

# VIETNAM 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that all individuals have the right to freedom of belief and religion. The law provides for significant government control over religious practices and includes vague provisions that permit restrictions on religious freedom in the stated interest of national security and social unity. The Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups, without which groups' activities are strictly limited. Some religious leaders, particularly those representing groups that either did not request or receive official recognition or certificates of registration reported various forms of government harassment – including physical assaults, arrests, prosecutions, monitoring, travel restrictions, and property seizure – and denials or no response to requests for registration and other permissions. Authorities did not recognize any new religious organizations during the year. Religious leaders across the country reported some improving conditions compared with prior years, such as better relations between unregistered religious groups and local authorities, while also reporting incidents of harassment, including police questioning and brief periods of detention. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration said they were generally more able to practice their beliefs with less government interference, although some recognized groups, including the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) (ECVN), reported harassment in gathering in certain provinces, including Quang Binh, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, and Ha Giang. While the United Presbyterian Church reported harassment in some provinces, the Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC) stated it worked with the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) to register more than 20 local congregations and places of worship (known locally as “meeting points”) in a number of northern provinces. Members of some religious groups continued to report that some local and provincial authorities used noncompliance with the required registration procedures to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close government management of their leadership, training programs, assemblies, and other activities.

There were reports of conflicts, at times violent, between members of unregistered and registered or recognized religious groups or between believers and nonbelievers. Religious activists blamed authorities for manipulating recognized religious groups and accused their agents or proxies of causing conflicts to suppress the activities of unregistered groups. On September 11 and 13, for example, members of the recognized Cao Dai Sect (Cao Dai 1997) disrupted the

rite of unregistered Cao Dai members (Cao Dai 1926) at a private residence in Ben Cau District, Tay Ninh Province.

The U.S. Ambassador and other senior embassy and consulate general officials regularly urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely. They sought reduced levels of government intervention in the affairs of the recognized and registered religious groups and urged an end to restrictions on and harassment of groups without recognition or registration. The Ambassador, Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, and other senior U.S. government and embassy officers advocated religious freedom in visits across the country, including to the Northern and Northwest Highlands, the Central Highlands, the North Central region, and Central Coast. Embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases of abuses as well as government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), independent Hoa Hao groups, and ethnic minority house churches with the GCRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial and local authorities. U.S. government officials called for the increased registration of church congregations around the country and for improvement in registration policies by making them more uniform and transparent. U.S. government officials urged the government to peacefully resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious groups.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 98.7 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The government's 2019 National Population and Housing Census reported approximately 13 million religious adherents, accounting for 14 percent of the total population. The census noted Catholics represented the largest number of adherents, with six million followers, accounting for 45 percent of the total number of believers nationwide and six percent of the overall population. The census recorded Buddhists as the second largest religious group, accounting for five million followers or 35 percent of the total number of religious adherents nationwide and five percent of the overall population. Protestants were the third largest group with nearly one million followers, accounting for seven percent of the total number of believers nationwide and one percent of the overall population. The census results contrast with January 2018 statistics released by the GCRA in which 26 percent of the population is categorized as religious believers participating in registered activities, with 15 percent of the population Buddhist, seven percent Roman Catholic, two percent Hoa Hao Buddhist, one percent Cao Dai, and one percent Protestant. GCRA officials, however, also estimate 90 percent of the population follows some sort of faith tradition, registered or

otherwise. According to observers, many religious adherents choose not to make their religious affiliation public for fear of adverse consequences, resulting in substantial discrepancies among various estimates.

According to government statistics, the total number of religious adherents reportedly decreased by roughly 2.5 million and the ratio of religious adherents dropped from more than 18 percent to 14 percent of the total population between the 2009 and 2019 censuses. Catholics and Protestants saw increases in membership, while Buddhists and religious groups based on local traditions saw a declining number of adherents, according to census data. Anecdotal reporting from provincial Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), Catholic, and Protestant leaders, however, indicates membership in all religious traditions continues to grow.

According to census data, VBS membership decreased from more than nearly seven million in 2009 to approximately five million in 2019. The GCRA estimates that the number of Buddhist followers is more than 10 million. The VBS notes that this number only counts those officially registered to *sanghas* (community of monks and nuns) and does not account for potentially tens of millions of others who believe in and observe Buddhist practices to various degrees without formal participation in a registered Buddhist religious group.

Within the Buddhist community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic majority, while approximately 1 percent of the total population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism.

Smaller religious groups combined constitute less than 0.16 percent of the population and include Hindus (mostly an estimated 70,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area); approximately 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam); an estimated 3,000 members of the Baha'i Faith; and approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). Religious groups originating in the country (Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, and Phat Giao Hieu Nghia Ta Lon) comprise a total of 0.34 percent of the population. A small, mostly foreign, Jewish population resides in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. National statistics on religious adherents from the GCRA and the Vietnam Fatherland Front are considered less comprehensive, as they do not account for members of unregistered religious groups.

