tabs on individuals, but this surveillance is now directed mainly at known dissidents rather than the entire population.

Human rights organizations and other private groups with rights-oriented agendas are banned. Trade unions remain state controlled, although hundreds of independent "labor associations" are permitted to represent many workers at individual firms and in some service industries. In any case, the vast majority of

Vietnamese workers are small-scale farmers in rural areas who are not unionized in any way. Enforcement of child labor, workplace safety, and other labor laws is poor. Workers frequently have taken matters into their own hands, staging dozens of strikes in recent years, generally against foreign and private companies.

Vietnam's judiciary is subservient to the CPV with the party closely controlling the courts at all levels and exerting strong influence over political and other high-profile cases. According to Amnesty International, even in ordinary criminal cases, defendants often lack sufficient time to meet with their lawyers and to prepare and present an adequate defense. Defense lawyers cannot call or question witnesses and sometimes are permitted only to appeal for leniency for their clients. While defendants have a constitutional right to counsel, Vietnam's scarcity of lawyers often makes this right impossible to enforce. Moreover, many lawyers reportedly are reluctant to take human rights and other sensitive cases because they fear that later they will be hit with sudden tax audits or otherwise harassed.

Police at times beat suspects and detainees. Vietnamese jails tend to be overcrowded and provide inmates with insufficient food and poor sanitation. Inmates generally are required to work, but receive little or no wages. Amnesty International said in 2002 that it had documented dozens of cases of Vietnamese prisoners who were denied adequate medical care, shackled as a form of punishment, or held in solitary confinement for long periods.

The death penalty is applied mainly for violent crimes, but sometimes also against Vietnamese convicted of nonviolent crimes, including economic and drug-related offenses. Of the 931 people sentenced to death between 1997 and 2002, for example, 310 were convicted of offenses involving illegal narcotics, according to official statistics. It is not clear how many of these sentences actually have been carried out.

While the government has long cracked down on dissent, the actual number of political prisoners is unknown. The latest crackdown has targeted, among others, Vietnamese who use the Internet to criticize the government or share information with overseas Vietnamese groups. Since 2001, at least 10 Vietnamese Internet dissidents have been arrested, with 6 of them sentenced to long jail terms after unfair trials, Amnesty International said in November. They include Pham Hong Son, who was sentenced in June to 13 years in prison on espionage charges. He was arrested after sending an article on democracy to friends and senior party cadres. Authorities in early 2003 also arrested and beat some of the more than 100 Montagnards who recently were forcibly returned to Vietnam after crossing into Cambodia, Human Rights Watch said in March. The government denies holding any prisoners on political grounds.

In addition to facing restrictions on religious freedom, Vietnam's ethnic minorities face unofficial discrimination in mainstream society, and local officials reportedly sometimes restrict minority access to schooling and jobs. Minorities also generally have little input into development projects that affect their livelihoods and communities.

Vietnamese women increasingly work in universities, the civil service, and the private sector, though in the latter they continue to face unofficial discrimination in wages and promotion. Many women reportedly are victims of domestic violence. Despite some governmental initiatives to protect women, trafficking of women and girls, both within Vietnam and to China, Cambodia, and other countries, continues unabated.