

World
Watch
Research

Vietnam: Full Country Dossier

Revised: January 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Man at work in Vietnam (c) IMB

Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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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 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Vietnam

Brief country details

Vietnam: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
99,284,000	9,159,000	9.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Map of country



Vietnam: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	71	19
WWL 2021	72	19
WWL 2020	72	21
WWL 2019	70	20
WWL 2018	69	18

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

- **Church raid:** On [30 January 2021](#), the authorities raided a house-church gathering in Hue Province and closed it down, after neighbors had reported them to the local authorities (International Christian Concern, 25 February 2021).
- **Physical attacks:** There have been physical attacks and a killing reported from the provinces of Dien Bien, Ha Giang and Quang Nam. For security reasons, no details can be given.

Specific examples of positive developments

- As reported by USCIRF on 18 September 2020, Pastor A Dao was [released](#) after four years imprisonment (CSW, 21 September 2020).
- As reported by the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) on 19 November 2020: "On May 24, 2020, Vietnam National University (VNU) Law School held a book launch for "*Law on the Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief*," the country's first-ever textbook on religious freedom and law. Jointly developed by IGE and VNU Law, the book was [published](#) earlier this May and targets graduate-level students. It has already been distributed to over 25 law schools and government offices throughout Vietnam."
- In December 2020, three Christian youths from the Hmong minority won the right to [attend high school](#), a right often not granted by the government due to missing identity documents (ADF International, 16 December 2020).
- The [first public Christian library](#) of Vietnam, established by the Bible Society and based in Ho Chi Minh City, opened its doors in January 2021 (Evangelical Focus, 1 February 2021).
- The Catholic Archdiocese of Hanoi opened the [Hanoi Institute](#) on 27 February 2021, a place where Catholic clergy and lay people can be trained in theology and humanities (UCA News, 2 March 2021).

External Links - Situation in brief

- 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: 30 January 2021 - <https://www.persecution.org/2021/02/25/ethnic-ta-oi-christian-women-persecuted-vietnam/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: released - <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/9/21/press/4813/article.htm>
- Specific examples of positive developments: published - <https://globalengage.org/updates/view/ige-facilitates-publication-of-first-ever-vietnamese-textbook-on-religious-freedom>
- Specific examples of positive developments: attend high school - <https://adfinternational.org/news/teenagers-win-legal-struggle-to-attend-school-in-vietnam/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: first public Christian library - <https://evangelicalfocus.com/culture/9993/first-public-christian-library-open-in-vietnam>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Hanoi Institute - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/new-theology-institute-established-in-vietnam/91606>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Vietnam

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/vietnam/	9 July 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-16567315	9 July 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-VNM.html	9 July 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/vietnam/	9 July 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	9 July 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	9 July 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (Vietnam not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-world/2021	9 July 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-net/2020	9 July 2021
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/vietnam	9 July 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/vietnam	9 July 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#vn	9 July 2021
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/vietnam	9 July 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/vietnam	9 July 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/VNM	9 July 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country report	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/	9 July 2021
USCIRF 2021 country report	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Vietnam%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf	9 July 2021
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam	9 July 2021

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 executive and decision-makers in the politburo are setting the framework for it. 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 and the country is said to benefit from the continuing US-China trade war. 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. 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 77 in 2021) 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 has 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. At the same time, observers have pointed out that the average age of the 13th Politburo is 63, making it [older and more male](#) than the 12th (The Diplomat, 2 February 2021).

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

- i) 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).
- ii) 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.
- iii) 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 maintained the status quo, but the elevation of the head of the Government Committee of Religious Affairs (GCRA) to also serve as Deputy Minister of the Interior is indicative of a continued high government priority to maintain control of religion, not least control of the Christians 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 or environmental activists – many of them Christians – often have to face being harassed, beaten, detained and sentenced.

Summing up the aforementioned [changes](#) in the leadership, another observer quoted a saying by Ho Chi Minh: "Di bat bien, ung van bien" which may be translated as 'responding 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 naming of Pham Minh Chinh as Prime Minister in April 2021 may lead to a more streamlined government and Party apparatus, especially at the [local level](#) (East Asia Forum, 1 March 2021).