Other individuals have no religious affiliation or practice animism or the veneration of ancestors, tutelary and protective saints, national heroes, or local, respected persons. Many individuals blend traditional practices with religious teachings, particularly Buddhism and Christianity. Research institutions, including the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, estimate there are approximately 100 “new religions,” mostly in the North and Central Highlands.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the population. Based on adherents’ estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including groups in the Northwest Highlands (H’mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M’ning, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states that all individuals have the right to freedom of belief and religion, including the freedom to follow no religion. The constitution acknowledges the right to freedom of religion or belief of those whose rights are limited, including inmates or any foreigners and stateless persons. It states all religions are equal before the law, and the state must respect and protect freedom of belief and religion. The constitution prohibits citizens from violating the freedom of belief and religion or taking advantage of a belief or religion to violate the law.

The LBR and implementing Decree 162 serve as the primary documents governing religious groups and their activities. At year’s end, the government did not promulgate a decree prescribing penalties for noncompliance with the 2018 law. The GCRA has stated, however, that the decree prescribing penalties is not vital, as at least 11 other laws and decrees mandate civil compliance with national law. The LBR reiterates citizens’ rights to freedom of belief and religion and states that individuals may not use the right of belief and religious freedom to undermine peace, national independence, and unification; incite violence or propagate wars; proselytize in contravention of the state’s laws and policies; divide people, nationalities, or religions; cause public disorder; infringe upon the life, health, dignity, honor or property of others; impede the exercise of civic rights and performance of civic obligations; or conduct “superstitious activities” or otherwise violate the law.

The government recognizes 38 religious organizations that affiliate with 16 distinct religious “traditions,” as defined by the government: Buddhism, Islam, the Baha’i Faith, Catholicism, Protestantism, Church of Jesus Christ, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Buu Son Ky Huong, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Phat Duong Nam Tong Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao Tam Tong Mieu, Cham Brahmanism, Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition. Four additional groups – the Assemblies of God, Ta Lon Dutiful and Loyal Buddhism, Vietnam Full Gospel Church, and Vietnam United Gospel Outreach Church – have “registrations for religious operation” but are not recognized as official organizations.

The law specifies that recognized religious organizations and their affiliates are noncommercial legal entities. The law also stipulates that religious organizations are allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with relevant laws. The government does not allow unauthorized organizations to raise funds or distribute aid without seeking approval and registration from authorities.

The GCRA, one of 18 “ministerial units” under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), is responsible for implementing religious laws and decrees; it maintains offices at the central, provincial, and, in some areas, district levels. The law lays out specific responsibilities for central-, provincial-, and local-level GCRA offices and delegates certain religion-related management tasks to provincial- and local-level people’s committees (i.e., local leaders). The central-level GCRA is charged with disseminating information to authorities and assuring uniform compliance with the legal framework on religion at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels.

By law, forcing others to follow or renounce a religion or belief is prohibited.

Military conscription is universal and mandatory for males between 18 and 25 years of age, although there are exceptions. None of the exceptions is related to religious belief.

The law requires believers to register religious activities with communal authorities where the “lawful premises for the religious practice is based” and prescribes two stages of institutionalization for religious organizations seeking to gather at a specified location to “practice worship rituals, pray, or express their religious faith.” The first stage is “registration for religious operation” with the

provincial- or national-level GCRA, depending on the geographic extent of the group's activities. Registration for religious operation allows a group to organize religious ceremonies and religious practice; preach and conduct religious classes at approved locations; elect, appoint, or designate officials; repair or renovate the headquarters; engage in charitable or humanitarian activities; and organize congresses to approve its charter. To obtain registration, the group must submit a detailed application with information about its doctrine, history, bylaws, leaders, and members as well as proof it has a legal meeting location. The relevant provincial GCRA office or the MHA – depending on whether the group in question is operating in one or more provinces – is responsible for approving a valid application for registration within 60 days of receipt. The relevant provincial GCRA office or the MHA is required to provide any rejection in writing.

The second stage of institutionalization is recognition. A religious group may apply for recognition after it has operated continuously for at least five years following the date it received approval of its “registration for religious operation.” A religious group is required to have a legal charter and bylaws, leaders in good standing without criminal records, and to have managed assets and conducted transactions autonomously. To obtain recognition, a group must submit a detailed application to the provincial- or national-level GCRA, depending on the geographic extent of the organization. The application must include a written request specifying the group's structure, membership, geographical scope of operation and headquarters location; a summary of its history, dogmas, canon laws, and rites; a list and the resumes, judicial records, and summaries of the religious activities of the organization's representative and tentative leaders; the group's charter; a declaration of the organization's lawful assets; and proof of lawful premises to serve as a headquarters. The relevant provincial people's committee or the MHA is responsible for approving a valid application for recognition within 60 days of receipt. The relevant provincial people's committee or MHA is required to provide any rejection in writing. Recognition allows the religious group to conduct religious activities in accordance with the organization's charter; organize religious practice; publish religious texts, books, and other publications; produce, export, and import religious cultural products and religious articles; renovate, upgrade, or construct new religious establishments; and receive lawful donations from domestic and foreign sources, among other rights.

The law states religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and believers may file complaints or civil and administrative lawsuits against government officials or agencies under the relevant laws and decrees. The law also states organizations and individuals have the right to bring civil lawsuits in court regarding the actions

of religious groups or believers. There were no analogous provisions in previous laws.

