

World
Watch
Research

Vietnam: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2024 / minor revision 10 January 2024

© Open Doors International

research@od.org



(c) Alamy

Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2024	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Vietnam	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Summary of international obligations and rights violations.....	6
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	7
Specific examples of positive developments	7
External Links - Situation in brief	7
WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Vietnam.....	8
Links for general background information.....	8
Recent history	8
Political and legal landscape	10
Religious landscape	11
Economic landscape.....	13
Social and cultural landscape.....	15
Technological landscape	18
Security situation	19

Trends analysis	20
External Links - Keys to understanding	22
WWL 2024: Church information / Vietnam	24
Christian origins.....	24
Church spectrum today	25
Areas where Christians face most difficulties	26
Christian communities and how they are affected	26
External Links - Church information.....	26
WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Vietnam	27
Reporting period	27
Position on the World Watch List	27
Persecution engines	27
Drivers of persecution	29
The Persecution pattern.....	30
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life	31
Violence.....	41
5 Year trends	43
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female	45
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male	46
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	46
Future outlook.....	47
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	48
Further useful reports.....	49

Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

Copyright note

This document is the property of 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: © 2024 Open Doors International.

Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Vietnam

Brief country details

Vietnam: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
99,699,000	9,635,000	9.7

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Vietnam: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	68	35
WWL 2023	70	25
WWL 2022	71	19
WWL 2021	72	19
WWL 2020	72	21

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Vietnam:	
Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Political parties, Government officials
Clan oppression	One's own (extended) family, Ethnic group leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Historical Christian communities (such as Roman Catholic churches) enjoy a certain amount of freedom unless they become politically active which can lead to imprisonment (e.g. in land-grabbing cases or environmental issues). Where Catholic congregations own large plots of land (e.g. surrounding convents, schools or hospitals) these are sometimes confiscated by state authorities for development purposes. On rare occasions when initiated by local party leaders, Catholics can become targets of state interference, as has happened in March 2023 when state officials interrupted a Catholic church service.

Both non-traditional Protestants and converts from indigenous religions face intensive 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. Their homes are sometimes destroyed and they are then forced to leave their villages. The [attack](#) against policemen and government officials in Dak Lak province on 11 June 2023, although not motivated by religion or persecution-related, illustrates how tensions with the Hmong minority and the Montagnard community (i.e., tribal groups in the Central Highlands) are simmering and can easily turn violent (Radio Free Asia/RFA, 24 June 2023; see below: *Political and legal landscape*).

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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 at the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- 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 and pressured to abandon their faith, their medical needs 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)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

25 May 2023: Catholic activist Peter Bui Tuan Lam was [sentenced](#) to five and a half years imprisonment by a Da Nang court for producing and distributing online materials against the Communist party (UCA News, 25 May 2023).

8 April 2023: Protestant missionary Y Krec Bya was [arrested](#) by authorities in Dak Lak province (Voatieng Viet, 19 April 2023).

22 March 2023: Local officials stormed a Catholic [church service](#) in Dak Giac parish in Kon Tum province and demanded that the service stop (UCA News, 27 March 2023).

5 January 2023: Lutheran pastor Dinh Diem [died](#) while serving a prison sentence in Nghe An Provincial Prison No 6. In 2018, he had been sentenced to 16 years charged with "attempting to overthrow the people's administration" (The Vietnamese, 9 January 2023).

Specific examples of positive developments

20 October 2022: A new church building was [inaugurated](#) in the Catholic sub-parish of Na Phac in Ngan Son district, Bac Kan province (UCA News, 21 October 2022). It will predominantly serve ethnic minorities.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: attack - <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/vietnam-montagnards-06202023152556.html>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: sentenced - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnams-catholic-activist-jailed-for-anti-state-videos/101426>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: arrested - <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/viet-nam-khoi-to-mot-muc-su-o-my-bat-giam-thay-truyen-dao-cua-hoi-thanh-doc-lap/7057080.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: church service - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-officials-storm-mass-in-illegal-chapel/100794>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: died - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/01/vietnam-briefing-jan-8-2023-lutheran-pastor-dinh-diem-passes-away-in-prison-government-declares-boy-trapped-in-concrete-pile-dead>
- Specific examples of positive developments: inaugurated - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/new-church-opens-for-vietnamese-ethnic-groups/99158>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Vietnam

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Vietnam report	AI Vietnam 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/viet-nam/report-viet-nam/	29 June 2023
BBC News Vietnam profile - updated 5 April 2023	BBC Vietnam profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-16567315	29 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Vietnam Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/VNM	29 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Vietnam - updated 28 June 2023	World Factbook Vietnam	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/vietnam/	29 June 2023
Crisis24 Vietnam report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Vietnam report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/vietnam	29 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Vietnam profile 2023	EIU Vietnam profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/vietnam	29 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Vietnam	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	29 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Vietnam not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Vietnam	https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-world/2023	29 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Vietnam	https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-net/2023	4 January 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Vietnam profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/viet-nam/	29 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Vietnam report	Girls Not Brides Vietnam	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/vietnam/	29 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Vietnam country chapter	HRW 2023 Vietnam country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/vietnam	29 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Vietnam	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#vn	29 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Vietnam	https://rsf.org/en/vietnam	29 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Vietnam	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/vietnam	29 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Vietnam	UNDP HDR Vietnam	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/VNM	29 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Vietnam	IRFR 2022 Vietnam	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/	29 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Vietnam CPC	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Vietnam.pdf	29 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Vietnam - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Vietnam	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/c6aceb75bed03729ef4ff9404dd7f125-0500012021/related/mpo-vnm.pdf	29 June 2023
World Bank Vietnam data 2021	World Bank Vietnam data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncoentry=VNM	29 June 2023
World Bank Vietnam overview – updated 14 April 2023	World Bank Vietnam overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview#1	29 June 2023

Recent history

Vietnam became a unified state at the end of the US-Vietnam War in 1975 and has remained one of the few remaining Communist states to this day. All power lies with the Communist Party and although there is a National Assembly, the Politburo carries out the main executive duties. The National Assembly is elected, but not under free and fair conditions. According to the Constitution, it is the highest decision-making body in the country, but most of its members belong to the Communist Party, so all power stays firmly in Communist hands. Due to Vietnam's large population and geographical position, economic reforms have led to a fast developing economy, although challenges remain, and the country is said to benefit from the continuing

US-China trade war, although possibly not as much as expected. Political development is slow in comparison.

More important than the National Assembly are the decisions the Communist Party will be taking in the future. A new leadership was chosen at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party in January 2021. By granting Nguyen Phu Trong an unprecedented third term as Secretary-General of the Communist Party, the delegates undoubtedly wanted to send a [signal of continuity](#), especially in the insecure times of a worldwide pandemic; it also indicates that the government's comparatively liberal economic approach will be held in bounds by strict political control (New York Times, 1 February 2021). Civil rights or freedom of religion will remain elusive, especially with the 2016 "Law on Religion and Belief" being enforced, even more so when the new revision becomes law (see below: *Religious landscape*) and the White Book published in March 2023 is implemented (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). The anti-corruption drive by the Communist Party will continue in which members, sometimes even Politburo members, have been demoted and/or sentenced to long prison terms for corruption. At times, efforts at eradicating corruption have coincided conveniently with political in-fighting.

Most likely due to the president's age (President Trong turned 78 in 2022) and his reportedly poor health, incumbent Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was appointed to replace him as president in April 2021. While this is a largely ceremonial position, Trong held this position since the surprising death of the former president in 2018. Pham Minh Chinh had been elected to serve as Prime Minister, so that Vietnam indeed returned to a "four pillar strategy" (with the head of the National Assembly included), distributing the workload, advancing careers and balancing regional considerations. However, in a surprise turn of events, President Phuc [stepped down](#) in January 2023, potentially in connection with some of his protégés being entangled in a corruption scandal (BBC News, 17 January 2023).

Politics of the Vietnamese Communist Party are notoriously hard to read, but the true position of power remains that of the Secretary-General of the Communist Party, still held by Mr. Trong (see: *Political and legal landscape*). The current 18-member Politburo is described as being "[securocratic](#)", since it has five members with a background in the security services (The Vietnamese, 16 September 2022). This fits observations made by Human Rights Watch which accuses the Politburo of promoting outdated Stalinist policies which belong to past [Communist history](#) (RFA, 21 September 2022).

Christians generally prefer to stay away from politics, but are nonetheless closely watched by the authorities for several reasons:

- Christians have a history of standing up against injustice (e.g. after environmental disasters, as activists for human rights, and in land-grabbing cases mainly faced by Catholic churches);
- Christians are perceived as being connected with foreign forces and can draw international attention to what is frequently seen as being 'internal affairs' of the country;
- Christians usually struggle more with local political leaders than with national level politics.

While the outcome of the 13th National Congress (held in January/February 2021) was largely predictable, from the perspective of Christians one thing was notable: In general, the five-year Party congress and a few top leadership changes simply serve to maintain the status quo, but

this time the head of the Government Committee of Religious Affairs (GCRA) was elevated to also serve as Deputy Minister of the Interior. This is indicative of a continued high government priority to keep religious communities under control, not least the Christian communities in Vietnam.

Political and legal landscape

As one country observer put it, three groups can be distinguished in Vietnamese politics: Regime conservatives, modernizers and those just seeking to make a profit. These key blocs exist within the ruling Communist Party, within the structures of the state, as well as within society and the economic system. Party leaders regularly acknowledge that corruption and rampant abuse of power have held back Vietnam's development. Citizens commonly complain about corruption among officials, governmental inefficiency and opaque bureaucratic procedures. The Vietnamese media have played a prominent role in exposing corruption scandals, a role which has been partly taken over by social media. Since the country lacks civil society groups able to act as watchdogs, the exposure of corruption and abuse by officials has largely been in the hands of a small number of newspaper journalists and increasingly, social media activists (bloggers). The authorities act very harshly against all deviations from the Communist Party line. This means that human rights and environmental activists – many of them Christians – often have to face being harassed, beaten, detained and sentenced.

The recent reshuffling of Vietnam's leadership with 52 year old Vo Van Thuong becoming the youngest ever President of the country has [shattered](#) some long-held assumptions (The Diplomat, 13 March 2023). However, a 132-page long [White Book on Religions and Religious Policy](#), released on 9 March, shows that nothing will change for Christians and other religions (RFA, 9 March 2023). One observer quoted a saying by Ho Chi Minh: "Di bat bien, ung van bien", which can be translated as 'respond to the changing with the unchanging' (East Asia Forum, 18 February 2021). As only 17% of the 200 members of the Central Committee are under 50, a generational change has been postponed. It was not only Secretary-General Trong, who was given an exception to the normal retirement age of 65, but there were nine other exceptions in this political body as well. The pandemic, while generally weathered comparably well by Vietnam, exposed the fact that the country and its Communist authorities continue to struggle with high levels of corruption: A [scandal](#) emerged in February 2022 involving overpriced COVID-19 testing kits and several high-ranking officials in the health sector (East Asia Forum, 23 February 2022).

Another challenge is the growing tension with Vietnam's big neighbor, China. The major stumbling block is China's actions in the South China Sea as well as Vietnam's policy of setting up Special Economic Zones, in which China is active. China is claiming almost the whole South China Sea as its possession, ignoring all claims other states may have, some of which are backed by international law. China not only attacked Vietnamese vessels in waters it claims for itself, it has also continued to build and fortify military structures on reefs and rocks to support its claim. Vietnam has also been [building](#) on Vietnamese islands in the South Chinese Sea, although the authorities claim that the work is just to prevent erosion (Benar News, 3 November 2021). The new Chinese [Coast Guard Law](#) is perceived as an additional threat (Jamestown Foundation, 25 January 2021) and the unilateral fishing ban announced by China every year is seen as [coercion](#) by Vietnam and other claimants (Hanoi Times, 30 April 2022). Despite all tensions, at least as far

as ideology is concerned, Vietnam follows China closely in emphasizing Communism and also in controlling society (see below: *Technological landscape*). Reportedly, China tried to [curb an influx](#) of followers of folk religion from Vietnam into neighboring Guangxi province, a movement particularly pronounced among the Zhuang minority (Bitter Winter, 25 May 2022).

