

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

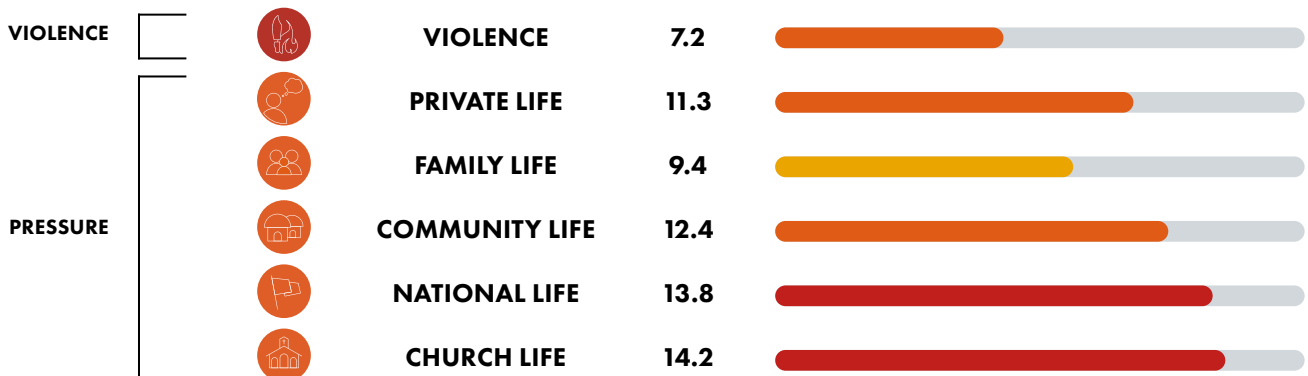
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

VIETNAM

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
35



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

Historical Christian communities (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 the State for development purposes. On rare occasions, when initiated by local party leaders, Catholics can become targets of state interference, as happened in February 2022 when state officials interrupted a Catholic mass. 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 different tribal groups are simmering and can easily turn violent.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Vo Van Thuong

POPULATION

99,699,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

9,635,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Communist State



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	9,635,000	9.7
Buddhists	49,010,000	49.2
Agnostics	12,047,000	12.1
Others	11,875,390	11.9

Source²

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 (not elected freely and fairly), the Politburo carries out the main executive duties.

As in all Communist countries, Christians are regarded as unpatriotic and anti-government and, as such, are strictly monitored, censored, and discriminated against. Christians are not only barred from positions of power within the Communist Party but also disqualified from officer ranks in the military, and receive harsh punishments when charged by police. The 2021 elevation of the head of the 'Government Committee of Religious Affairs' (GCRA) to serve as Deputy Minister of the Interior is indicative of high government concern about maintaining control of

religion. Vietnam objected strongly to being placed on the US Special Watch List (SWL) for religious freedom in December 2022 (its first "demotion" since Vietnam was removed from the worst Country of Particular Concern (CPC) category in 2006). A 132-page [White Book on Religions and Religious Policy](#), released on 9 March, shows that it is unlikely anything will change for Christians and other religions (RFA, 9 March 2023). As one 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 Roman Catholic Church makes up more than 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 seeking 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). 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). Christians generally prefer to stay away from politics, but are nonetheless closely watched by the authorities.

Members of communities in the Central Highlands, many of them Christians from ethnic minorities, are

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

neglected economically and socially and felt this even more during the pandemic crisis. Even though there is no conclusive evidence that the Dak Lak attack was religiously motivated, 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 from the community.”

How the situation varies by region

Pressure and violence targeting Christians among the ethnic minorities is especially strong in the Central and North West Highlands in the following provinces: Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, 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 North West Highlands, including Hoa Binh, Son La, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai Provinces.”

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Buddhist or Animist background face the most severe violations, not only from the authorities but also from their families, friends and neighbors. The Communist authorities, usually at a local level, treat them particularly suspiciously and hostilely because most of them belong to ethnic minorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist and post-Communist oppression blended with dictatorial paranoia

The Communist Party violates the rights of the Christian minority in the central highlands, north-west and north-east regions by harassing them and requiring all religious institutions to be supervised by the government's Committee on Religious Affairs. The government even makes use of local criminals, known as 'Red Flag' groups, whom they tacitly encourage to assault Christians and expropriate church property. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community, and therefore the government's primary target. This suspicion is elevated by Catholic insistence on highlighting social injustice and environmental issues under Communist rule, which often results in punitive violence and confiscation of church-owned land. Some villages are named "communist village" or "Zero-Christian village." The people there would not allow Christians to live in their village.