Under the law, a religious organization is defined as “a religious group that has received legal recognition” by authorities. The law provides a separate process for unregistered, unrecognized religious groups to receive permission for specific religious activities by applying to the commune-level people’s committee. Regulations require the people’s committee to respond in writing to an application within 20 working days of receipt. The law specifies that a wide variety of religious activities require advance approval or registration from authorities at the central and/or local levels. These activities include “belief activities” (defined as traditional communal practices of ancestor, hero, or folk worship); “belief festivals” held for the first time; the establishment, division, or merger of religious affiliates; the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); establishment of a religious training facility; conducting religious training classes; holding major religious congresses; organizing religious events, preaching or evangelizing outside of approved locations; traveling abroad to conduct religious activities or training; and joining a foreign religious organization.

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

The law provides prisoners access to religious counsel as well as religious materials, with conditions, while in detention. It reserves authority for the government to restrict the “assurance” of that right. Decree 162 states detainees may use religious documents that are legally published and circulated, in line with legal provisions on custody, detention, prison, and other types of confinement. Prisoner access to religious counsel and materials must not, however, affect the rights of others to freedom of religion and belief or nonbelief or contravene other relevant laws. The decree states the Ministries of Public Security, Defense, and

Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs shall be responsible for providing guidelines on the management of religious documents and the time and venue for the use of these documents.

The law specifies that religious organizations must follow numerous other laws for certain activities. Religious organizations are allowed to conduct educational, health, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the law, but the law does not provide clarification as to which activities are permitted. In addition, construction or renovation of religious facilities must occur in accordance with laws and regulations on construction, and foreigners participating in religious activities must abide by immigration laws.

Publishing, producing, exporting, or importing religious texts must occur in accordance with laws and regulations related to publishing. Legislation requires all publishers be licensed public entities or state-owned enterprises. Publishers must receive prior government approval to publish all documents, including religious texts. By decree, only the Religious Publishing House may publish religious books. Any bookstore may sell legally published religious texts and other religious materials.

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

Under the law, provincial-level people's committees may grant land use certificates for a "long and stable term" to religious institutions if they have permission to operate, the land is dispute-free, and the land was not acquired via transfer or donation after July 1, 2004. Religious institutions are not permitted to exchange, transfer, lease, donate, or mortgage their land-use rights. In land disputes involving a religious institution, the chairperson of the provincial-level people's committee has authority to settle disputes. Parties may dispute the chairperson's decision by appealing to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment or filing a lawsuit in court.



In practice, if a religious organization has not obtained recognition, members of the congregation may acquire a land-use title individually.

The renovation or upgrade of facilities owned by religious groups requires notification to authorities, although it does not necessarily require a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public and private schools. This prohibition extends to private schools run by religious organizations.

There are separate provisions of the law that permit foreigners legally residing in the country to request permission to conduct religious activities, teach, attend local religious training, or preach in local religious institutions. The law requires religious organizations or citizens to receive government permission in advance of hosting or conducting any religious activities involving foreign organizations, foreign individuals, or travel abroad. Regulations also contain requirements for foreigners conducting religious activities within the country, including those involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership, to seek permission for their activities.

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

### **Government Practices**

During the year, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported cases of government officials physically abusing individuals from religious minority groups, particularly ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, although it was not clear the reported cases were related to religious affiliation. Government officials in different parts of the country reportedly continued to monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily detain, and discriminate against some individuals, at least in part, because of their religious beliefs or affiliation. The majority of the victims of the reported incidents were members of unregistered groups engaged in political or human rights advocacy activities or with ties to overseas individuals and organizations that were outspoken and critical of authorities. Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of harassment as being solely based on religious identity.

Local authorities in some parts of the Central Highlands reportedly intimidated and threatened violence against members of certain unregistered Protestant groups that had reported human rights violations to international bodies or attempted to force

these groups' members to recant their faith or join a registered religious organization. According to Boat People SOS (BPSOS), a U.S.-based NGO, authorities in the Central Highlands threatened to kill church leaders and members for reporting incidents of abuse to foreign diplomatic missions and accused them of belonging to separatist groups. In July, BPSOS reported authorities in Dak Lak Province threatened to kill church elders from the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ in Buon Ma Thuot City and Good News Mission Church in Cu Kuin District during interrogations conducted following meetings between the elders and diplomats in June. Authorities reportedly pressured the church elders to recant their faith, stop their activities, and join the registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Dak Lak Province police reportedly threatened to kill a member of the Good News Mission Church unless he revealed what he reported to U.S. diplomats. In August, Krong Ana District police, Dak Lak Province, interrogated a Good News Mission Church pastor and threatened him for suspicion of association with the long-defunct separatist organization United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races, known by its French acronym FULRO. The government considered the group an insurgent militia. According to Degar Christian groups, authorities repeatedly accused them of belonging to FULRO, which they denied.

According to BPSOS reports, during the year local police in Dak Lak and Phu Yen Provinces questioned at least 30 members of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ, Good News Mission Church, and International Degar Church at local police stations or their residences. In some cases, local police coerced individuals to report to local police stations and then interrogated them for hours before releasing them without charges. Authorities reportedly demanded they cease affiliation with unregistered religious groups and refrain from providing "negative" reports to international organizations. Local police in some cases demanded some religious adherents request permission from authorities prior to traveling outside of their communes. According to members of a house church in Chu Se District, Gia Lai Province, Bo Ngoong Commune police in December confiscated from the church 300 million dong (\$13,000) in Christmas funds, Bibles, and other property, and said if the villagers carried on with Christmas celebrations they would be fined or arrested.

