

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

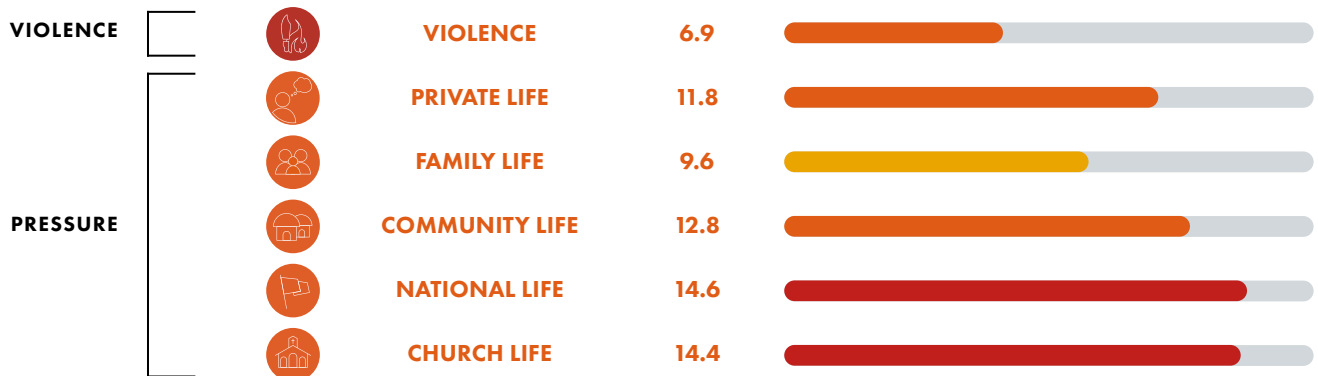
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**25**

## Vietnam



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

Historical Christian communities like Roman Catholics enjoy a certain amount of freedom unless they become politically active, which can lead to imprisonment. Where Catholic congregations own large plots of land (such as convents, schools or hospitals) these can be confiscated by the state for development purposes. Both non-traditional Protestants and converts to Christianity from indigenous religions face intense pressure and violence for their faith, especially in the remote areas of central and northern Vietnam. Most belong to the country's ethnic minorities, like the Hmong, and face social exclusion, discrimination and attacks on ethnic grounds. Catholic churches have encountered [state interferences](#) on rare occasions when local party leaders have specifically targeted them. They are sometimes forcibly expelled by demolition of their homes.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Nguyen Xuan Phuc

### POPULATION

98,954,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

9,401,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

### GOVERNMENT

Communist State



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	9,401,000	9.5
Buddhists	48,471,000	49.0
Agnostics	12,063,000	12.2
Others	11,805,390	11.9

*OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*  
Source<sup>2</sup>

Vietnam continues to follow its Doi Moi (economic renovation) policy. This was introduced in 1986, and successfully doubled the GDP within the last decade, reduced poverty and increased employment. However, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic was strong, seen in [the 6.7% shrinking of GDP](#) in the third quarter of 2021. However, the [economic recovery](#) accelerated, and GDP growth was forecast to surge from an estimated 2.6 percent in 2021 to 7.5 percent in 2022.

As in most Communist countries, Christians are regarded as unpatriotic and anti-government and, as such, are strictly monitored, censored, and discriminated against. Christians are not only barred

from positions of power within the Communist Party but also disqualified from officer ranks in the military, and receive harsher punishments when charged by police. While the Party Congress in January 2021 did not bring any surprises and Communist politics continues to preserve the status quo, there is one exception to this rule: the elevation of the head of the ‘Government Committee of Religious Affairs’ (GCRA) to serve as Deputy Minister of the Interior is indicative of a high government concern to maintain the control of religion.

The current 18-member Politburo is described as being “[securocratic](#)”, since it has five members with a background in the security services. This fits observations made by Human Rights Watch, which accuses the Politburo of promoting outdated Stalinist policies that belong to past [Communist history](#).