Gender perspective

Men and women are, broadly speaking, equal under Vietnam’s laws. For example, they are afforded the [same inheritance, marriage, divorce and custody rights](#) (Women, Business and the Law, 2022). In reality however, the prevailing religious and socio-cultural norms of Vietnam promote a male-dominant society. An independent [review](#) of the 10-year implementation of the Gender Equality Law noted that progress is being made, but that women and girls remain disadvantaged (UN Vietnam, 24 September 2020). Whilst higher than the average rate in Asia, women make up just [30%](#) of the seats in parliament and despite [marriage laws](#) banning the practice, child marriage continues to take place, particularly in northern Vietnam and mountainous regions (World Bank Vietnam data, 2023; Law on Marriage and Family, 2014, Article 8). According to Girls Not Brides Vietnam, 11% of girls are married before the age of 18. This is linked to lower education rates for girls, poverty, gender inequality and [traditional and customary](#) laws which allow underage marriages to occur with the consent of parents (UNFPA, Vietnam, 2016).

For men, [military service](#) is mandatory for a period of 24 months to 36 months, while women, although eligible are typically not drafted (World population review, 2023). Christian men, within this context experience pressure for their faith, as restrictions prevent them from reading their Bible freely or partaking in Christian practices while on [active duty](#) (US Department of State, IRFR 2018 and IRFR 2022 Vietnam).

Religious landscape

Vietnam: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	9,635,000	9.7
Muslim	178,000	0.2
Hindu	59,300	0.1
Buddhist	49,010,000	49.2
Ethno-religionist	10,345,000	10.4
Jewish	350	0.0
Bahai	448,000	0.4
Atheist	6,100,000	6.1
Agnostic	12,047,000	12.1
Other - includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.	11,875,390	11.9

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

The 2019 [government census](#) states the following concerning religion under Item No 8 (United Nations Population Fund, 19 December 2019):

- "As of 1 April 2019, there were 16 religions practiced in Viet Nam. A total of 13.2 million persons identified as religious, or 13.7% of the total population. Catholicism was the most commonly practiced religion with 5.9 million persons, accounting for 44.6% of the total number of religious followers and 6.1% of the total population of the country. The second most common religion was Buddhism with 4.6 million persons, or 35.0% of religious followers and 4.8% of the national population. The remaining religions all had a relatively small proportion of followers."

The Journal of Party Building stated in an article dated 28 July 2022 that out of 1.2 million Protestants throughout Vietnam, [73% belong to ethnic minorities](#), roughly one third living in the northern mountainous region and two thirds in the Central Highlands (The Vietnamese, 4 October 2022). They are a showcase of what it means to be doubly vulnerable to persecution, as ethnic minorities and as Protestants.

In 2023, a Communist party-owned newspaper published statistics showing that the number of religious adherents more than doubled from 13 million in 2019 to [27.2 million](#) as of 30 November 2022 (The Vietnamese, 4 July 2023). However, the authorities neither revealed how they derived the number nor the various percentages of the individual religious categories. Whatever figures are published by the government, there is always a strong bias against Christians and it is likely that many people will anyway be wary of revealing their true religious affiliation. This is especially true for Protestants, as many of them come from the ethnic minorities (who were anyway only partially included in the 2019 census).

Whereas the World Christian Database (WCD 2023) estimates show that just under half of the population follow Buddhism and just 10.4% ethnic religions (with a further 11.9% following 'other' religions, including folk religions), Pew Forum made the following estimates in its [2010 Global Religious Landscape report](#): 45.3% folk religion, 16.4% Buddhist and 8.2% Christian. Whichever figures best reflect reality, Buddhism and ethnic religions overlap and the latter have a stronger influence than numbers may tell. Christians can expect to be tolerated as long as they do not challenge the existing order. However, as many of the Protestant Christians belong to ethnic minorities, which historically fought on the American side in the Vietnam War, they are quick to be seen as potential troublemakers.

To a lesser extent, this is true for the far larger group of Roman Catholic Christians as well, since they have a colonial background and are seen as being connected to a foreign power, the Vatican. Thus Christians are always on the radar of the local and national authorities. Just over 80% of all Christians are Catholics according to WCD 2023.

According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 (BTI Vietnam Report 2022):

- "Freedom to practice one's religion can also be constrained. Members of the Evangelical Church of Christ, and in the northwest of the Highlands, Hmong Christians, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North, the United Buddhist Church, some Cao Dai and Hóá Hao Buddhist groups, and many Catholic priests have all been harassed and arrested because of their reli-

gious practices, or on charges of undermining the unity policy of the party-state. Overall, the party-state effectively controls religious activities and does not accept the influence of religious dogmas on law and order and political institutions."

This BTI verdict came even before the government posted [two new draft decrees on religion](#) online in June 2022, which would replace the rules valid from 1 January 2018 and which observers have termed "draconian" (Morning Star News, 14 June 2022). The same could be said about the White Book published in March 2023. As long as religious groups are not recognized and registered, they are considered illegal. While this affects all religions and all Vietnamese, it has greater consequences for the country's ethnic minorities, of whom a considerable number adhere to Protestant Christianity. These ethnic minorities, already watched with suspicion by the authorities, face frequent raids on their church meetings, constant surveillance and the accusation that they are in cahoots with foreign forces. They are frequently blocked from any contact with the outside world, so that it becomes next to impossible to speak out for them about their situation.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's Human Development Report Vietnam profile:

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 7.433
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 4.9% of the population live in multidimensional poverty, a further 5.6% are vulnerable to it (2013/14 are the last available figures), according to the country's own national poverty line, 6.7% of the population lives below it
- **Remittances:** The contribution of remittances to the GDP is 6.49%. "The half million Vietnamese migrant workers in foreign countries sent a whopping \$13 billion-plus home through remittances in 2017, according to the United Nations International Labor Organization." (Vietcetera, 2 December 2022)

According to the World Bank Vietnam data:

- The World Bank classifies Vietnam into the lower-middle income group
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 11.397
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 7.2% (up from 1.7% in 2021; in 2019 it was 6%)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 6% (2020). Between 2002 and 2018, GDP per capita increased by 2.7 times, reaching over US\$2,700 in 2019, and more than 45 million people were lifted out of poverty. Poverty rates declined sharply from over 70% to below 6% (US\$3.2/day PPP). The vast majority of Vietnam's remaining low-income population – 86% – is made up of ethnic minorities.

Vietnam continues to follow its *doi moi* policy (literal translation: renovation) which was introduced in 1986 and aims at reforming and improving the economic sector. It has delivered excellent results in doubling the GDP within the last decade as well as in poverty reduction and in increasing employment rates. Economically, Vietnam is doing well but this policy comes at a price. Many of the Communist leaders, whether in politics or the army, have become rich and this has led the country's ideology into a crisis. Communism, especially in the cities, is more a matter of rhetoric than real life, and young people have started to ask questions. One of the main challenges in this respect is - as explained above in the section *Political and legal landscape* - corruption of party officials, with new cases emerging on a regular basis. To counter-act this erosion of credibility, Communist ideology is being emphasized even more strongly and the authorities act harshly against all who deviate from the norm - especially human rights activists.

The iron grip of the regime has stabilized the economy and many well-educated Vietnamese are returning to the country to [start up businesses](#) (ASEAN Today, 5 March 2019). The still unfolding trade war between China and the USA is diverting investment to other states - especially those belonging to the intergovernmental Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) - at least in the short term, Vietnam could reap an unexpected windfall, although the effect is unfolding only slowly, was overshadowed by the COVID-19 crisis and may overall not be as large as previously assumed.

The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant, as can easily be seen by the GDP growth rate which dropped sharply from a level of 6-7% over many years to below 2% in 2021. And even then, Vietnam was one of the very few countries worldwide which still had actual growth, reflecting how well the country in general dealt with the pandemic. Although the growth rate is bouncing back, it will take time until Vietnam's economy fully recovers.

In its Vietnam overview, the World Bank sums up some of the challenges as follows:

- "Vietnam has grown bolder in its development aspirations, aiming to become a high-income country by 2045. To achieve this goal, the economy would have to grow at an annual average rate of 5.9% per capita for the next 25 years. Vietnam also aims to grow in a greener, more inclusive way, and has committed to reducing methane emissions by 30 percent and halting deforestation by 2030 while achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. A few megatrends are shaping the future of Vietnam. The country's population is rapidly aging and global trade is declining. Environmental degradation, climate change, and the rise of automation are growing. The COVID-19 crisis presented unprecedented challenges that might undermine progress towards development goals. To rise to these challenges, Vietnam needs to dramatically improve its performance to implement policies particularly in finance, environment, digital transformation, poverty/social protection, and infrastructure, according to the World Bank's latest Systematic Country Diagnostic Update."

Christians have been affected by the general economic downturn just as they had previously benefitted from the economic progress and will most likely benefit from the economic recovery. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many people who had migrated to the cities may well return to their rural hometowns. If so, this could strengthen rural churches, but it would also put converts under greater pressure (since being back with a non-Christian family in a small village also means higher social control). Members of communities in the Central Highlands, many of them Christ-

ians from the ethnic minorities, are neglected economically and socially and felt this even more during the pandemic crisis. There were many cases where Christians were excluded by local authorities from various government relief programs. With the violent incident in Dak Lak province in June 2023 (See above: *Brief description of the persecution situation*), it is to be expected that the Hmong and other ethnic minorities will come under closer scrutiny of local and national authorities. And even this June 2023 incident was partly motivated by underlying [economic](#), land rights-related, and other social grievances (The Vietnamese, 24 June 2023).

The Communist Party (CPV) has set ambitious goals for the mid- and long-term. According to the country report of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI report 2022):

- "The CPV has set out ambitious development goals for the next five, 10 and 25 years: by 2025, Vietnam is to be a developing country with a modernized industry and an income above the lower middle level; by 2030, marking the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPV, Vietnam is to be a developing country with a modern industry and a high middle income; and by 2045, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (which is now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam), Vietnam is to be a developed country with a high income level."

Gender perspective

Men remain the primary breadwinners in Vietnam. Whilst Vietnam has one of the highest female workforce participation rates in the world, averaging at 69.1% in 2022 (World Bank Vietnam data), men typically have [higher positions](#) than women in the workplace (VOA, April 16, 2019). Christian men also face discrimination and harassment at work, especially if employed by the state; some lose their jobs altogether because of their faith, placing severe economic pressures on the wider family (BTI Vietnam Report 2022). According to the Civil Code and [2013 Land Law](#), Vietnamese women are accorded the same rights as men to inherit land and assets, and to make wills. In practice however, women and girls are often denied their inheritance [rights](#) due to a strong son preference, shown in one of the highest [sex-ratio-at-birth imbalances](#) in the world (GSO and NFPA, 2020).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the UNDP's HDR Vietnam profile and World Factbook Vietnam:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kinh (Viet) 85.3%, Tay 1.9%, Thai 1.9%, Muong 1.5%, Khmer 1.4%, Mong 1.4%, Nung 1.1%, other 5.5% (2019 est.)
- **Main languages:** Vietnamese (official), some English, French, Chinese, Khmer, mountain area languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 39.5%
- **Literacy rate:** 95.8% (15 years and above)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 8.3
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people 8.3 physicians are available and 32 hospital beds; the pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 20:1.