In May, according to observers, local police of Quynh Luu District, Nghe An Province, "invited" a number of Catholic converts who were baptized by Father Nguyen Dinh Thuc to local police stations, threatening to withhold their social benefits and preventing them from attending Easter masses. Religious activists stated, however, authorities did not carry out these threats. The converts were harassed reportedly because of their connection to Thuc, who, according to human

rights organizations, had been harassed for many years due to his human rights advocacy efforts, particularly for helping victims of Formosa toxic spills and supporting human rights activists.

On March 19, state media reported that Gia Lai police, in association with the Ministry of Public Security, detained Kunh, Lup, and Jur who were ethnic minorities belonging to the Catholic “Ha Mon” group founded in Kon Tum in 1999. Authorities had labeled the Ha Mon group an “evil-way religion” due to its alleged association with FULRO. All three were released in June.

According to reports from BPSOS, on August 27, local authorities of Hoa Thang Commune, Buon Ma Thuot City, Dak Lak Province, questioned church member Y Nguyet Bkrong about pictures on his Facebook page showing local police officers at his residence during religious services of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ. The local officials threatened to punish him if he did not remove the pictures and ordered him to stop hosting gatherings of unregistered religious groups. On January 14, according to BPSOS, local authorities of Krong Buk District, Dak Lak Province questioned Y Khiu Nie and Y Blon Nie, members of the unregistered Good News Mission Church, about their sharing reports critical of the government internationally and pressured them to stop accessing and posting negative reports on human rights websites and Facebook pages. BPSOS reported other similar incidents in Dak Lak Province during the year.

On September 18, authorities released Pastor A Dao of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ from prison 11 months earlier than his expected release date of August 18, 2021. He was arrested in 2016 and charged with “organizing for individuals to flee abroad” under Article 275 of the 1999 penal code.

Nineteen members of the An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist group remained in prison on sentences ranging from 10 years to life on 2013 convictions of “activities aimed at overthrowing the government.” On October 8 and November 13, respectively, authorities released An Dan Dai Dao Buddhists Phan Thanh Tuong 16 months earlier than his expected release date and Do Thi Hong four years earlier than her expected release date.

There were multiple reports of government discrimination against individual religious believers and religious groups across the country. Members of some religious groups whose members were poor or ethnic minorities said authorities denied some of the legal benefits to which the members were entitled.

The VBC, an unregistered group, reported that authorities stopped disrupting its gatherings but harassed its congregants in different ways. For example, according to BPSOS, local authorities of Thach Loi Commune, Thach Thanh District, Thanh Hoa Province, denied state financial assistance for COVID-19 to Church members.

In June, a crowd of approximately 60 members of the government-organized Cao Dai 1997, supported by Phu Yen provincial authorities, confronted members of the unregistered Hieu Xuong Cao Dai (1926) Temple and attempted to breach the building to force the congregants out of the temple and take control of the property. Hieu Xuong Cao Dai members reported they were able to prevent the mob from occupying the temple but that the crowd threatened to return and try again.

BPSOS reported authorities continued to harass UBCV communities in an effort to seize their temples and facilities and force the UBCV to join the government-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Church.

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. State-run media, however, reported military officials praying for peace and happiness while visiting pagodas.

Khmer Krom Buddhists, whose males traditionally enter the monastery for a period of training lasting at least one month before the age of 20, reported that mandatory conscription into the military with no possibility of alternative service hampered their traditional religious rite of passage.

According to family members of some imprisoned individuals, authorities continued to deny some prisoners and detainees the right to religious practice. Detention officers continued to deny visits by priests to Catholic prisoners, including Ho Duc Hoa, Le Dinh Luong, and Nguyen Nang Tinh, who were detained in Nam Ha, Ba Sao, and Nghi Kim Prisons, respectively. Prison authorities stated this was due to the lack of appropriate facilities inside the prisons for Catholic services. In a number of cases, prison authorities restricted or hindered religious prisoners' access to religious texts, despite provisions in the law for providing such access. According to BPSOS, independent Hoa Hao adherent Bui Van Trung was able to have a censored version of the Hoa Hao scripture in prison.

Protestant and Catholic groups continued to say that legal restrictions and lack of legal clarity on operating faith-based medical and educational facilities made them wary of attempting to open hospitals or parochial schools, despite government statements welcoming religious groups expanding their participation in health, education, and charitable activities. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools it seized in 1954 and 1975.

According to the GCRA, in northern mountainous provinces, local authorities granted registration for nearly 800 local congregations known as “meeting-points,” and recognized 14 local congregations, out of more than 1,600 Protestant local congregations. The registrations and recognitions impacted approximately 250,000 members in total (of which 95 percent were ethnic minorities, mostly H’Mong). In the Central Highlands, local authorities granted registration to more than 1,400 local congregations and recognized 311 local congregations, together impacting nearly 584,000 members.

The Ministry of Public Security estimated there were approximately 70 Protestant groups with nearly 200,000 members operating outside of the legal framework mandated by the LBR. These groups neither sought nor received registration certificates or recognition.

Authorities did not recognize any new religious organizations during the year. The GCRA registered approximately 70 local congregations during the year to include four Protestant local congregations, approximately 50 Catholic parishes, and 12 Cao Dai local congregations. The VBC stated it worked with the GCRA to register more than 20 local congregations and “meeting points” in a number of northern provinces. 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 registration 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.