Clan oppression

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

Organized corruption and crime

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

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Despite having one of the highest female workplace participation rates, women bear an unequal share of domestic work and are considered subservient. The country holds socialist ideals of equality, but Confucian values remain and are embedded in school textbooks and reflected in cultural son-bias. Female Christians may be forced into early marriages with non-Christians, especially converts and those in tribal cultures. Within marriage, they risk oppression, violence and forced divorce. Christian women and girls are also vulnerable to sexual assault.

Female typical pressure points:

- Forced divorce
- Violence – physical

Men

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

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	35	68
2023	25	70
2022	19	71
2021	19	72
2020	21	72

The small drop in overall score in WWL 2024 was caused by the fact that the scores across all Spheres of Life slightly decreased, 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 restricted and limited the space Christians enjoy even further. The new draft regulations on religion, if implemented, promise a strongly tightened environment for churches and Christians and yet further bureaucracy to deal with.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **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 and charged with “attempting to overthrow the people’s administration” (The Vietnamese, 9 January 2023).
- **22 March 2023:** Local officials stormed a Catholic [worship service](#) in Dak Giac parish in Kon Tum province and demanded that the service stop (UCA News, 27 March 2023).
- **8 April 2023:** Protestant missionary Y Krec Bya was [arrested](#) by authorities in Dak Lak province (Voatieng Viet, 19 April 2023).
- **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).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government
2024	1	7	20	5
2023	1	5	10*	10*

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

Private life

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

Family life

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

Community life

Tribal communities in hotspot areas assist in the monitoring of Christians. Local authorities encourage the community to restrict Christian groups as these are seen as foreign and dangerous. Christians applying for jobs, and those due for promotion, sometimes experience discrimination and exclusion both in public and private sectors. Within the military and police, Christians are not eligible to be selected as officers. In northern Vietnam, state authorities are known to threaten to cancel the healthcare benefits of Christians if they resist state mandates or continue to meet as a church. The OD Field expert explained: "When people who are eligible for the "poor certificate" status, which includes social welfare, health care and other benefits become Christians, the local authorities often consider them as not economically poor anymore and take back the poor certificate. In some areas, they even say: "Because you are Christians now, let the Church take care of your life."

National life

Vietnam follows Communist ideology strictly, and all other beliefs are opposed. The government does not respond to registration applications or approve requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often does not specify



reasons for refusals as required by law. Members of the Communist Party are not allowed to profess a religion, and commissioned military officers are not permitted to be religious believers. As the field expert explained: "Christians are not allowed to work as government officers, so they must give up their faith. According to the qualification of a government officer, he/she must have "zero-Christianity" within his/her extended family up to 3 generations. If a government officer converts to Christianity or even is "being too friendly with Christians," he/she can be demoted or dismissed. Even if he still manages to stay in the position, he will be cut off benefits and cannot be promoted." In the media, Christians are portrayed as trying to reinstate colonial ideology and are accused of disruptive and anti-government activities. When a Catholic priest dared to criticize the setting up of a COVID-19 vaccine fund and calls for ordinary citizens to contribute to it, the [official media](#) immediately called for him to be "handled". Perpetrators of violence against Christians are almost never brought to trial.

Church life

Churches are monitored and occasionally meetings are disrupted. Churches are required by law to register their activities with the authorities. The Field expert adds: "Additionally, the government requires the Church to submit a list of Church members. With the list, they go from house to house in uniforms to "clarify" if they belong to that Church. This would scare (young) Christians from admitting their faith and membership of the Church." Obtaining Christian materials in bulk can be risky especially when the materials are imported or do not have prior approval from the government. All published material requires approval by the government and all imports are highly restricted. However, obtaining small numbers of Christian material is possible. Catholic and Protestant church leaders and activists are often arrested or forced into exile for criticism of the government or advocacy on behalf of human rights.

International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

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



Open Doors in Vietnam

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

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



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