According to World Bank Vietnam data:

- **Age distribution:** People under the age of 14: 22.2%; People of 65 years and above: 9.2%. Vietnam is ageing fast.
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 110%; the enrolment rate is 118% (2018).
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 1.9% (2022), the rate of vulnerable employment is 52% (2021), both modelled ILO estimates.
- **IDPs/Refugees:**
 - According to [IDMC](#) (accessed 5 July 2023), in 2022 there were 353,000 IDPs. This figure refers mostly to disaster displacement triggered by storm and flood events.
 - According to [UNHCR](#) (accessed 5 July 2023): "Viet Nam receives only a small number of cases involving claims for international protection per year. The country is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, and there is no framework for identifying international protection needs or refugee protection."
 - Nearly 50 years after the fall of Saigon, many refugees who escaped from Vietnam are still residing in Thailand. As per the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR, 10 September 2022): "There are six different groups of Vietnamese and Montagnard asylum seekers and refugees in Thailand, totaling approximately 1,700 people: 'boat people', former prisoners of conscience and activists at risk, the Montagnards, the Hmong, and the Khmer Krom."

According to the UNDP's HDR Vietnam profile:

- HDI score and ranking: With a score of 0.704, Vietnam ranks 117th in the list of 189 countries. Its development has been fast and impressive, but slowed down in the last years.
- Life expectancy: The average life expectancy is 75.4 years
- Median age: 32.5 years
- GINI coefficient: 35.7
- Gender inequality: With a score of 0.296, Vietnam ranks 65th of 126 listed countries. The sex ratio at birth (female-to-male) is one of the most unequal in the world at 1.12 (trailing China and Azerbaijan with 1.13 each). According to the World Bank, it is 1.113, not 1.15 anymore. According to [research](#) published in 2012, parents without sons reportedly experience humiliation and lose social standing (Nanda et al, Study on Gender, Masculinity and Son Preference in Nepal and Vietnam, January 2012).
- Unemployment: The unemployment rate is 2%, the rate of people in vulnerable employment is 54.1%, the percentage of youth (between 15 and 24 years old) not in school or employment is 9.7%.

With ethnic minorities comprising 13%-16.5% of the population, depending on the sources used, Vietnam is among the more ethnically heterogeneous societies in the Asian-Pacific region. Communist ideology had previously seemed to have succeeded in smothering many ethnic, religious and social differences, but these differences have surfaced again and find their expression predominantly in local protests. Civic protest movements are mostly limited to the local level, are spontaneously organized, and are directed against ethnic and general socio-economic discrimination, but they have not challenged the political regime. Typical topics are protests against land-grabbing or ecological disasters and how local and national authorities are

dealing with the issue. Of course, this does not mean that the government does not feel challenged, especially since some tribal groups are still aiming to set up their own autonomous state. Often Christians (and especially Catholics) are among the leading figures of such protest and dissent. During the COVID-19, such protests diminished.

As already indicated above, the healthy economy has led to comparably low unemployment rates and Christians have often benefitted from this as well, especially in the cities. The recent economic slowdown will affect Christians and non-Christians alike. The sex ratio at birth is among the most imbalanced in the world; with considerably more males than females being born, this may lead to increasing challenges in the future.

Another challenge facing Vietnam is the fate of the Mekong river. While it crosses six countries in Southeast Asia and China and thus, whatever is happening upstream will have consequences for the whole region, Vietnam is home of the Mekong delta and millions of people depend on the river for making a living (and for their health). The continued damming of the Mekong (and possibly climatic changes) are leading to considerable social and [environmental problems](#) (Channel News Asia, 17 April 2021). This may become one of the major geopolitical challenges in the region if the situation continues to worsen. China pledged to [share more data](#) on the Mekong with its downstream neighbors (South China Morning Post, 5 July 2022), but the details remain unclear and a similar promise had been reported already two years ago.

According to the World Bank's [Poverty and Equity Assessment 2022](#), p. 91, ethnic minorities are more prone to poverty than the average ethnic Kinh population. This is telling, since these groups are not only neglected because they are living in remote areas and are considered somewhat backward. Some ethnic minorities were previously involved in insurgencies and had hoped for some sort of autonomy; they are seen by the authorities as being different and as endangering the harmony of wider society. Many of them are also Christians and have historical ties with Christians abroad, especially in the USA. This serves as another reason for the central government to keep their economic and social status at a controlled level, although there are some social and economic development projects taking place. The World Bank Poverty and Equity Brief published in [April 2023](#) sums the situation up and provides an update.

Gender perspective

Whilst some people groups in Vietnam reportedly once [had an ancient matriarchy](#), it has entrenched patrilineal norms (Le Minh Khai history, 21 March 2014). Despite socialist ideals of equality, women bear an unequal load of domestic work, reflecting the subsisting vestiges of indigenous Vietnamese values. Within marriages, women can face oppression and threats of divorce from their husbands, reinforcing the feeling that they are second-class citizens, especially in the case of Vietnamese [‘marriage migrants’](#) (Women and Migration, November 2021). As women and girls are socially in a weaker status than men, young women and girls are more at risk of [sexual exploitation](#), including rape (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 31 August 2020). Sources report that young women are at particular risk when in police custody and rural areas. Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have further been linked to a rise in [domestic abuse](#) (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, December 2020). Women are hesitant to report instances of abuse due to social stigma and cultural beliefs that it should remain a private matter. Christian women

as part of a minority in Vietnam are no strangers to severe forms of pressure and violence, especially [converts](#) from Buddhist or ethnic-animist backgrounds (Christian Post, 24 April 2023).

Trafficking remains another key area of concern; according to the [UN Human Persons in Trafficking Report](#) (July 2022), both men and women are trafficked; men for forced labor and child soldiers, and women as brides and/or for sexual exploitation.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Vietnam):

- **Internet usage:** 86% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 86% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to the World Bank Vietnam data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 139 per 100 people (2021)

Whilst the gender gap in SIM and mobile phone ownership is almost non-existent in Vietnam, there was a modest 5% gender gap in Internet usage as of 2016 (GSMA, 2016). However, more recent [surveys](#) indicate that the gap has narrowed quite significantly (Silver et al, 2019). As such, in comparison to neighboring countries and other emerging economies around the world, Vietnamese women are well connected to the digital world. According to Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS 2021 Vietnam), about 92% of women in Vietnam have access to a mobile phone.

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report 2023 Vietnam:

- "Internet freedom remained restricted in Vietnam. The government continued to enforce stringent controls over the country's online environment and introduced new internet regulations concerning data localization and personal data protection. Authorities aggressively pressured global internet companies to comply with content moderation and user data requests. Activists and ordinary people are often punished for their online activities, while media outlets face punitive fines in relation to their reporting."
- Consequently, Freedom House categorizes Vietnam as "Not free" and its score remained at a very low level.

Vietnam struggles to keep online dissent in check, as the country is among the world's top ten in having the highest number of Facebook members. New rules, forcing social media giants into removing content and services deemed illegal within 24 hours, block illegal livestreams within three hours of notice, and immediately remove content that endangers national security, have been condemned as an "[existential threat](#) to freedom of expression in Vietnam" by international human rights organizations like Amnesty International (RFA, 20 April 2022).

It is especially noteworthy that one of the largest telecommunication companies of the country, Viettel, is military-owned, so it is hardly surprising that effective content limitations are in place. Additionally, in December 2017, the army announced that it has set up a cyber unit called "Force

47", consisting of propaganda specialists tasked with countering what the regime sees as wrong or harmful news in the Internet. The force allegedly has up to 10,000 members of staff and was reportedly very active in the run-up to the National Assembly elections in May 2021, especially in smearing and hindering independent candidates (The Diplomat, 21 May 2021). There are reports that Vietnam is following in neighboring China's footsteps in terms of [digital monitoring](#) and control (The Vietnamese, 12 August 2022).

An amendment to the Telecommunications Law was made later in 2023, introducing a [mandatory identity verification](#) for social media users, thus further restricting freedom of expression online (The Diplomat, 10 May 2023). For many citizens, social media sites have more or less replaced other sources of information such as newspapers. Indeed, Vietnam is the country with the seventh largest number of Facebook users in the world, and sixth largest number of TikTok users. As a result, scams and internet fraud have become a very serious problem, both for the country and wider region. However, the new regulations can, at the same time, be used to stifle criticism, opposition or, as the Ministry of Information stated when announcing a probe into TikTok, 'against anything toxic, offensive, false and superstitious which poses a threat to the country's youth, culture and tradition.' Christian content can be very easily subsumed under this broad classification. In addition, Catholics and, to a lesser extent, Protestants, have a history of activism dealing with social justice and environmental issues. The new regulations will make it easier for the authorities to target such Christian activists and other citizens perceived as dissidents. The [Ministry of Information](#) announced a proposal in 2023 to block individuals and organizations committing online violations from accessing internet and social media services (The Diplomat, 20 July 2023).

Christians have to live with the aforementioned restrictions, too, and Christian activists are often at the forefront of facing consequences from censorship. However Christians communicate, be it via the Internet or on their mobile phones, they have to be cautious and always keep in mind that they are being watched. They also face vilification in social media and state media.

Security situation

In general, Vietnam enjoys a very stable security situation. Apart from continued skirmishes with China in the South China Sea, where Vietnam arguably has the strongest territorial claim in the region (along with the Philippines), the areas with the highest potential for unrest are the mountainous provinces in the central and northwestern highlands where most of the ethnic minorities are living. For years, there were no longer any active fighting insurgency groups in existence, but the attack against policemen and government authorities in Dak Lak province in June 2023 shows that a violent potential is simmering below the surface, which in turn gives the authorities reasons for keeping very tight control over these regions and making access very difficult. The fact that Vietnamese authorities immediately claimed that an independency group named FULRO (French acronym for "United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races") which was long believed to be defunct since the 1990s as being responsible, does not bode well for the rights of ethnic minorities (see below: *Trends analysis #3*). These minorities are often Protestant Christians, especially those from the Hmong minority.

Trends analysis

1) Communist Party policy and structures remain unchanged

Communist Party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong has been mentioned as “embodying the virtue of [core leadership](#)” (The Diplomat, 13 February 2023), a term that has never been used before by Vietnamese Communists to describe an individual’s role, not even Ho Chi Minh’s. The fact that this claim came right after the Party faced a major corruption scandal, shows that the Communist Party saw it necessary to remind its members and the general public of the virtues of Communist rule. Whenever the Communist Party feels insecure and needs to consolidate its power, those are the times which are particularly dangerous for dissenting minorities, especially when – like Christians – they are seen as being in contact with foreign powers.

Another sign for a continually perceived danger from religious groups was the promotion of the Head of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to Deputy Minister of the Interior. Likewise, the White Book on Religion, published in March 2023, does not provide any relief for Christians or adherents of other religions. Modernizers within the Communist Party, who would like to see the principles of *doi moi* (i.e., the introduction of an at least partly private economy to induce growth) translated to several parts of national life will need to wait at least another five years, since the newly elected leadership promises only continuity and Communist orthodoxy. A further opening up of the country does not seem to be likely for the foreseeable future. Christians will continue to be watched, singled out and used as scapegoats, where considered necessary.

Vietnam continues to be challenged in its territorial and economic claims in the South China Sea (in Vietnamese terms: the Eastern Sea) by an ever more assertive neighboring China, reinforced by the new Coast Guard Law of China, referred to above, and a process of re-naming and [registering](#) all features in the South China Sea by China (Benar News, 13 April 2021). When Vietnam held the rotating ASEAN chair in 2020, it managed to get a [strongly worded statement](#) on the South China Sea issued (Asia Times, 3 July 2020). ASEAN affirmed for the first time that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea is the [framework](#) in which solutions have to be found (Geopolitical Monitor, 28 July 2020). How serious Vietnam is in its territorial claims was shown by its [ban of the "Barbie movie"](#), as in one scene, it showed a map carrying the Nine-dash-line, underlining Chinese claims to the Sea (BBC News, 4 July 2023).