Although the GCRA recognized Chieu Minh Tam Thanh Vo Vi Cao Dai Dharma Practice in 2009, during the year, the GCRA downgraded its status from recognized to registered. In 2019, the GCRA upgraded the registration status of the Church of Jesus Christ from registration of the church's representative committee to the more formal "registration of religious operation."

GCRA officials stated that government officials assisted unregistered religious groups with navigating the bureaucratic procedures required for registration. In 2019, the GCRA created a website with an interactive portal to provide access to forms required for registration of religious activities. By the end of the year, 62 religious organizations had established accounts on the website. The portal also allowed religious organizations to track the status of their document submissions. The GCRA, however, acknowledged the web portal designed to expedite this process did not prove useful for remote religious groups that often lacked the technical skills to utilize the digital forms provided by the government. The GCRA continued to provide provincial-level training to facilitate local registration.

Local authorities continued obstructing the assignment and transfer of religious leaders to unregistered local congregations, particularly those who were from other localities. In several cases, local authorities harassed members of these unregistered local congregations. The ECVN also reported the recognition of its local congregations was still time consuming, although many of them had been operating stably for many years and, from their perspective, fully met the registration requirements. According to the ECVN, authorities recognized 23 local congregations and granted registration to approximately 500 out of 1,200 local congregations and houses of worship (meeting points). The ECVN reported that it continued to experience difficulties obtaining registration of its meeting points with local authorities in Quang Binh and Nghe An Provinces.

The VBC said it tested a new approach to achieve local registrations of congregations, in coordination with the GCRA. Unlike earlier applications, in which representatives of local congregations completed the relevant paperwork for local authorities in relative isolation, the VBC chief pastor completed multiple registration packages under his name for submission to the GCRA. By year's end, the VBC registered meeting points in Phu Yen District, Son La Province, and Nam Po District, Dien Bien Province. Local authorities previously denied registration packages for these local congregations. According to the VBC, the GCRA worked with local authorities to advance these registrations.

Authorities required most, if not all, applicants for registration of religious operation or recognition to include in their applications language stating the religious organization would be in harmony with the nation and serve the Vietnamese people. For example, the Catholic Church used the slogan “live the gospel amidst the nation” while the VBC used “dharma, nation, and socialism.”

According to local religious leaders, authorities continued to impose a rigid upper management structure on religious organizations. According to religious community representatives, authorities preferred a two-level, top-down hierarchy to better control the religious organization and its affiliates through the religious group’s internal administrative structure.

According to several Catholic bishops, parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations continued to face difficulty registering with provincial authorities due to their inconsistent application of national laws. 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 Son La Lao Cai and Yen Bai Provinces. In August, Lai Chau authorities approved the establishment of Lai Chau Parish. The recognition reportedly came after more than 13 years of paperwork and discussions between the authorities and church leaders.

According to local religious leaders, Protestant groups also experienced authorities’ inconsistent interpretation and enforcement of the law when attempting to register their local congregations. Local authorities in Dien Bien Province, for example, continued to deny the registration applications of an independent Pentecostal congregation at Noong Luong Commune, Dien Bien District, Dien Bien Province, stating that the congregation was affiliated with an unrecognized religious group. The Pentecostal group’s religious leader, however, said the law did not require a local congregation to be affiliated with a recognized organization to receive registration. The leader also noted that members had practiced their faith at the local congregation for nearly 30 years and had begun filing registration applications in April 2017. Dien Bien authorities also denied registration of a group called Assembly of God of Vietnamese People (Hoi Thanh Phuc Am Ngu Tuan Nguoi Viet), reasoning that the applicant’s dogma was indistinguishable from that of the recognized Assembly of God of Vietnam (Giao hoi Phuc Am Ngu Tuan Viet Nam).

During the year, authorities continued monitoring, preventing, or disrupting the gatherings of some unregistered groups and harassed their members in different

ways. In most cases, members of these religious groups were also involved in human rights advocacy activities or had links to individuals and organizations that were critical of the government. Religious leaders in urban areas and among ethnic-majority Kinh adherents largely reported the ability to practice without significant restrictions, so long as they acted transparently to official oversight. This remained true for both officially registered and unregistered religious groups. Unrecognized religious denominations operating in the Central and Northwest Highlands and in certain parts of the Mekong Delta – especially those that had a predominantly ethnic minority following – were more likely to report harassment from government officials. Recognized religious denominations in these areas reported rapid growth and generally fewer problems with officials.

On March 15 and 29, BPSOS reported that local police in Hoa Thang Commune, Buon Ma Thuot City, Dak Lak Province disrupted the gathering of dozens of adherents at a house church of the Evangelical Church of Christ due to Church members' political activities. According to BPSOS, many members of the Church attended a civil society training session in Thailand and met with representatives of UN agencies and foreign diplomats, to whom they expressed concern about the human rights situation in Vietnam. Police also accused them of having links to human rights activists in exile.

According to local religious leaders, authorities harassed members of recognized and well-established religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church, the ECVN, and the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), for their engagement in human rights advocacy activities or land disputes. On January 7, Ho Chi Minh City police threatened to disrupt a Catholic Mass if Father Nguyen Dinh Thuc led the service. In June, the Vinh Diocese suspended Father Dang Huu Nam from doing pastoral work. Both Thuc and Nam have faced persistent harassment for many years for their roles in supporting victims of the 2016 Formosa toxic spill and their advocacy on human rights conditions across the country.