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. In November 2019, a high-ranking member of the government "made headlines with a suggestion that Vietnam may consider alternative measures in managing the South China Sea disputes it is embroiled in, including [international arbitration](#) which the Philippines had previously pursued against China." (The Diplomat, 13 November 2019). China continued to hinder oil exploration activities in Vietnam's EEZ and sank another [fishing boat](#) in April 2020 (Reuters, 4 April 2020). China's People's Liberation Army is taking up an increasingly [important role](#) in the conflict (PRC Leadership Watch, 1 December 2020). 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 has been seen as coercion by Vietnam and other claimants (Benar News 16 June 2021). 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*).

Men and women are, broadly speaking, equal under Vietnam’s laws. For example, they are afforded the [same inheritance, marriage, divorce and custody rights](#) (OECD, Vietnam, 2019). In reality however, the prevailing patriarchal norms of Vietnam favor the rights of men. 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 [26.8%](#) of Parliament positions (Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, 25 September 2020) and despite [marriage laws banning the practice](#), child marriage continues to take place, particularly in Northern Vietnam and mountainous regions (Law on Marriage and Family, 2014, Article 8). According to [Girls Not Brides](#), 11% of girls are married by 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 18 months to 2 years. Christians can experience pressure within this context for their faith, as restrictions prevent them from reading their Bible freely or partaking in Christian practices.

Religious landscape

Vietnam: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	9,159,000	9.2
Muslim	173,000	0.2
Hindu	57,900	0.1
Buddhist	49,881,000	50.2
Ethno-religionist	10,056,000	10.1
Jewish	350	0.0
Bahai	436,000	0.4
Atheist	5,964,000	6.0
Agnostic	11,847,000	11.9
Other	11,711,370	11.8
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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

Whatever figures are published by the government, there is 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) 2021 estimates show that half of the population follow Buddhism and just 10.1% ethnic religions, Pew Forum has 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 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. Almost 81% of all Christians are Catholics according to WCD 2021.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards):

- **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%

According to the World Bank:

- The World Bank classifies Vietnam into the lower-middle income group
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 8.200
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 2% (down from 6% in 2019)
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** 6.9% (2018). 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% – are 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. 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. However, the fact that the country had been placed on the US list of currency manipulators briefly (and only [removed](#) by the new US administration in April 2021) is a strong reminder that the economy is influenced and often formed by (international) politics (Al-Jazeera, 16 April 2021).

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 2% in 2020 (2.9% according to the World Bank). And even then, Vietnam was one of the very few countries worldwide which still had an actual growth, reflecting how well the country dealt with the pandemic in 2020. It went more than three months without infections being reported at all and it recorded its first [two deaths](#) only on 31 July 2020 (Reuters, 31 July 2020). However, in March 2021, [the number of citizens testing positive spiked](#) and the vaccination program was slow to pick up speed (The Diplomat, 15 June 2021). By the end of October 2021, Vietnam had recorded the fourth highest number of COVID-19 related deaths in Southeast Asia.

Christians have been affected by the general economic downturn just as they had previously benefitted from the economic progress. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, many people who had migrated to the cities are likely to 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 Christians from the ethnic minorities, are neglected economically and socially, but will feel this even more during the pandemic crisis. There have already been many cases where Christians have been excluded by local authorities from various government relief programs. On the other hand, living in rural and remote areas may benefit them, since viruses are probably less likely to reach them.

Men remain the primary breadwinners in Vietnam. Whilst Vietnam has one of the highest female workforce participation rates in the world, averaging at 72.5% in 2020 (The World Bank), men typically have [higher positions](#) than women in the workplace (VOA, April 16, 2019). Christian men face discrimination and harassment at work; some lose their jobs altogether because of their faith, placing severe economic pressures on the wider family. 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 (International Center for Research on Women - ICRW 2015).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343) and the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kinh (Viet) 85.7%, Tay 1.9%, Thai 1.8%, Muong 1.5%, Khmer 1.5%, Mong 1.2%, Nung 1.1%, Hoa 1%, other 4.3% (2009 est.)
- **Main languages:** Vietnamese (official), some English, French, Chinese, Khmer, mountain area languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 36.6%
- **Literacy rate:** 95% (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 the World Bank:

- **Age distribution:** People under the age of 14: 23.2%; People of 65 years and above: 7.9%. Vietnam is ageing fast.
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 110%; the enrolment rate is 115.4%.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 2.27%, the rate of vulnerable employment 52.3% (modelled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's Migration Agency in Vietnam ([IOM](#), accessed 9 July 2021), work migration from rural into urban areas in Vietnam has been the rule and an estimated 25-30% of the urban population consists of migrants. An estimated three million Vietnamese are living abroad and more than 500,000 are resident abroad as temporary workers.

According to the UN's Global Human Development Indicators (HDI):

- **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, reli-

gious 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. With the arrival of COVID-19, such protests have 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. As the World Bank states, the COVID-19 crisis has also left a lasting impact on households, with 45% of households reporting a lower level of income in January 2021 than in January 2020. 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 possible climate change) 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.

According to the World Bank data referred to above, 86% of the population considered poor belong to ethnic minorities. This is a telling figure, since these groups are not only neglected because they are living in remote areas and are considered somewhat backward. Many Hmong and other minorities are targeted by programs from international donors and churches, but they are still [struggling](#) (UCA News, 26 October 2020). 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 them in their difficult economic and social status, although there are some social and economic development projects taking place. COVID-19, if it reaches these communities, has the potential to worsen their situation considerably.

Whilst some people groups in Vietnam reportedly once had an ancient matriarchy (Le Minh Khai history, 21 March 2014), it has entrenched patriarchal norms. Despite socialist ideals of equality, women bear an unequal load of domestic work and Christian women can face severe forms of pressure and violence. Within marriages, women can face oppression and threats of divorce from their husbands, reinforcing the feeling that they are second-class citizens. As women and girls are socially in a weaker position than men, young women and girls are more at risk of [sexual abuse](#), including rape (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 31 August 2020). Sources report that young wo-

men are at particular risk when in police custody and in rural areas. Lockdowns caused by 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 ([OECD Vietnam](#), 2019/20).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 72.9% penetration – survey date: December 2020
- **Facebook usage:** 72.9% penetration – survey date: December 2020

According to the World Bank:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 141.2 per 100 people (2021)

Whilst the gender gap in SIM ownership is almost non-existent in Vietnam, there was a modest 5% gender gap in Internet usage as of 2016 (GSMA, 2016). As such, in comparison to neighboring countries, Vietnamese women are well connected to the digital world. According to Georgetown, 68.6% of women have access to a mobile phone (Georgetown, 2019/20 data).

According to Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020:

- "Internet freedom declined to an all time low in Vietnam, as the government continued to impose stringent controls over the country's online environment. In an effort to scrub any trace of critical or 'toxic' speech online, the state continued mandating companies to remove content, suspended online newspapers, and imposed draconian criminal sentences for online expression. A deliberate disruption to connectivity amid a violent land dispute, as well as a reported throttling of Facebook's local servers by state-owned telecommunications companies, further constrained internet freedom. Vietnam is a one-party state, dominated for decades by the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Although some independent candidates are technically allowed to run in legislative elections, most are banned in practice. Freedom of expression, religious freedom, and civil society activism are tightly restricted." Consequently, Freedom House categorizes Vietnam as "Not free" and its score decreased by two points.

Vietnam struggles to keep online dissent in check, as the country is among the top ten in having the highest number of Facebook members - a reported 66.7 million (World Population Review, 2021). Vietnam's June 2018 law on cyber security forces Internet companies such as Facebook, Google and Youtube to store their users' data in Vietnam itself and open offices there, leaving the very active Christian (especially Catholic) community barely any freedom (International-LaCroix, 28 July 2018). According to a report by Amnesty International, these Internet companies are complicit in censorship and repression (Amnesty International, 1 December 2020).

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).

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, as could be seen in the example of "Revival Ekklesia Mission" (REM) church in Ho Chi Minh City, when it became one of the infection centers of COVID-19 (Morning Star News, 15 June 2021). However, the state's control of media messaging became evident, when a more recent outbreak at the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South's Institute of Bible and Theology in Ho Chi Minh City, did not create such a high-profile backlash (Morning Star News, 30 July 2021).