2) Trade agreements continue to sideline human rights concerns

The economic *doi moi* policy has not spilled over into the social and political spheres of society and is not expected to do so in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, the authorities are increasingly relying on Communist rhetoric and ideology and act decisively against dissidents and all movements perceived as threatening their power. Dreams of an open civil society in Vietnam with public debates on political, economic, social and religious issues (which are common in democratic societies) are still far off.

The Free Trade Agreement with the EU entered into force on [1 August 2020](#). Human rights advocates have been promoting a [long list](#) of topics worth being discussed for improving the Agreement, including freedom of religion (Human Rights Watch, 22 March 2022). While the economic decline caused by the COVID-19 crisis could induce the government to be more open

for improving its human rights record, it seems more likely that it will prioritize political stability. The human rights dialogue continued after a hiatus; in its last meeting in [June 2023](#), no mention of freedom of religion was made according to the joint press release (EEAS press team, 9 June 2023).

3) Ethnic minorities under increased scrutiny

The violent attack on 11 June 2023 against policemen and authorities, leaving eight people dead, took place in Ea Tieu and Ea Ktur villages in Dak Lak province, home of the Ede minority, but also of a smaller Hmong community. The government prosecuted 84 suspects and claimed an organization named FULRO (see above: *Security situation*) was behind the attacks. The fact that the authorities classified the attacks as [terrorism](#) not only raises more questions than answers (The Vietnamese, 4 July 2023), but also does not bode well for the already difficult situation of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. It will provide the Communist Party with even more opportunities to act with a heavy hand against them and increase pressure and restrictions. So far, there is no conclusive evidence that the attack was religiously motivated, but the fact that the Vietnamese police released a [video](#) in its aftermath showcasing church buildings of the "Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands" does not bode well for Christians in the Central Highlands (The Vietnamese, 6 July 2023). A country expert commented:

- "The government still considers the Evangelical Church of Christ as a reactionary group. Media, news and state television stated that the people have to 'eliminate this church out of the community'. Pastors have been targeted, Christians threatened from the government. They are all under close monitoring by the government and their communities. The government puts a lot of effort in clearing the Evangelical Church of Christ from not only Central Highlands but also other provinces around, such as Phu Yen and Binh Dinh."

Although the government still held the view that opposition towards the government and sabotage were the main factors behind the violence, it has admitted that frustration had been building up due to poor land management by the authorities and the growing wealth gap. This admittance of the government's [own partial responsibility](#) (RFA, 7 September 2023) is an encouraging sign, but should not be understood as any opening up.

4) Communist Party's approach unchanged, but inconsistent

In general, whichever way Vietnam develops, as long as the Communist Party rules the country, Christians will remain suspected of being linked to foreign forces, and the Communist Party will maintain its policy of [recruiting informers](#) for monitoring minority religions (The Vietnamese, 13 April 2022). Volatile times are normally more challenging for ethnic and religious minorities in general and as these are more affected by poverty, they will continue to experience discrimination and marginalization from the government - and at times far worse from local officials and communities.

Vietnam [objected strongly](#) to being placed on the US Special Watch List (SWL) for religious freedom in December 2022 (RFA, 16 December 2022). This was the country's first 'demotion'

since Vietnam was removed from the worst Country of Particular Concern (CPC) category in 2006). At least partly as a reaction to this demotion, Vietnamese authorities published four books on managing religion, among them the already mentioned "White Book" (see above: *Political and Legal landscape*). A country expert explained:

- "The most damaging of the books was a frank account by the Ministry of Public Security of their problems in managing Evangelical churches. It was a no-holds-barred criticism of all groups and leaders, legally registered or not. The openness of this intra-government contention came as a bit of surprise to some and reveals the regressive attitude of the government agency with the real power. The tension also partially explains the continued inconsistency in enforcement of the Law on Religion."

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: signal of continuity - <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/world/asia/vietnam-party-congress.html>
- Recent history: stepped down - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64302745>
- Recent history: securocratic - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2022/09/the-securocratic-turn-in-the-vietnamese-government-2/>
- Recent history: Communist history - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/hrw-vietnams-mps-stalinist-09212022001753.html>
- Political and legal landscape: shattered - <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/mythbusting-vietnams-recent-leadership-change/>
- Political and legal landscape: White Book on Religions and Religious Policy - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/religion-03092023165749.html>
- Political and legal landscape: scandal - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/02/23/looking-beyond-the-tip-of-vietnams-corruption-iceberg/>
- Political and legal landscape: building - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/construction-images-11032021145538.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Coast Guard Law - <https://jamestown.org/program/early-warning-brief-introducing-the-new-new-china-coast-guard/>
- Political and legal landscape: coercion - <https://hanoitimes.vn/china-unilateral-fishing-ban-in-south-china-sea-violates-vietnam-waters-hanoi-says-320661.html>
- Political and legal landscape: curb an influx - <https://bitterwinter.org/guangxi-religious-repression-zhuang-minority/>
- Political and legal landscape: same inheritance, marriage, divorce and custody rights - <https://wbl.worldbank.org/content/dam/documents/wbl/2022/snapshots/Vietnam.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: review - <https://vietnam.un.org/en/92405-launch-review-report-ten-year-implementation-gender-equality-law-viet-nam>
- Political and legal landscape: 30% - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=VN>
- Political and legal landscape: marriage laws - <https://vietnamlawenglish.blogspot.com/2014/06/vietnam-marriage-and-family-law-2014.html%22%20/%20%22:~:text=Cohabitation%20as%20husband%20and%20wife,Article%208%20of%20thi s%20Law.>
- Political and legal landscape: traditional and customary - <https://vietnam.unfpa.org/en/news/ending-child-marriage-towards-world-where-girls-are-free-dream>
- Political and legal landscape: military service - <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-mandatory-military-service>
- Political and legal landscape: active duty - <https://www.state.gov/report/custom/811b9aa69d-6/#:~:text=Members%20of%20the%20military,significant%20discretion%2C%20experts%20reported.>
- Religious landscape description: government census - <https://vietnam.unfpa.org/en/news/results-population-and-housing-census-2019>

- Religious landscape description: 73% belong to ethnic minorities - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2022/10/religion-bulletin-july-2022-authorities-ramp-up-repression-of-independent-protestant-groups-bring-tinh-that-bong-lai-case-to-trial/?ref=The+Vietnamese+Magazine-newsletter>
- Religious landscape description: 27.2 million - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/07/religion-bulletin-january-2023-state-will-no-longer-manage-temple-monetary-merit-donations/?ref=the-vietnamese-magazine-newsletter>
- Religious landscape description: 2010 Global Religious Landscape report - <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>
- Religious landscape description: two new draft decrees on religion - <https://hrwf.eu/vietnam-vietnam-floats-draconian-new-religion-decrees/>
- Economic landscape: half million - <https://vietcetera.com/en/shocking-claims-of-abuse-of-vietnamese-migrant-workers-abroad-highlight-need-for-stronger-labor-protections>
- Economic landscape: start up businesses - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2019/03/a-brain-drain-in-reverse-vietnams-economy-thrives-as-top-talents-return/>
- Economic landscape: economic - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/06/religious-turmoil-in-the-central-highlands-navigating-a-deadlock-amidst-vietnamese-government-intervention/>
- Economic landscape: higher positions - <https://www.voanews.com/a/vietnam-gender-equality/4877652.html>
- Economic landscape: 2013 Land Law - <https://vietnamlawenglish.blogspot.com/2013/11/vietnam-land-law-2013-law-no-452013qh13.html>
- Economic landscape: rights - https://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/images/Toolkit_4_0.pdf
- Economic landscape: sex-ratio-at-birth imbalances - https://vietnam.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/20210301_final_srb_factsheet_eng_1.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: IDMC - <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/viet-nam>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://www.unhcr.org/countries/viet-nam>
- Social and cultural landscape: research - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272356023_Study_on_Gender_Masculinity_and_Son_Preference_in_Nepal_and_Vietnam
- Social and cultural landscape: environmental problems - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/climatechange/mekong-low-water-level-sediment-nakhon-phanom-golf-14606940>
- Social and cultural landscape: share more data - <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3184164/china-pledges-share-more-data-mekong-river-downstream-nations>
- Social and cultural landscape: Poverty and Equity Assessment 2022 - <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099115004242216918/pdf/P176261055e180087097d60965ce02eb562.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: April 2023 - https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_VNM.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: had an ancient matriarchy - <https://leminhkhai.blog/the-ancient-vietnamese-matriarchy-and-western-theory/>
- Social and cultural landscape: marriage migrants - <https://womenandmigration.com/case-study/taiwan/>
- Social and cultural landscape: sexual exploitation - <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/42904/sexual-violence-in-vietnam-issue-of-the-present-but-rooted-from-the-past>
- Social and cultural landscape: domestic abuse - https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/publikationen/engl/Domestic_violence_under_the_impact_of_COVID19_EN.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: converts - <https://www.christianpost.com/news/religious-groups-urge-biden-admin-to-address-persecution-in-vietnam.html#:~:text=Converts%20from%20Buddhist%20or%20ethnic-animist%20backgrounds%20face%20the%20most%20severe%20persecution%20from%20authorities%2C%20their%20families%2C%20friends%20and%20neighbors.>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Human Persons in Trafficking Report - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/337308-2022-TIP-REPORT-inaccessible.pdf>

- Technological landscape: surveys - <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/03/07/use-of-smartphones-and-social-media-is-common-across-most-emerging-economies/>
- Technological landscape: existential threat - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/social-media-regulations-04202022171837.html>
- Technological landscape: digital monitoring - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2022/08/vietnams-surveillance-state-following-chinas-model-of-digital-authoritarianism/>
- Technological landscape: mandatory identity verification - <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/vietnam-to-introduce-mandatory-identity-verification-for-social-media-users/>
- Technological landscape: Ministry of Information - <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/vietnam-proposes-to-turn-off-internet-for-law-breakers/>
- Trends analysis: core leadership - <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/is-the-communist-party-of-vietnam-set-to-establish-a-core-leadership-position/>
- Trends analysis: registering - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/sea-trademarks-04132021172405.html>
- Trends analysis: strongly worded statement - <https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/asean-stops-pulling-punches-over-south-china-sea/>
- Trends analysis: framework - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/07/how-asean-benefits-as-japan-shifts-production-away-from-china/>
- Trends analysis: ban of the "Barbie movie" - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66083761>
- Trends analysis: 1 August 2020 - <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/eu-vietnam-free-trade-agreement>
- Trends analysis: long list - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/04/human-rights-watch-submission-european-union-ahead-eu-vietnam-human-rights-dialogue>
- Trends analysis: June 2023 - https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/vietnam-human-rights-dialogue-eu-took-place-ha-noi_en
- Trends analysis: terrorism - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/07/vietnams-classification-of-dak-lak-attack-as-terrorism-raises-more-questions-than-answers/>
- Trends analysis: video - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/07/insufficient-evidence-the-vietnamese-governments-accusations-against-the-montagnard-evangelical-church-of-christ-in-the-violent-central-highlands-incident/>
- Trends analysis: own partial responsibility - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/accountability-09072023143821.html>
- Trends analysis: recruiting informers - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2022/04/vietnamese-communist-party-spies-inside-religious-institutions/>
- Trends analysis: objected strongly - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/religious-freedom-12162022105452.html>

WWL 2024: Church information / Vietnam

Christian origins

Christianity first came to Vietnam in the 16th and 17th centuries, introduced by Dutch and Portuguese traders. When France became the colonial power of Indochina (1859-1954), French missionaries arrived to strengthen the Roman Catholic Church which is still prominently represented by large cathedrals in major cities. Protestantism arrived in 1911 with the coming of the Christian and Missionary Alliance and was later strengthened by various Western missionaries. Some Montagnard churches were even founded by [radio broadcasts](#) (FEBC, 25 April 2020).