On June 17, public security officials of Dak Lak Province prevented Pastor Yjol Bkrong of the Evangelical Church of Christ of Vietnam from meeting with diplomatic officials, forcibly turning him away when he approached the meeting point.

Some religious leaders faced external travel restrictions, and leaders and followers of certain religious groups faced other restrictions on their movements by government authorities. The Catholic Redemptorist Order stated authorities still



held passports confiscated in 2018 of at least two priests of the order. Some pastors who were outspoken and critical of authorities expressed concerns about traveling abroad for fear of being stopped at the border or being detained upon return to the country. In May, authorities denied the passport renewal request of Redemptorist Father Nguyen Van Toan, citing his conduct of “activities against the state.”

According to various reports, the government allowed Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s potential successors from Thailand and some European countries to enter the country and gather with the Zen master on his Continuation Day at Tu Hieu pagoda in Thua Thien in Hue Province.

Multiple civil society organizations expressed concern about possible government interference in the Catholic Church’s decisions regarding the assignment or reassignment of priests who had been particularly outspoken on a variety of human rights issues. Among controversial cases during the year were the transfers of Father Nguyen Dinh Thuc and Father Dang Huu Nam, both from the Vinh Diocese, following a June announcement that Father Dang would be restricted from pastoral work in the diocese. Both priests were well known for their support of victims of the 2016 Formosa toxic waste spill as well as a variety of human rights advocacy activities. In October, the Xuan Loc Diocese in Dong Nai Province reassigned outspoken priest Nguyen Duy Tan, suspending him from pastoral work. Tan began criticizing human rights conditions in Vietnam following the 2016 Formosa toxic waste spill. According to the monks of Thien An Monastery in Thua Thien in Hue Province, authorities continue to prevent Father Nguyen Van Duc, the monastery’s head abbot-elect, from returning to assume his role after seeking medical treatment abroad.

Many ordained pastors conducted pastoral work, despite not having completed the paperwork mandated by law to be recognized as clergy by the government. For example, the ECVN reported only approximately one-fifth of its pastors had applied to be officially recognized by the government.

Some pastors of unregistered groups stated that authorities did not interfere with their clerical training, despite their lack of legal authorization.

Leaders of some unregistered groups reported that government officials urged unregistered groups to affiliate with registered or recognized organizations. Some stated authorities did so, knowing that unregistered groups would never accept

affiliation, while others said authorities sought increased control over the groups through affiliation with other organizations.

Media sources continued to report tension and disputes between Catholics and authorities in the Vinh and Ha Tinh Dioceses in the central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh, mostly over land disputes or relating to human and environmental rights advocacy activities. BPSOS reported that on March 22, local authorities of Binh Loc Commune, Loc Ha District, Ha Tinh Province prevented My Loc parishioners from building a fence separating a statue of Jesus from a communal compound and public space. According to nongovernmental sources, the construction was on parish-owned land. Understanding that local authorities were planning a “new rural area,” the parishioners reportedly sought an explanation for the authorities’ refusal to permit fence construction but failed to get a clear response in writing. Progovernment websites blamed parishioners for obstructing local authorities from building public works, including a community center and a sports field, and for occupying public land for use by the parish

According to a local NGO, Phu Yen authorities requested the executive board of the SECV reassign Pastor Luong Manh Ha from Phu Yen Province, given his outspokenness against the government during a land dispute between Tuy Hoa Evangelical Church and authorities. The GCRA reported that on September 10, the Tuy Hoa City People’s Committee, Phu Yen Province and the SECV resolved the property dispute.

Leaders of the unregistered Protestant Duong Van Minh group reported local authorities allowed the construction of a small number of *Nha Don* structures for storing funeral-related items. Authorities had demolished 13 of the structures in 2019. The group, which the government considers an “evil-way” religion, reported local authorities monitored key members, stating that local police officials “visited” their residences from time to time or “invited” them to local authorities’ headquarters. Those who refused such “invitations,” however, said they were not subjected to reprisals. An NGO reported Tuyen Quang authorities destroyed as many as 30 *Nha Don* structures during the year, accounting for all but one example of structure destruction for the year.

Provincial and local authorities continued to exercise eminent domain over land belonging to individuals and religious organizations in the name of social and economic development projects. Authorities continued many such projects that required the revocation of land rights and demolition of properties of religious organizations or individuals across the country. Authorities also reportedly did not

intervene effectively in many land disputes that involved religious organizations or believers, and in most of these cases, the religious organizations or believers were unsuccessful in retaining land use rights. Such actions resulted in land disputes involving both recognized, registered, and unregistered religious organizations.

State media and progovernment websites alleged that Catholic priests in many parishes occupied – or urged their parishioners to use or illegally occupy – land legally used by nonbelievers or authorities. There were also cases in which Catholics were alleged to have “misused” their land, for example, by turning an agricultural plot into a soccer field without the approval of the proper authorities. In June, local authorities of Son Tien Commune, Huong District, Ha Tinh Province, accused Ke Dong parishioners of the Ha Tinh Diocese of illegal construction on agricultural land. Catholic priests in turn pointed to examples of land confiscated from the Catholic Church by the government in 1954 or 1975 being subdivided and sold for commercial purposes.