## How the situation varies by region

Pressure and violence targeting Christians among the ethnic minorities is especially strong in the central and north-west highlands in the following provinces: Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Bin Phuoc, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Dien Bien, Gia Lai, Ha Giang, Ha Nam, Hoa Binh, Kon Tum, Lai Chau, Lam Dong, Lao Cai, Nghe An, Ninh Thuan, Phu Yen, Quang Binh, Quang Ngai, Son La, Thanh Hoa, Tra Vinh and Yen Bai.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

As expatriate Christians cannot mix with local churches in rural areas, they are involuntarily isolated. This category includes foreign workers from Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines, who face pressure from being monitored.

### Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam are the main historical Christian communities. The former managed to open a Catholic university in 2016, but problems with land-grabbing by authorities and arrests of Catholic activists have increased, and in December 2020 a congress of the ECVN (S) was hindered.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Buddhist or Animist background face the most severe violations, not only from the authorities but also from their families, friends and neighbors. Since most of them belong to ethnic minorities, Communist authorities are particularly suspicious and hostile towards them.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities consist of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. They gather in house churches, as many denominations are not registered. They are closely monitored and face discrimination at various levels from the government and society.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Communist and post-Communist oppression blended with Dictatorial paranoia:

The Communist Party violates the rights of the Christian minority in the central highlands, north-west and north-east regions by harassing them and requiring all religious institutions to be supervised by the government's Committee on Religious Affairs. The government even makes use of local criminals, known as 'Red Flag' groups, whom they tacitly encourage to assault Christians and expropriate church property. Due to the pandemic, those groups have been less active than in former reporting periods. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community, and therefore the government's primary target. This suspicion is elevated by Catholic insistence on highlighting social injustice and environmental issues under Communist rule, which often results in punitive violence and confiscation of church-owned land.

### Clan oppression:

Communities in tight-knit villages, enforced by village leaders and family members, coerce Christian converts to renounce their faith. In order to maintain the tribe's culture, tribal leaders often exclude Christians from the community, seeing them as traitors to their culture and heritage. The community itself will often react violently against Christian converts and expel them from their villages.

### Organized corruption and crime:

There have been, and still are, incidents of land-grabbing, particularly targeted at the Catholic Church. This occurs mainly in cities, where government officials look for land and property to confiscate, and then sell the land to private developers. Lands belonging to the Catholic Church and other ethnic Christian minorities are prime targets. Eviction has often been executed with the help of criminal groups and 'Red Flag' guards, although this has become less visible due to the pandemic.

# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Despite having one of the highest female workplace participation rates, women bear an unequal share of domestic work and are considered subservient. The country holds socialist ideals of equality, but Confucian values remain, embodied in sayings like ‘one boy is something, 10 girls is nothing’. Female Christians may be forced into early marriages, especially converts and those in tribal cultures. Within marriage, they risk oppression, violence and forced divorce. Christian women and girls are also vulnerable to sexual assault. Trafficking of Hmong women as brides to China also remains prevalent.

- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence – physical

## MEN

Men often face discrimination and harassment at work, risking job loss and monitoring due to their faith. As men are the primary providers in Vietnam, this paralyzes the whole family economically and weakens their place within society. Once in custody, detainees face harsh treatment, physical beatings, and pressure to renounce their faith. There is also pressure within compulsory military service, with men unable to freely read the Bible or partake in other Christian practices.

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Imprisonment by the government

- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – physical

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	25	70
2022	19	71
2021	19	72
2020	21	72
2019	20	70

The drop in overall score in WWL 2023 was caused by the fact that fewer cases of violence were reported. However, it should be noted that reporting, particularly from ethnic minority regions, is hindered and sometimes made next to impossible. The average score for pressure in the spheres of life increased slightly by 0.2 points; with increases in Private and National life. The regulations on religion, implemented from 1 January 2018 onwards, have not changed anything substantially, except for adding another source of uncertainty. The regulations also did nothing to cut down bureaucracy or alleviate fears that obtaining government permits comes with pressure to conform to Communist ideology. Tighter regulations on online communication helped in restricting and limiting the space Christians enjoy even further.