Church spectrum today

Vietnam: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	7,689,000	79.8
Protestant	1,687,000	17.5
Independent	599,000	6.2
Unaffiliated	19,200	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-359,000	-3.7
Total	9,635,200	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,709,000	17.7
Renewalist movement	830,000	8.6

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The Roman Catholic Church makes up just under 80% of all Christians in Vietnam and while it is following the Vatican in its doctrine, there are subtle and less subtle attempts by the government at influencing it, possibly most visibly in the election of bishops. The Vatican and Vietnam are on their way to improve diplomatic relations and it is possible that the Vatican will have a [resident](#) papal representative in the country, after an agreement seems ready to be signed (Reuters, 16 July 2023). Some [commentators](#) have been very critical of this agreement, even going so far as saying that the agreement resembles the one the Vatican has with China and highlighting that it does not even give the right to send a nuncio to Hanoi (UCA News, 25 July 2023).

Protestants are split into many denominations, two larger state-recognized ones are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN-S) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN-N), but there are also many Reformed, Baptist, Anglican, WEC, Seventh-Day Adventists and others. Mennonites and Baptists have been officially recognized by the state, but they have only a small number of followers from tribal and ethnic minority background. Vietnam Christian Mission (VCM) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North and South) have an estimate two thirds membership with tribal and ethnic minority background. Even being state-recognized does not protect against state interference, as was shown when the authorities denied the ECVN-S permission to convene its traditional congress. This is explained in more detail below (see: *Pressure in Block 5 Church sphere*).

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Pressure and violence targeting Christians among the ethnic minorities is especially strong in the central and north-western highlands in the following provinces: Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Binh 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.

This coincides with what the US State Department states on page 19 of IRFR 2022 Vietnam:

- "Catholic leaders reported that the most problematic regions were in the Central Highlands (Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Kon Tum, and Lam Dong provinces) and the Northwest Highlands, including Hoa Binh, Son La, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai provinces."

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: As they cannot mix with local churches in rural areas, which make up the most part of Vietnam, expatriate Christians are involuntarily isolated. This category includes foreign workers from Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines, who face pressure by being monitored.

Historical Christian communities: These are especially the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Whereas the former managed to open a Catholic university in 2016 and a training institute in Hanoi in March 2021, problems with land-grabbing by the authorities continue and the arrests of Catholic activists show that historical Christian communities continue to face severe problems.

Converts to Christianity: Converts come either from a Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and face the strongest persecution, not only from the authorities, but also from their families, friends and neighbors. Since most of them belong to ethnic minorities like the Hmong, the Communist authorities are particularly suspicious of them.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category mainly consists of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. At the beginning of the Protestant missionary work, all Protestant groups identified themselves as Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) churches. However, these developed into the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North and South) and are now included under Historical Christian Communities. Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian churches were established in the South in 1950s, 60s and early 70s. Pentecostal churches started in late 1980s and early 90s. Baptists, Mennonites, Churches of Christ and many others gather in house churches. They are closely monitored and face discrimination at various levels of government and society.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: radio broadcasts - <https://www.febc.org/2020/04/25/the-hmong-story/>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: resident - <https://www.reuters.com/world/vatican-vietnam-take-major-step-forward-relations-2023-07-16/>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: commentators - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/has-the-vatican-sacrificed-religious-freedom-for-ties-with-vietnam/102067>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Vietnam

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Vietnam: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	68	35
WWL 2023	70	25
WWL 2022	71	19
WWL 2021	72	19
WWL 2020	72	21

The drop of 2 points in overall score in WWL 2024 was caused by the fact that the scores for pressure across all Spheres of life decreased slightly, most prominently in the *National sphere*. However, it should be noted that reporting, particularly from ethnic minority regions, is hindered and sometimes made next to impossible. The regulations on religion, implemented from 1 January 2018 onwards, have not changed anything substantially, except for adding another source of uncertainty (although on paper they looked like an improvement). 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 for Christians even further. The new draft regulations on religion of June 2022, if implemented, promise a strongly tightened environment for churches and Christians and a greater burden of bureaucracy to deal with.

Persecution engines

Vietnam: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong), blended with Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

Vietnam – or as the official name reads: the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” – is one of the five remaining countries in the world which is still ruled by a Communist party. Vietnamese Communism is more than just cosmetic, as one country observer noted when stating that Marxist-Leninist-Ho Chi Minh-ideology is “quasi-religious”. The government monitors Christian activity and exerts a very high level of pressure on all Christians. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community in the country, but government authorities remain suspicious since Roman Catholics are tied to a foreign power, the Vatican, and are additionally often seen as a remnant from French colonial days. (In 1954, French forces were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, which led to peace negotiations and the division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel.) Stereotypes such as “Catholics are French and Protestants are American” still prevail, especially in rural areas. The expropriation of church-owned land and the fact that especially Catholics are active in highlighting social injustices underline the chequered relationship Communist leaders have with the Catholic Church. Some villages are named “Communist village” or “Zero-Christian village.” The people there would not allow Christians to live in their village.

The government is particularly suspicious of the ethnic minorities who live in the central and northern highlands (also known as “Montagnards”). Many of them are Protestant Christians, whose growth in numbers has reportedly continued. It should be noted that all non-Catholic Christians in Vietnam self-identify as Evangelicals, many of whom are Pentecostal or Charismatic. As already stated above (in: *Religious landscape*), in 2022, the Communist Party estimated that 73% of all Protestants were members of ethnic minorities, including minority groups in the north-western highlands (Hmong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the central highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and Mnong, among others).

A new law on religion came into force on 1 January 2018, and although it looked like an improvement on paper, in practice its implementation has not yet had any positive effect. No real changes were expected because the predominant goal of the Communist authorities is always to keep all groups and organizations in check in order to maintain their own level of power. Much stricter draft rules on religion have since been published in June 2022. Clearly, running Christian churches and registering them will be at least as cumbersome as it is now, and speaking about one’s faith will continue to be dangerous, especially for Christians among the ethnic minorities who remain under the close watch of the authorities.

An incident reported in the WWL 2024 reporting period indicates that Communism may at times wish to protect leaders of certain religions: A group of Buddhists were arrested and sentenced to six years imprisonment for saying that a monk belonging to a state Buddhist monastery was ‘as stupid as a cow’.

Clan oppression (Strong)

A country expert stated that Christians from ethnic minorities “are treated with scorn and antagonism in their clans when they convert to Christianity. The clan uses many pressure tactics in order to force the believers to renounce their faith.” If new Christian believers of a tribal background are discovered by co-villagers or village leaders, where ethnic religions are still

strong, they are forced by family and friends to keep following the age-old norms and values of their community. In order to maintain the tribe’s culture, tribal leaders will often exclude Christians from the community, seeing them as traitors of their culture and identity. The community itself will often react violently against new Christian converts as well and expel them from their villages. Local authorities often cooperate with tribal leaders to the disadvantage of those converts.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium)

There have been incidents of land-grabbing particularly affecting Catholic Church property. These cases occur mainly in the cities. As one country expert put it: "Corrupt officials are always looking for land and other property to confiscate and sell to private developers, and church lands - typically Catholic - as well as communal lands of ethnic minority Christians, have been frequent targets for this corruption." Eviction has often been done with the help of criminal groups and "Red Flag Guards". However, no cases were reported for two years in a row, so such incidents may be declining.

Drivers of persecution

Vietnam: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
				STRONG		VERY STRONG		MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Government officials				Weak		Strong		Medium	Medium
Ethnic group leaders				Medium		Weak			Very weak
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs				Medium		Weak			Weak
One's own (extended) family				Strong		Weak			
Political parties						Very strong		Medium	Weak

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression and Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials and political parties (Strong):** The government violates the rights of the Christian minority at national, regional and local level. The Communist Party often does this by implementing ideology strictly and by promoting those who hold Communism in esteem. The government implements the control over religion by requiring all religious institutions to submit to the supervision of the government's Committee on Religious Affairs. Laws are passed and then implemented at the grassroots level, often undergoing misinterpretation and even stricter implementation, so one could say that persecution is becoming more "localized".

- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Occasionally, ethnic group leaders, citizens and even a convert's own family can become additional drivers of persecution, however, this is usually connected with *Clan oppression*, not *Communist oppression*. But Communist authorities can co-opt ethnic group leaders. Such actions are strictly limited to a distinct geographical location, most often a village.

Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** As the tradition of ancestor worship is very strong in Vietnam and conversion to Christianity means stopping such acts of worship, this is viewed by most families (both nuclear and extended) in the rural areas as breaking the moral norm. Non-Christian relatives of Christians drive persecution by cutting family ties and denying inheritance; in some cases this means forcing a Christian spouse to divorce and withholding rights of child custody. All this is usually threatened first in an effort to bring the convert back to the family fold, but if this fails, he or she can be expelled from the family and the village.
- **Citizens (Medium):** Villagers persecute Christians – also by conniving with local authorities – beating Christians, expelling them from their village, or disrupting Christian fellowship by throwing stones at their place of worship.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** As they are protecting their tribe's culture, ethnic group leaders see converts to Christianity as traitors to their tribal identity and usually cut them off from accessing resources or expel them from their villages altogether, destroying their fields etc. in an effort to bring converts back to their ancient faith.

Drivers of Organized Corruption and Crime

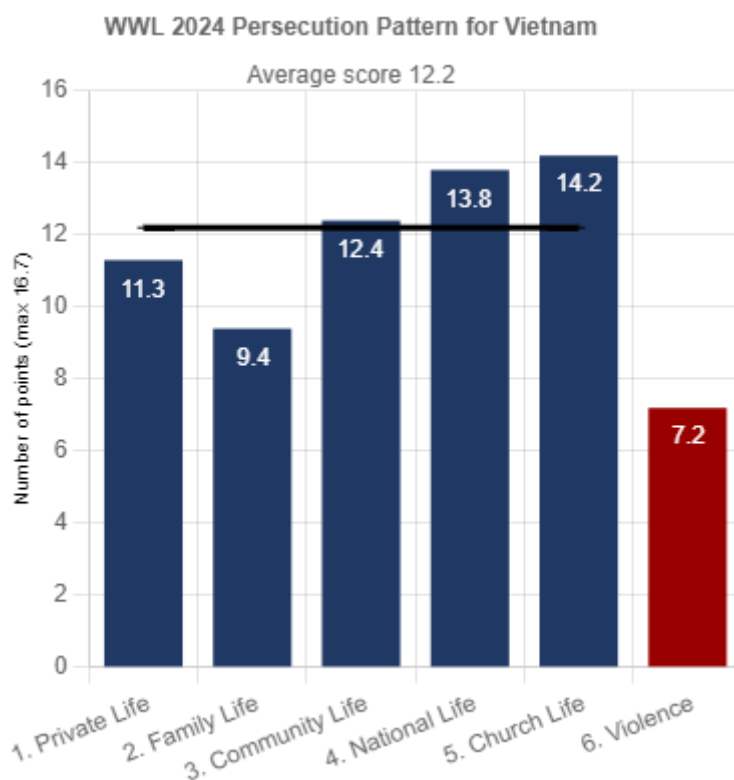
- **Government officials (Strong):** Corruption is rampant in Vietnam and although the government is countering it with programs and crackdowns against corrupt officials, it is still ubiquitous and hard to uproot. One way this affects the Christian minority is through government officials who confiscate and sell for profit plots of land belonging to a church, or communal land from ethnic minority Christians.