From June to October, independent Hoa Hao followers in An Giang reported that local authorities and state-recognized Hoa Hao Buddhist groups in Phu Tan District, An Giang Province advocated tearing down the 100-year-old An Hoa Tu Pagoda, one of the first independent Hoa Hao pagodas built by Prophet Huynh Phu So, founder of the Hoa Hao religious tradition, citing a need to build a new pagoda. Independent Hoa Hao followers opposed the pagoda’s demolition due to its religious importance and proposed it be renovated instead. Plainclothes police reportedly assaulted independent Hoa Hao Buddhists who tried to prevent the pagoda’s demolition. The government temporarily halted demolition of the pagoda, and it remained intact at year’s end.

State-run media and progovernment blogs continued to accuse religious leaders and members who were vocal in their opposition to the government of exploiting religion for personal gain or “colluding with hostile forces with the purpose of inciting public disorder and acting against the Communist Party and State.” Progovernment blogs and at times state-run media continued publishing stories stating that some in the ranks of the Catholic clergy led a depraved life and misappropriated donations for personal use. On April 6, the *People’s Police Newspaper*, a publication of the Ministry of Public Security, published an article criticizing members of the Vietnam Interfaith Council, whose members included leaders of five unregistered religious denominations, specifically unregistered Protestant and Catholic churches, the UBCV, Cao Dai 1926, and independent Hoa Hao Buddhists. In June, the progovernment website Dau Truong Dan Chu (Democracy Battlefield) accused outspoken priest Father Dang Huu Nam of

having a child and accused Fathers Nguyen Dinh Thuc and Nguyen Duy Tan of “living a luxurious life” with “fancy” villas, vehicles, and parties.

State-run media and progovernment websites sometimes equated particular Christian denominations and other religious groups, often ones associated with ethnic groups such as the Vang Chu H’Mong in the Northwest Highlands, Ha Mon Catholics and Degar Montagnard Protestants in the Central Highlands, and Khmers Krom in the southwestern region, with separatist movements, blaming them for political, economic, and social problems.

State media reported local and provincial authorities in the northern mountainous provinces, including Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen, continued to call the Duong Van Minh religious group a threat to national security, political stability, and social order. State media and progovernment websites continued referring to the group as “an evil-way religion” or “an illegal religious group.”

The GCRA website and several provincial government websites, including those of Hung Yen, Dak Lak, and Binh Thuan Provinces, referred to Falun Gong as an “evil-way religion” or an “extremist religious group.” Many progovernment websites associated Falun Gong with acts against the Communist Party and the state and other hostile political agendas. Some accused Falun Gong of doing harm to traditional culture and disrupting the social order and public safety. According to state-run media, in July, a court in Binh Duong stated there were links to Falun Gong when it sentenced Pham Thi Thien Ha to death and sentenced three others to prison sentences of between 13 and 22 years for murder. State-run media and progovernment websites portrayed the defendants as fanatic Falun Gong practitioners who killed other practitioners over disputes relating to practicing their beliefs.

In April, Ha Tinh authorities imposed a fine of 42 million dong (\$1,880) on Pham Hung Cuong for possessing approximately 600 Falun Gong-related masks and nearly 600 publications. He was charged with “storing publications without evidence for their legal origin.” In a number of cases, state officials received punishment for practicing or supporting Falun Gong. In June, the People’s Committee of Vinh Linh District, Quang Tri Province, dismissed Tran Huu Duc, rector of Cua Tung High School, from all his Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) positions for distributing Falun Gong texts and hosting Falun Gong gatherings at his residence.

From August 10 to August 12, approximately 40 protesters demonstrated at the Catholic Thien An Monastery in Thua Thien in Hue Province, requesting the monastery to “give back their land,” according to various sources and social media. The dispute over Thien An’s land extended back more than 20 years. The group, described in Catholic media as “land grabbers” sponsored by the provincial government, reportedly fenced the claimed area with wire on August 13. Some of the online videos showed the protesters wearing masks and shouting at the Benedictine monks, who were praying in front of the remains of a cross they said was torn down by individuals affiliated with the local government. The monastery had set up a stone slab that depicted the history of the cross, including when it was removed by the government in 2017.

On August 17, a Thua Thien television station in Hue reportedly broadcast a video in which it accused priests from the Thien An Monastery of illegally occupying 265 acres of land and reporting “distorted truths” on social media regarding the land dispute. The Thien An Monastery protested the video, stating the television station had defamed and insulted priests of the monastery.

The government continued efforts to deepen knowledge about the 2018 LBR among government officials and religious adherents. Some religious groups also reported that they could engage in charitable activities, particularly in response to severe flooding during the year in Central Vietnam. According to the UBCV and some Catholic and VBS groups, however, authorities prevented religious organizations from distributing humanitarian aid to those affected by flooding in Central Vietnam in October and November.

According to the UBCV, authorities in Thua Thien in Hue Province reportedly confiscated relief vouchers and prevented flood victims from coming to UBCV temples to receive aid. According to other UBCV temples, humanitarian missions to deliver flood relief were conducted successfully with minimal interference from authorities.