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, 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. Although there are no longer any active fighting insurgency groups in existence, the authorities are still keeping very tight control over these regions and access is very difficult. These minorities are often Protestant Christians, especially those from the Hmong minority.

Trends analysis

1) Old Communist Party policy continues, despite some new leaders

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, Communist Party leaders at various levels prioritized getting COVID-19 under control, but the action against the Revival Ekklesia Mission (REM) church shows that they continue to regard churches as a dangerous sector in society easily capable of mobilizing masses of people. The REM church was singled out and dealt with strictly, even though there have been other infection hotspots, too. 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. 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 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 scapegoated, 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). Given that with Brunei (in 2021) and Cambodia (in 2022) - close allies of China - hold the rotating presidency of ASEAN, no easing of tension or progress can be expected along this avenue.

2) Trade agreements continue to ignore 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](#). Only time will tell if and how the human rights mechanisms anchored in it will improve the situation, e.g. of the explicitly mentioned freedom of religion. It seems likely that this issue will continue to take a [backseat](#), at least from the Communist Party's point of view (Voice of Vietnam, 31 May 2021). However, the economic decline caused by the COVID-19 crisis could induce the government to be more open for improving its human rights record.

Whichever way Vietnam develops, as long as the Communist Party rules the country, Christians will be viewed with suspicion and linked to foreign forces. 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 - especially during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath.

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: older and more male - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-fallout-from-vietnams-communist-party-congress/>
- Political and legal landscape: changes - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/18/idle-leadership-at-vietnams-13th-communist-party-congress/>
- Political and legal landscape: local level - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/01/pham-minh-chinh-potential-to-shape-vietnams-political-system/>
- Political and legal landscape: international arbitration - <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/what-would-a-vietnam-south-china-sea-legal-challenge-mean/>
- Political and legal landscape: fishing boat - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnam-protests-beijings-sinking-of-south-china-sea-boat-idUSKBN21M072>
- Political and legal landscape: important role - <https://www.prcleader.org/mastro>
- 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: unilateral fishing ban - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/asean-defense-ministers-plus-meeting-06162021181503.html>
- Political and legal landscape: same inheritance, marriage, divorce and custody rights - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/VN.pdf>

- Political and legal landscape: independent review - <https://vietnam.un.org/en/92405-launch-review-report-ten-year-implementation-gender-equality-law-viet-nam>
- Political and legal landscape: 26.8% - <https://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/10-year-implementation-of-law-on-gender-equality-reviewed-27358.html>
- Political and legal landscape: marriage laws banning the practice, - <http://un-act.org/publication/viet-nams-law-on-marriage-and-family-2014/>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/vietnam/>
- 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/countries/countries-with-mandatory-military-service/>
- Religious landscape description: official government census - <https://vietnam.unfpa.org/en/news/results-population-and-housing-census-2019>
- Religious landscape description: 2010 Global Religious Landscape report - <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>
- Economic landscape: UNDP's full 2020 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf>
- 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: removed - <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/4/16/us-removes-vietnam-switzerland-from-currency-manipulator-list>
- Economic landscape: two deaths - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-vietnam/vietnam-reports-first-coronavirus-death-after-months-of-successful-curbs-idUSKCN24W06K>
- Economic landscape: the number of citizens testing positive spiked - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/what-explains-vietnams-current-covid-19-struggles/>
- Economic landscape: higher positions - <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/men-still-have-edge-communist-vietnams-gender-equal-system?amp>
- Economic landscape: 2013 Land Law - <https://vietnamlawenglish.blogspot.com/2013/11/vietnam-land-law-2013-law-no-452013qh13.html>
- Economic landscape: often denied - https://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/images/Toolkit_4_0.pdf
- Economic landscape: their - https://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/images/Toolkit_4_0.pdf
- Economic landscape: inheritance - https://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/images/Toolkit_4_0.pdf
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- 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: struggling - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnamese-priests-reach-out-to-struggling-hmong-villagers/90020>
- Social and cultural landscape: sexual abuse - <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/42904/sexual-violence-in-vietnam-issue-of-the-present-but-rooted-from-the-past>
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- Social and cultural landscape: OECD - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/VN.pdf>
- 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: 1 August 2020 - <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/eu-vietnam-free-trade-agreement>
- Trends analysis: backseat - <https://vov.vn/en/politics/vietnam-cannot-grant-free-reign-to-operations-of-religious-groups-862179.vov>