The Persecution pattern

The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Vietnam (see below) shows:

- Pressure on Christians in Vietnam has remained very high, although the average pressure decreased to 12.2 points.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National* and *Church spheres* (extreme level of pressure), followed by the *Community* and *Private spheres* (very high pressure). The pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, but all Christians face strong pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled by increasing levels of Communist rhetoric, continued expropriation of Catholic church land, the religion law which came into force in 2018 with its cumbersome requirements and strict implementation, and an ongoing suspicion towards all Christians (particularly converts) as well as to all ethnic and religious minorities.

- The violence score increased slightly from 6.9 points in WWL 2023 to 7.2 points in WWL 2024. There was one killing reported and several churches were attacked. The government also continued its policy of detaining Christians, especially in connection with raids against "illegal religious activities" and frequently affecting Christians from the ethnic minorities. It was very difficult to get information from all parts of the country, especially the regions where ethnic minorities live .



Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)

In rural areas, discussing faith is dangerous because it can be seen as stirring up the community. Thus, talking about faith may lead to imprisonment or acts of violence and can lead to a Christian being expelled from the village. In the city, there is slightly more freedom, but it may still mean being called in by the police and questioned. As one country expert explained:

- "If a person is a member of a Christian group which the government regards as suspect – for instance, a Montagnard who is a member of an unregistered Evangelical church

which the government regards as 'Dega Protestant' and therefore 'separatist' or 'terrorist' -- he or she had better not discuss it too widely, because there is an excellent chance that a few of his or her neighbors or extended family members are sympathetic to the government and/or might see it as to their advantage to report this information to the authorities."

This is especially true after the Dak Lak attacks in June 2023.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.00 points)

Whereas conversions have not been banned by law, they are strongly opposed by families and community. Christianity is seen as a threat to family members who follow ancestral worship since they fear that nobody would take care of them in the after-life. In some cases, family members evicted converts and ostracized Christian relatives. Christianity is seen as a threat in strongly Communist families as well. Opposition is often supported by the local authorities. Compared to cities, the opposition is strongest in rural areas.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.00 points)

In cases where only some family members convert to Christianity, other family members can strongly oppose conversion, which is usually related to the refusal to participate in ancestral worship rituals; such refusal is seen as the abandonment of filial piety and is considered a serious offense. Therefore converts will be very reluctant to talk to their families about their new faith, especially if they are in a position of some vulnerability (such as young teenagers or women). If non-Christian family members are serving in the government or are members of the Communist Party, opposition is likely to come from them, too, as a conversion in the family could also put their positions or jobs at risk.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (2.50 points)

As one country expert explained: "People have learned it is safer to be discreet about their faith on social media - why invite trouble." This is even more true for pastors. In this respect, it should also be kept in mind that already in 2020 the social media giants, Facebook and Google, had been accused of assisting the authorities in cracking down on any (perceived) dissent (UCA News, 2 December 2020). As reported above (see: *Technological landscape*), there are plans to ban individuals and organizations from accessing the Internet and social media if they commit online crimes.

Block 1: Additional information

Since families in Vietnam, especially those in rural areas, usually live with three generations under one roof, Christian converts have to be particularly careful about how to practice their faith. Converts also have to be cautious when keeping Christian materials. Under these circumstances, meetings with other Christians can become very difficult and in many cases, family members will hinder the new converts from having fellowship with other Christians. This

is true not only for converts from a Buddhist or Animist background but also for Christians from families with strong connections to the Communist Party. As all meetings need to be registered in advance with the authorities, the latter have a free hand in deciding when and how to cause trouble for Christians (e.g. when churches fail to meet the reporting standards and thus break the law). Meeting with other Christians is therefore risky even for members of registered churches and especially for the ethnic minorities. In tribal communities, some neighbors would not want any "foreign" symbols in their village as this may offend the spirits guarding their community and village leaders will get active to prevent any "damage" being done to the community.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Christian children are taught Communism at school; even in nursery school they are taught how to sing praise to 'Uncle Ho'. In some regions in the southern part of Vietnam, Buddhism is taught to all children. Elsewhere, Christian families in villages are often put under pressure to join in ancestral worship.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.00 points)

Christian children are sometimes prevented from attending school because of their faith or that of their parents. As one country expert explained:

- "Children whose families do not have 'household registration' are not allowed to attend school, although in practice they seem to be allowed to attend up to the sixth grade. The families who do not have household registration include thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Protestant Christians who have been denied these documents because they refuse to renounce their faith and/or to join the official government-affiliated Protestant denomination."

At school, Christian children are easy targets for being bullied by peers and are often treated more strictly by teachers. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there were cases of children being denied scholarships because they were Christians.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (2.50 points)

It is generally expected that burials are to be performed according to traditional rites, which is especially a problem for Christians from the ethnic minorities, where churches cannot go against the wishes of the majority. Ancestral worship is seen as important, even more so in rural areas, because there is such fear of angering the spirits. Burials can also become a problem in mixed marriages between Buddhists and Christians.

It is often difficult for Christians to obtain burial plots, although this is less of a problem for Catholic Christians. Another facet of the problem is that in places where cremation is mandatory, the monopoly for this rests with the Buddhist majority as the crematorium is carried out within a Buddhist temple complex, making it impossible to cremate without following Buddhist rites.

Block 2.13: Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity. (2.50 points)

This is one of the more common consequences which converts to Christianity face when they leave their ancestral faith. Conversion does not only mean giving up an ancient faith, but also implies that the convert does not care about their family and ancestors in the "other world". This is even truer when the convert is the oldest son as he bears the responsibility for ancestor worship. A country expert reported that it is common for parents to confiscate farmland in an attempt to pressurize their child/children into renouncing their Christian faith. Additionally, converts who are married may be threatened with divorce, and it is common for families to disown, evict and cut off support from family members that convert to Christianity.

Block 2: Additional information

A country expert explained the need for household registration as follows:

- "Household registration is the key document necessary to live a normal life in Vietnam. Without household registration the person cannot get legal documents such as marriage certificates or birth certificates. Employment and access to education are also severely restricted without household registration. Among those denied household registration have been thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Christians, most of whom are converts and/or belong to unregistered churches, and who refuse to renounce their faith. There have been numerous reports of birth certificates being denied to the children of these Christians, who have essentially been rendered stateless in their own country."

Christians seldom manage to convince the authorities to issue the relevant documents. This can have dire consequences; for instance, they are needed for getting access to health services (see below: *Block 3 Community sphere*).

In registered churches and in the cities, baptisms are usually not hindered, although most churches prefer to do them inside in order to not raise too much attention. But for Christians of an animistic background, baptisms always come at a risk due to pressure from family, society and the authorities.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

Local communities frequently assist in monitoring Christian activities and the authorities encourage the use of neighborhood watch systems, a classic tool of Communist supervision. Local authorities encourage the community to restrict Christian groups as these are seen as

foreign and potentially dangerous. Local police officers and private groups like the "Red Flag Associations" are also active in watching Christians, and if the authorities see the need, they will be instructed to take action. One person living in the country shared that whenever those monitoring see something strange or unusual, "the local security comes after just 10-15 minutes". Online activities are also heavily monitored, as are the phones of some church leaders.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

One country expert called this "one of the most common forms of control": Pastors and church leaders are called in by the police and interrogated. The police often try to compel, persuade or offer incentives for Christians to cooperate with them and to report about their activities. Those meetings are sometimes called "working sessions". Frequently, Christian leaders are asked to provide the numbers and names of members. In one case in the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), a policeman told a convert that "becoming a Christian means you want to get beaten". In villages, Christians are normally summoned by the village elders to report on their activities. Local community members also question them. If they notice anything suspicious, they report it to the police or village leaders.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

The workplace is one of the most common places where Christians are discriminated against. This is not limited to public employers, but is normal for private employers as well. Christians applying for jobs and those due for promotion often experience exclusion and limitations. Christians may be invited for job interviews, but when the potential employer learns about their religious background, the chances are high that they will not be taken on. This sometimes also has to do with the fact that Christians do not work on Sundays. There are employers who on purpose offer double pay on Sundays. In public service, which includes the armed forces and the police, Christians can become rank-and-file members, but are not eligible as officers or for promotion.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.00 points)

In schools, students are required to show reverence to a photo of Ho Chi Minh. Christian students are frequently told to forget about pursuing further education, arguing that, as Christians, no one is likely to hire them after their graduation. Cases have also been reported where school principals threatened converts with expulsion. A country expert adds:

- "It is also well-known (although difficult to prove) that access to foreign scholarships at the university level - which are often funded by foreign governments including those of liberal democracies, but which, like just about everything else in Vietnam, are administered in close co-operation with Vietnamese authorities - is denied to anyone who is perceived as disloyal to the government. This would emphatically include members of unregistered churches, as well as members of registered churches whose religious beliefs had caused them to criticize government programs or policies."

In the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), government subsidies for housing and food for students were revoked, when the authorities found out that the students were Christian. In other cases, the authorities revoked their status-category 'poor', thus effectively cutting off Christian students from receiving proper schooling.

Block 3: Additional information

A country expert explains the organization of civic activities as follows:

- "Most public civic activity is conducted through the 'Fatherland Front', an umbrella group of non-government entities that is directed by the Communist Party and works closely with government at all levels. A number of registered religious institutions - mostly those that were created by the government - are members of the Fatherland Front and their members participate in its activities."

Denying access to shared water wells is a typical act of discrimination. As especially Christians from the ethnic minorities struggle to get themselves and their children registered, this also has consequences for the access to health care. A country expert explained:

- "A 'poor certificate' confirms economic status and includes social welfare, health care and other benefits for the poor. When such people convert to Christianity, the local authorities would consider them as not poor economically anymore and revoke the poor certificate. In some areas, authorities even said: 'Because you are a part of Christianity now, let the church take care of your life'".

The proposed new decree on religion stipulates "administrative punishment" fines for infractions of each provision of the Religion Law. The proposals were circulated in early June 2022 for public input and was highly criticized. At this point, it is not clear if or in what form this decree will become official policy, but it is possible that fines will become an additional part of the authorities' discriminatory toolbox: These fines have reportedly already been implemented in some regions anyway, which, as a country expert explained, is typical for religious decrees, ordinances and laws. The uncertainty about implementation seems to be deliberate. This may also reflect intra-government tensions, as explained above (see: *Trends analysis #4*).

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Vietnam follows its Communist ideology strictly and reveres the state founder Ho Chi Minh, or 'Uncle Ho' as he is fondly referred to, but this is not comparable to the reverence shown to leaders in North Korea. All beliefs other than Communist ideology are opposed, and religion is curbed by laws known under the heading "Decree 92". A new, comprehensive "Law on Religion and Belief" came into effect on 1 January 2018. Assessing the application of this new law, the US State Department's 2022 IRFR states (p.16/17):

- "Registered and unregistered religious groups continued to state that 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 as required by law. In other cases, religious groups were unaware they had been granted local approval of religious activities. Some local authorities reportedly requested documents or information beyond what was stipulated by law. Several religious leaders said authorities sometimes solicited bribes to facilitate approvals. ... Authorities attributed the delays and denials to the applicants' failure to complete forms correctly or provide complete information. Religious groups said the process of registering groups or notifying authorities of activities in new or remote locations was particularly difficult. Some religious groups reported that authorities urged them to register as affiliates of recognized religious groups instead of as new groups."

The Communist Party's understanding of freedom of religion has been well described in a [report](#) published in May 2021 (The Vietnamese, 5 May 2021). The new [draft decree on religion](#) published in June 2022 illustrates that the Communist Party does not consider freedom of religion as a human right to be protected, but as a danger to be fenced off (Morning Star News, 14 June 2022).