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **June 2022:** Christian Hmong family expelled from village: A 13 member Christian family was expelled from their village Ku Duoi in Nghe An province (and a child was refused a birth certificate), because they refused to renounce their Christian faith.
- **February 2022:** On 20 February 2022, state officials entered a church in Hoa Binh province and disrupted a Catholic mass celebrated by the Archbishop of Hanoi, Joseph Vu Van Thien.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians Imprisoned or Punished by the government
2023	1	5	10*	10*
2022	1	10	10	1

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

## Private life

In rural areas, discussing one’s faith is dangerous and can lead to violence from the wider community. In cities, slightly more freedom exists, but harassment and questioning by police is common. While conversions are not banned by law, they are strongly opposed. Christianity is seen as foreign and a threat to family and heritage, especially in areas where ancestral worship prevails. Often family members are forced to choose between reconversion from Christianity or eviction and ostracization from family and community.

## Family life

Christian children in Vietnam are pressured into attending anti-Christian teaching in the form of Communist doctrine throughout their education. Christian children who belong to unregistered, and sometimes registered denominations and churches including thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Protestants, are prevented from attending schools because of their faith, or that of their parents and their ethnicity. Some of those who are able to attend school are often the victims of harassment and bullying from fellow students and school administrators alike. Additionally, converts who are married may be threatened with divorce. It is common for families to disown, evict and cut off support from family members that convert to Christianity.

## Community life

Tribal communities in hotspot areas assist in the

monitoring of Christians. Local authorities encourage the community to restrict Christian groups, as these are seen as foreign and dangerous. Christians applying for jobs, and those due for promotion, sometimes experience discrimination and exclusion both in public and private sectors. Within the military and police, Christians are not eligible to be selected as officers. In northern Vietnam, state authorities are known to threaten to cancel the healthcare benefits of Christians if they resist state mandates or continue to meet as a church. In the reporting period of WWL 2023, government subsidies for housing and food for students were revoked when authorities found out that the students were Christian. In other cases, authorities revoked their status as poor, effectively cutting off students from receiving proper schooling.



### National life

Vietnam follows Communist ideology strictly, and all other beliefs are opposed. The government does not respond to registration applications or approve requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often does not specify reasons for refusals as required by law. Members of the Communist Party are not allowed to profess a religion, and commissioned military officers are not permitted to be religious believers. In the media, Christians are portrayed as trying to reinstate colonial ideology and are accused of disruptive and anti-government activities. When a Catholic priest dared to criticize the setting up of a COVID-19 vaccine fund and calls for ordinary citizens to contribute to it, the [official media](#) immediately called for him to be “handled”. Perpetrators of violence against Christians are almost never brought to trial.

### Church life

Churches are monitored and occasionally meetings are disrupted. Churches are required by law to register their activities with the authorities. Obtaining Christian materials in bulk is extremely difficult as all published material requires approval by the government and all imports are highly restricted. However, obtaining small numbers of Christian material is possible. Catholic and Protestant church leaders and activists are often arrested or forced into exile for criticism of the government or advocacy on behalf of human rights.



## International obligations & rights violated

Vietnam has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(CAT\)](#)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#)

Vietnam is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are harassed in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christians are killed because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6.1)
- Christians are arrested for speaking up for their rights (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 19)
- If arrested, Christians experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian children are ostracized at school, pressured to abandon their faith and their medical needs are often neglected on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 18; CRC Arts. 14 and 24)
- Christian female converts are forced to marry non-Christian men and pressured to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

## Situation of other religious minorities

As is typical under Communist regimes, Vietnamese authorities seek to keep all religious groups under control. Those under particular scrutiny alongside Christians are Cao Dai, Hoa Hao Buddhists and Muslims. Those who organize under government-controlled councils are left largely alone other than censorship of what is preached. Independent groups, however, are treated as serious threats and come under severe pressure from the government, especially their leaders. This can lead to harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, and confiscation of property.



Vietnamese women are writing a card to encourage women in Nigeria.

### Open Doors in Vietnam

Open Doors works through local church partners to come alongside Vietnamese believers when they suffer persecution for choosing to follow Christ. Physical attacks and expulsion from their families and communities are the common forms of oppression they encounter. Our interventions consist of presence, relief, practical aid, and advocacy. Open Doors also works through local partners to strengthen persecuted believers in Vietnam through the following efforts:

- Provision of Christian materials
- Leadership training
- Discipleship programs
- Socio-economic development programs

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

---