In several other cases in a growing trend, local authorities permitted religious organizations to operate social services and to gather for training. For example, in Hanoi and surrounding areas, city officials continued to allow Protestant house churches to operate drug rehabilitation centers.

Most representatives of religious groups continued to report anecdotally that adherence to a registered religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernmental, civil, economic, and secular life, but that

adherence to an unregistered group was more disadvantageous. Religious leaders said that actual religious belief was not a cause of official discrimination, but rather it was the implication of being affiliated with any type of extralegal group that could attract additional scrutiny from authorities. Practitioners of various registered religious groups served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Many nationally recognized religious organizations, such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha as well as other clergy and religious followers, were members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella group for government-affiliated organizations under the guidance of the CPV. High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter and attended Vesak activities commemorating the birth of the Buddha. The official resumes of the top three CPV leaders stated they followed no religion; however, while many senior CPV leaders were reported to hold strong religious beliefs, particularly Buddhist, they generally did not publicly discuss their religious affiliation.

During calendar year 2019 and the first nine months of 2020, the GCRA conducted 46 training sessions nationwide, in which more than 8,800 state officials and religious leaders participated, to assist with the continued implementation of the LBR. Local GCRA's, in association with local authorities, also conducted hundreds of similar training sessions for local officials, religious leaders, and believers. During the year, the GCRA conducted inspections in Ho Chi Minh City, Nghe An, Quang Ninh, and Thanh Hoa Provinces to monitor implementation of the law and trained provincial government officials to conduct their own local inspections. The National Assembly Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, Adolescence and Children and the Vietnam Fatherland Front also met with local authorities and leaders of religious organizations to oversee implementation of the law.

Although the law prohibits publishing all materials, including religious materials, without government approval, some private, unlicensed publishing houses continued to unofficially print and distribute religious texts without active government interference. Other licensed publishers printed books on religion. Publishers had permission to print the Bible in Vietnamese and other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ngong, H'mong, C'ho, and English. Other published texts included works pertaining to ancestor worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai.

The Church of Jesus Christ continued to report authorities permitted it to import sufficient copies of the Book of Mormon, although the church was still working with the GCRA to import additional faith-based periodicals.

Authorities permitted Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Baha'i, and Buddhist groups to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities, and religious leaders noted increased enrollment in these education programs in recent years. Students continued to participate in training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy organized at pagodas nationwide during summer holidays.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of conflicts, at times violent, between members of unregistered and registered or recognized religious groups or between religious adherents and nonbelievers. Religious activists blamed the authorities for manipulating members of recognized religious groups and accused their agents in disguise and proxies of causing these conflicts to intimidate or suppress the activities of unregistered groups. On September 11 and 13, for example, members of the recognized Cao Dai Sect (Cao Dai 1997) disrupted a gathering of unregistered Cao Dai members (Cao Dai 1926) at a private residence in Ben Cau District, Tay Ninh Province.

Individuals who converted to another faith outside of their family faced ostracism and societal stigma for their conversions.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of government officials and CPV leaders, including the President, Prime Minister, and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the GCRA, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and various provinces and cities. They stressed to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship.

The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the UBCV, Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent Cao Dai and Hoa Hao groups; sought greater freedom for recognized and registered religious groups; advocated for access to religious materials and clergy for persons who were incarcerated; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. Embassy

and consulate general officials raised specific cases of abuses as well as government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups, independent Cao Dai, and ethnic minority house churches with the GCRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial and local authorities. U.S. government officials called for increased registration of church congregations around the country and for improvement in registration policies to make them more uniform and transparent. In addition, U.S. officials urged the government to peacefully resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious groups.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom raised these issues during the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in October, held virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions, and raised specific concerns about implementation of the LBR, the status of religious believers detained or imprisoned, property issues involving religious groups, and the situation of ethnic religious minority groups.

In September, embassy officials met with government officials of the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the GCRA as well as with registered and unregistered religious groups to discuss implementation of the LBR and advocate for increased religious freedom, including allowing both registered and unregistered groups to exercise their rights freely, seeking accountability for reports of government harassment, and resolving lands rights issues.

The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials met with religious leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups and attended religious ceremonies to demonstrate support for religious freedom. On February 24, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City paid respects at the funeral of the late Patriarch of UBCV Thich Quang Do and on June 1, offered incense on the 100th day of the Passing of the Patriarch at Tu Hieu UBCV Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City. On June 11, the Consul General hosted an event with leaders of registered and unregistered Protestant and Baptist groups to learn about the impact of COVID-19 on these religious groups and how they responded to the government's policies combating the COVID-19 pandemic. On October 27, the Consul General hosted an event with Muslim leaders from southern Vietnam that aimed to advance religious freedom goals among this important minority religious group. In September, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom had telephone discussions with registered and unregistered religious organizations about religious freedom in the country.



On October 9, the Ambassador sent a congratulatory letter to Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh on his 94th Continuation Day.

Embassy and consulate general officials at every level traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, to monitor religious liberty and meet with religious leaders. Representatives of the embassy and consulate general maintained frequent contact with leaders of numerous religious communities, including recognized, registered, and unregistered organizations. In June, embassy officials met with more than 150 individuals on a visit to Gia Lai and Dak Lak Provinces and with 100 individuals on a subsequent visit to Dien Bien Province to examine issues of religious freedom and ethnic minorities in remote areas.