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (4.00 points)

Media reporting on Christians is biased, and slander against them is frequent. For example, Christians are portrayed as acting as a tool for reinstating colonial ideology, either the French Catholic variety or US Protestantism. Christian activists have also been subjected to smear campaigns in the local media (concerning human rights or environmental issues). When a Catholic priest dared to criticize the government for setting up a COVID vaccine fund by obtaining contributions from ordinary citizens, official media immediately [demanded](#) "that he be 'handled' by the authorities" (RFA, 4 October 2022).

The fact that state-controlled media tacitly and also directly connected the Dak Lak attacks from June 2023 to a Protestant church (see above: Trends analysis #3) is another example.

Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (4.00 points)

Perpetrators of violence against Christians are almost never brought to trial. Local authorities often hire thugs for acts of violence, which are never brought to justice. Those Christians who have had to go to court have not received a fair trial. As a country expert explained:

- "In a way [Block 4.15] is a trick question, because nobody gets due process of law in Vietnam, so arguably Christians are no worse off than anyone else. However, Christians and others who are prosecuted for political crimes such as 'propaganda against the state' or 'damaging national unity' are subjected to solitary confinement, denial of family visits, particularly harsh sentences, imprisonment in remote locations in parts of the country far removed from their homes, and other gross violations of due process, more often than defendants who are charged with ordinary crimes such as robbery or drunk driving."

One example is the situation in Dong Tamon where a Catholic church is [facing](#) land-grabbing issues (RFA, 31 October 2022).

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Christians are widely regarded as being unpatriotic citizens who work against the government and its Communist goals and ideology. Therefore they have to be controlled and discriminated against. Members of the Communist party are not allowed to profess a religion. As the US State Department's 2022 IRFR noted (p.22):

- "There were no clear regulations for religious expression in the military, leaving individual unit commanders to exercise significant discretion. According to religious leaders of multiple faiths, the government did not permit members of the military to practice religious rites at any time while on active duty; military members were required to take personal leave to do so."

A country expert reported:

- "Usually, the authorities dismiss complaints made by religious minorities, saying that this is a local matter for which they do not have jurisdiction or they completely set it aside and ignore it."

Another explained:

- "Christians will not be allowed to work as government officers, and they must renounce or hide their faith to work for the government. According to the qualifications for a government officer, he/she must have 'zero-Christianity' within his/her extended family up to three generations. If a government officer converts to Christianity or is being seen as 'too friendly with Christians', he/she can be demoted or dismissed. If he/she still manages to stay, he/she will be cut of some benefits, and cannot be promoted."

One of the most visible areas where discrimination plays out is in the denial of household registration for ethnic minority Christians (already explained above). There have been cases where the authorities have told Christians that, even for the most simple of requests, they must first renounce their 'American religion'.

Block 4: Additional information

Although national ID cards do not include a section on religious affiliation anymore, family cards and other documents still do. Reportedly, officials frequently simply give the entry "non-religious" (or deny documents altogether). There have been reports that the police explicitly state during interrogation that the harassment would cease if (and only if) ethnic minority Christians would leave their house-churches and join officially registered churches. Movements made by Christian leaders are monitored and access to villages in the northern and central part of Vietnam is restricted.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

This is so normal that one country expert called it a "constant given". Churches are closely monitored and occasionally meetings are hindered or disrupted. The limit of monitoring is only determined by the limited manpower of the government, but at the same time, surveillance is often supported by neighbors and organized neighborhood watches. According to law, churches need to register activities with the authorities. In rural areas, village leaders are also likely to keep checking up on any local church. Registered churches submit to the rules of the Committee on Religious Affairs, whose members are known to be staunch atheists, and the local and regional People's Committees of the Communist Party. The government seeks to direct the activities of the Catholic Church through a "Committee of Patriotic Priests". In the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), officials interrupted a church service being conducted by the Archbishop of Hanoi on 20 February 2022 in Hoa Binh province (UCA News, 24 February 2022). In the WWL 2024 reporting period, local officials stormed a Catholic [church service](#) in Dak Giac parish in Kon Tum province and demanded that the worship should immediately cease (UCA News, 27 March 2023).

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)

Church registration demands a tremendous amount of administrative work for church leaders and there is no guarantee of actually getting the permit in the end. This is just one way the government controls the growth of the Church and keeps it under Communist rule. Even churches affiliated to registered churches find it difficult to be recognized by the government and the local authorities. Registered churches often find it difficult to set up new gathering points or chapels. According to the 2018 Law on Religion, churches now only have to have been in existence for 5 years (instead of 20 years) before a registration application can be made - assuming that the authorities have received no negative reports in that time. The 2018 Law also sets time limits within which the registration process should be completed. Nevertheless, many churches that have applied lack any information about progress being made.

Apart from these requirements, a country expert mentioned another chilling practice:

- "The government requires the church to submit a list of church members. After receiving the list, they go from house to house in uniform to 'clarify' if those on the list really belong to that church. This scares particularly young Christians from admitting their faith and membership in the church."

Block 5.10: Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders. (3.75 points)

The [denial](#) of permission for the ECVN (S) to hold its church congress in December 2020 has been a strong reminder of who ultimately is governing and controlling the churches (UCA News, 26 November 2020). This denial came as a surprise as the ECVN (S) traditionally has good relations with the authorities. Reportedly, the latter were not willing to accept the church's tradition that

members of the congress could spontaneously stand up to speak and thus influence the course of discussion. Consequently, most training has to be executed 'under the radar' and has a higher chance of being unnoticed when it is only done locally.

Country experts added: "The three or four registered Bible colleges all have to have government approval for the size of each incoming class. Churches say this limits the number of pastors they need. All these Bible colleges also have to teach appointed subjects by the government, such as Scientific Socialism, Ho Chi Minh's Thoughts, Religion, Political Philosophy, etc."

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.50 points)

There are plenty of examples where speaking out against local or national authorities have landed Catholic and Protestant church leaders and activists in prison or forced them into exile. Others have been threatened to "be dealt with", as the example given under 4.11 shows. Village heads and families also apply sanctions if converts dare to speak out, be it by exerting even more pressure on them or by expelling them from the village completely. Despite this, there are still Christians courageously speaking out. The government also bans Christians, especially from ethnic minorities, from travelling to [conferences abroad](#) and speaking about their situation. Such a ban was imposed concerning a conference taking place in Bali in November 2022 (The Vietnamese, 14 November 2022).

Block 5: Additional information

Church building permits are handled by the authorities in a highly restrictive way. Land-grabbing by the authorities is also a recurrent problem and especially Roman Catholic churches face problems in keeping possession of their property. The Catholic Church owns various large plots of land (churches, schools and hospitals), especially in the larger cities, and there has been more than one clash, when the authorities made repeated attempts to take this land away, allegedly for development purposes. The new law requires each church to create a dossier proving that they are registered as an approved Christian group, have the right to gather and that the land is owned by the church. This is then sent to the authorities for approval. It is an extremely lengthy process and the authorities can easily deny permits by claiming that the land is not meant for religious purposes, or the land is residential, or that the church is not a registered group.

In addition, every October, registered churches have to submit a list of topics that will be preached for the complete coming year. The new draft decrees (published in June 2022) plan to introduce even harsher rules. Leaders who use their home for church fellowship (this is common for underground churches) face the risk of losing their home and property, as well as any government social program they may be benefitting from, if the local authorities learn about their gathering. Evangelists and their families may experience harassment. Religious leaders who are known to be active in advocating for religious freedom (and other human rights) and have contact with international agencies, also face repression from the government.

The publication and distribution of Christian materials is possible, but highly restricted. Any illegal material is confiscated by the police. All published material needs to be approved by the government. As imports are highly restricted, materials have to be (re-)printed in Vietnam.

Translated material needs to be reviewed; approval depends on how sensitive and dangerous the authorities consider the content to be. There are no clear criteria for the 'harmfulness' of material. Just to give one example: The production of a Hmong language Bible is likely to face far more hindrances than a Vietnamese language Bible.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers: *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Vietnam: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	1	1
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	7	5
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	20	10 *
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	5	10 *
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	100 *	10 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10	10 *
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	7
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	22	32
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	5

For the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** 1 - Lutheran pastor Dinh Diem died while serving a prison sentence in Nghe An Provincial Prison No 6. In 2018, he had been sentenced to 16 years charged with "attempting to overthrow the people's administration" (The Vietnamese, 9 January 2023).
- **Christians attacked:** In several incidents, dozens of Christians were attacked, sometimes in connection with police raids on churches and church compounds. Due to restrictions, not all regions could be reached for information, so the true number may be much higher.

- **Christians detained/arrested:** Several pastors and church leaders were detained or arrested. One public example was Catholic activist Peter Bui Tuan Lam, who was sentenced to five and a half years imprisonment by a Da Nang court for producing and distributing online materials criticizing the Communist party (UCA News, 25 May 2023).
- **Churches attacked:** In at least seven incidents, church buildings were attacked and/or destroyed, mainly house-churches. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** There were several incidents in the reporting period. For security reasons, no further details can be given.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

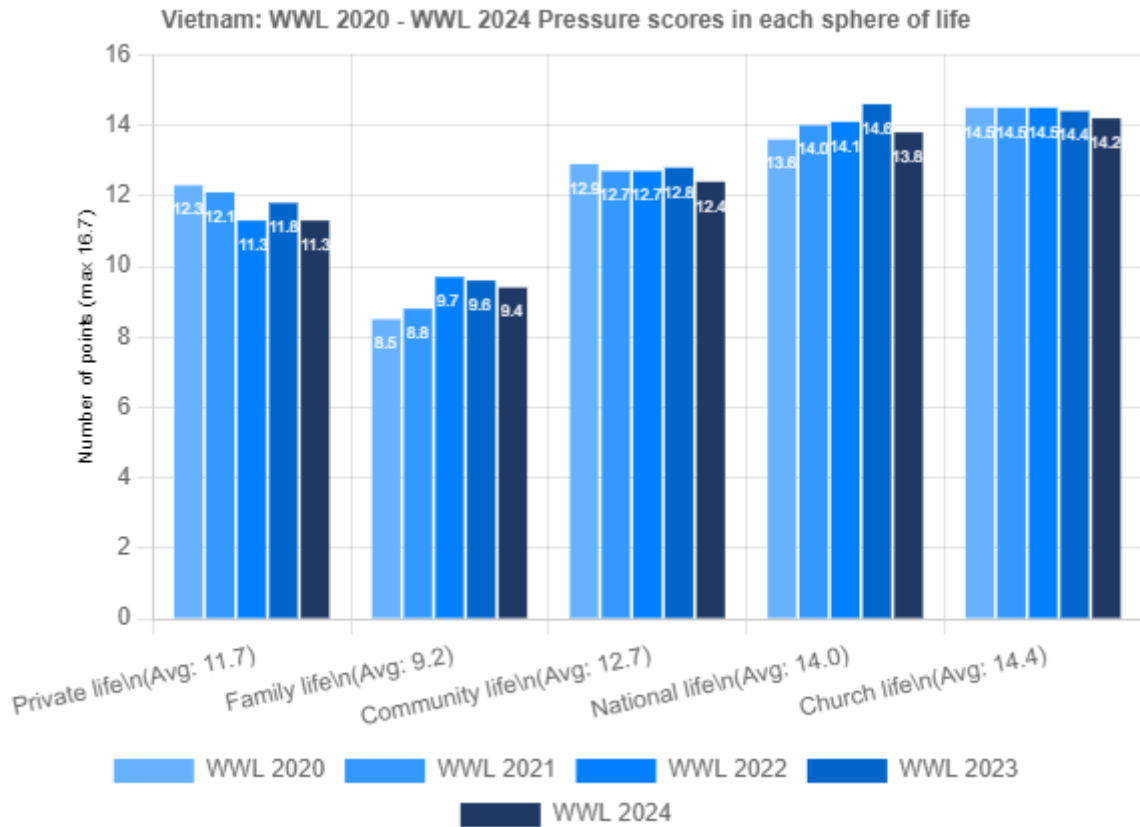
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Vietnam: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.2
2023	12.6
2022	12.4
2021	12.4
2020	12.4

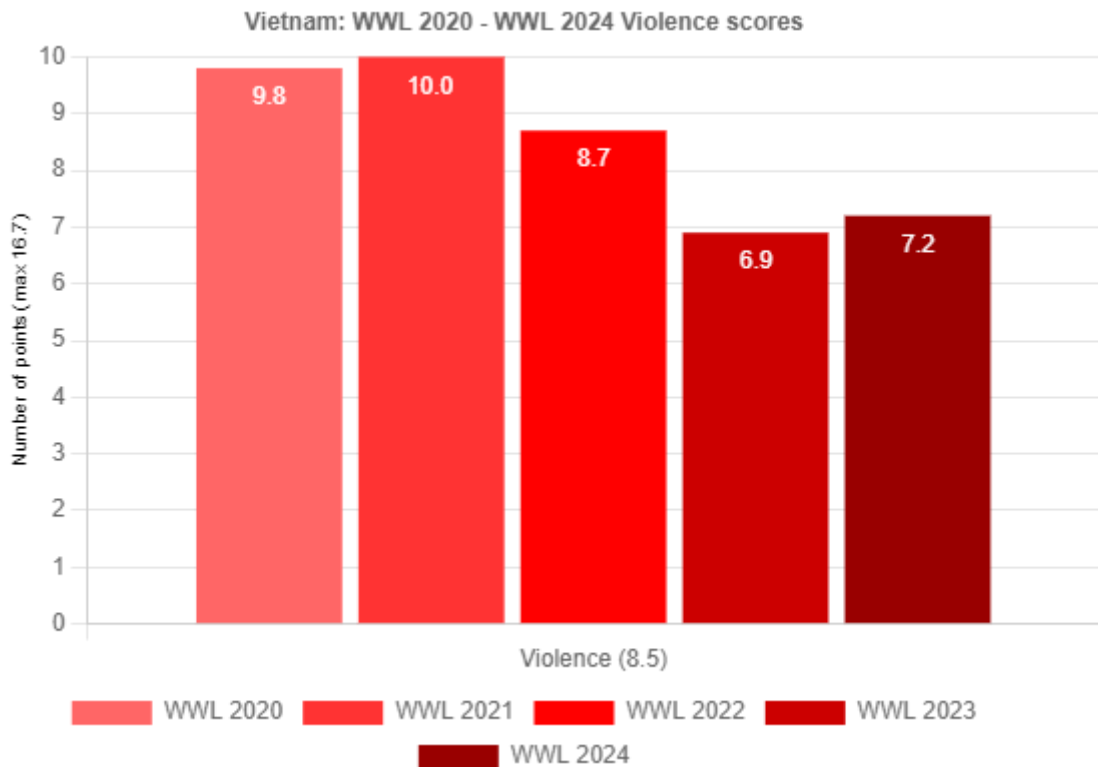
The table above shows how the average level of pressure on Christians has been fairly stable at a very high level over the last five reporting periods. It had plateaued at 12.4 points in the period WWL 2020-2022 and is now at a slightly lower level (12.2 points).

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

The chart below shows that the pressure on Christians in all *spheres of life* has consistently been at a very high level or higher (except in *Family life*) over the last five reporting periods. The pressure in the *National sphere of life* dropped slightly in WWL 2024 after increasing each year since WWL 2020 and peaking at the extreme level of 14.6 points in WWL 2023. The pressure in *Church life* is at a consistently extreme level above 14 points. This reflects the severity of the state restrictions, not least by the introduction of the new law on religion in 2018 and tighter Internet restrictions.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Persecution in Vietnam has always involved violence. The chart above shows the very high scores over all 5 WWL reporting periods, with a peak in WWL 2021. Killings do not happen on a large scale; the Communist government's preferred means are prison sentences or deportation. Limitations in reporting suggest an undercounting, so the score of 6.9 points in WWL 2023 and 7.2 points in WWL 2024 may mean that they are indicating lower levels of violence than in reality.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced divorce
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Despite having one of the highest female workplace participation rates, women bear an unequal share of domestic work and are considered subservient. As in much of Communist Asia, women are traditionally expected to care for their parents, which requires a significant investment of time and energy. The country holds Socialist ideals of equality, but Confucian and patriarchal values remain which still influence aspects of society such as school textbooks ([Mai Trang Vu & Thi Thanh Thuy Pham, 2021](#)). On an everyday basis, gender equality is not the reality for many women in Vietnam ([The Vietnamese, 12 January 2023](#)). This is also reflected in Vietnam's son-bias and the ongoing practice of sex-selective abortions, with the sex ratio at birth one of the most unequal globally ([The Diplomat, 13 July 2022](#)).

A country expert explains that “women are often the first converts to get the brunt of the pressure to recant,” potentially as they are perceived as easier to coerce. For example, within marriages, new Christians face oppression, violence and threats of divorce from their husbands, and are more likely to lose custody of their children when their faith becomes known. New women converts may also be exiled from their own homes. These impacts reinforce the feeling that they are unequal, creating fear and despondency.

For example, Hoa, a single mother and member of the Hmong tribe, became a Christian in August 2022 when a friend spoke with her about Christian faith. When her neighbors learned of her new faith she was threatened with a stark choice: recant Jesus or be kicked out of the village. She made a bold and courageous decision to continue to follow Jesus, and left the village with her 3-year old daughter, saying: “I will follow my Lord who forgave my sins...I don't know about tomorrow, what trouble will come to me, but I will continue to trust in the Lord and pray that He will open the door for us, and He will take care of us.”

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Christian men, and in particular church leaders, are more likely to experience overt persecution, and will often be the government’s primary target for arrest and interrogation on faith-related grounds. A country expert explains that “men are typically monitored more closely” and are “readily caught and summoned to the police office”.

Interrogation can range from a conversation with the police as they look to extract information, to longer-term detainment and physical violence, and being sentenced to imprisonment. Around [27 Christian prisoners of conscience](#) are reportedly in prison at the time of writing, majority of these being male (22 December 2023, The 88 Project). Generally, once in custody, Christian detainees suffer harsh treatment, physical beatings and are put under pressure to renounce their Christian faith.

Within communities, male Christians can also expect physical violence from villagers or the authorities, even risking death for their faith. A country expert summarized, that when a husband is persecuted, “the wife and children are also under pressure because he is whom they rely on emotionally [and] financially”.

Christians also experience pressure within the armed forces. Military service is compulsory for all men; evasion is punished by a prison sentence. Religious convictions are not grounds for non-participation. Within the armed forces, Christians are unable to read the Bible freely or partake in other Christian practices.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Being Communist, the government acts against all religions which are not under its umbrella, including Buddhists, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao Buddhists and Muslims. This starts with harassment and may end up in detention or expulsion from their homes, villages or country. Particularly members of the country’s ethnic minorities are on the authorities’ radar.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Vietnam - pp.25/26):

- “In October, the People’s Committee of Ngoc Hoi District ordered Abbot Thich Nhat Phuoc of UBCV Son Linh Pagoda in Kon Tum Province to dismantle a building used as a temple within 45 days, citing it as illegal construction of a house on agricultural land. According to Radio Free Asia, Plei Kan town authorities ordered the abbot to comply with the request

by December 12; otherwise, they would destroy it and charge him the cost of the demolition. On December 13, police and dozens of local officials demolished UBCV Son Linh pagoda while Phuoc was away in another province. Police prevented the abbot's mother from entering the area to intervene. According to the abbot's mother, local government workers carried Buddha statues and worshiping tablets out of the pagoda and then tore down the wooden building with chainsaws, cranes, and excavators. In 2019, Ngoc Hoi District authorities demolished another temple structure built on the same grounds. Abbot Phuoc reported to Radio Free Asia that many individuals had built houses on agricultural land nearby but had not been forced to destroy them. The abbot said he believed authorities destroyed the pagoda because he refused to join the registered VBS."

As is typical for all Communist governments, the Vietnamese authorities seek to keep all religious groups under control. As long as they are organized under government-controlled councils and thus meet with the government's knowledge, the latter will leave them alone, except for controlling what is preached. Independent groups, however, come under serious pressure from the government, especially their leaders. In the words of Human Rights Watch (HRW 2023 Vietnam country chapter):

- "Unrecognized religious groups—including Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Christian, and Buddhist groups—face constant surveillance, harassment, and intimidation. Followers of independent religious groups are subject to public criticism, forced renunciation of faith, detention, interrogation, torture, and imprisonment. As of September 2021, Vietnam acknowledged that it had not officially recognized about 140 religious groups with approximately 1 million followers."

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Communist and post-Communist oppression - blended with Dictatorial paranoia

The headline of an [article](#) published by the Voice of Vietnam on 31 May 2021 sums up the prevailing sense of the Communist Party and authorities: "Vietnam cannot grant free rein to operations of religious groups". Civil rights and freedom of religion will almost certainly remain elusive and *Communist oppression* will continue to be heavily felt by Christians for the time-being. The draft decrees on religion published in June 2022 also point to a tightening of control and pressure exerted against Christians. Ethnic minorities will most likely continue to be watched with suspicion, especially when they are adherents of a religion outside government control.

Clan oppression

Many Vietnamese follow age-old traditions of worshiping ancestors and spirits. Whoever decides not to join in these traditions puts themselves outside of the family and community and will therefore be put under strong pressure to belong again. As family bonds are still strong, especially in the rural areas, this pressure will not cease for Christians coming from this background.

Organized corruption and crime

No changes are to be expected related to this Persecution engine.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (2.50 points): assisting the authorities - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/tech-giants-accused-of-helping-vietnams-online-crackdown/90536>
- Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points): report - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2021/05/the-collision-of-religion-and-the-vietnamese-state/>
- Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points): draft decree on religion - <https://mailchi.mp/morningstarnews.org/vietnam-floats-draconian-new-religion-decrees>
- Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (4.00 points): demanded - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/slander-10042021152224.html>
- Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (4.00 points): facing - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/dong-tam-10312022010744.html>
- Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points): church service - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-officials-storm-mass-in-illegal-chapel/100794>
- Block 5.10: Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders. (3.75 points): denial - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-blocks-protestant-churches-congress/90469>
- Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.50 points): conferences abroad - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2022/11/vietnam-briefing-nov-14-2022-vietnam-banned-religious-practitioners-from-attending-conference-on-freedom-of-religion-and-belief/>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: died - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/01/vietnam-briefing-jan-8-2023-lutheran-pastor-dinh-diem-passes-away-in-prison-government-declares-boy-trapped-in-concrete-pile-dead>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: sentenced - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnams-catholic-activist-jailed-for-anti-state-videos/101426>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Mai Trang Vu & Thi Thanh Thuy Pham, 2021 - <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681366.2021.1924239>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: The Vietnamese, 12 January 2023 - <https://www.thevietnamese.org/2023/01/how-is-gender-equality-in-vietnam/?ref=the-vietnamese-magazine-newsletter>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: The Diplomat, 13 July 2022 - <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/what-the-roe-reversal-means-for-abortion-rights-in-vietnam/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: 27 Christian prisoners of conscience - <https://the88project.org/database/>
- Future outlook: article - <https://english.vov.vn/en/politics/vietnam-cannot-grant-free-reign-to-operations-of-religious-groups-862179.vovOV.VN>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Vietnam>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.