WWL 2022: 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	7,375,000	80.5
Protestant	1,620,000	17.7
Independent	551,000	6.0
Unaffiliated	18,400	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-405,000	-4.4
Total	9,159,400	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,671,000	18.2
Renewalist movement	810,000	8.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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 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 visible in the election of bishops. Protestants are split in 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 and an estimated two-thirds of all Protestants come from a tribal and ethnic minority background. Even being state-recognized does not protect against intervention, as has been shown when the state denied the ECVN-S permission to convene its traditional congress, as is explained below (see: *Pressure in Block 5 Church sphere*).

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: radio broadcasts - <https://www.febc.org/2020/04/25/the-hmong-story/>

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Vietnam

Reporting period

01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Vietnam: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	71	19
WWL 2021	72	19
WWL 2020	72	21
WWL 2019	70	20
WWL 2018	69	18

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

The drop in overall score in WWL 2022 was caused by the fact that fewer cases of violence were reported. However, it should be noted that reporting, particularly from ethnic minority regions, was hindered by COVID-19 restrictions. The score for pressure in the *spheres of life* remained by and large stable; with small changes in *Private* and *Family life*. 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 Christians enjoy even further.

Persecution engines

Vietnam: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Very weak
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
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 exercises a high level of pressure on all Christians. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community in the country, but government authorities always 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. The government is particularly suspicious of the ethnic minorities who live in the central and northern highlands (who are also known as ["Montagnards"](#)) (Radio Free Asia, 23 October 2018). 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.

It is estimated that two-thirds of all Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including minority groups in the north-western highlands (H'mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the central highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M'nong, among others). In a speech in February 2012 summarizing the government's religious policy goals, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc encouraged stronger monitoring on matters related to land and property rights and urged continued government "management" of Protestantism in order to limit its extraordinary growth. Overall, the deputy prime minister stressed the need to avoid religious "hot spots" forming and to counter "enemy forces" that use religion to "destroy our nation". These words have guided the policy ever since and counter-measures may involve the use of violence, either explicitly by police raids or implicitly by (silently) approving of violence against religious communities and venues (including the use of violent criminal groups).

Although the new law on religion, which came into force on 1 January 2018, brought some improvements on paper, its implementation has not yet had any positive effect in practice. Since the predominant goal of the Communist authorities is to keep all groups and organizations in check in order to maintain their own level of power, no real changes can be expected. Running Christian churches and registering them will be at least as cumbersome as it is now. Also, testifying 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.

Clan oppression (Medium)

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. This pattern can also be observed among the majority Kinh population, but in less intensive ways.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium)

Especially targeting the Catholic Church, there have been (and still are) incidents of land-grabbing. These 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, due to the pandemic this has become less the case.

Drivers of persecution

Vietnam:									
Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
				MEDIUM		VERY STRONG		MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Government officials				Weak		Strong		Medium	Strong
Ethnic group leaders				Medium		Weak		-	Very weak
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs				Medium		-		-	Weak
One's own (extended) family				Strong		-		-	-
Political parties				-		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. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". 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". If violence is needed, the government prefers to hire local thugs, who are not directly connected to them, but locally known as "Red Flag groups", often to prepare and implement expropriations and confiscations.
- **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 this worship practice, 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 – giving Christians beatings, 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 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 sell plots of land belonging to a church, or communal land from ethnic minority Christians for making a profit.
- **Normal citizens (Weak):** Normally, citizens do not act as drivers of persecution, except when they are linked to the Communist Party or act in concert with the family against converts. An important exception are the 'Red Flag Associations', mentioned above. However, due to the pandemic there have been no reports of violence originating from such groups in the WWL 2022 reporting period.

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.

Christian communities and how they are affected

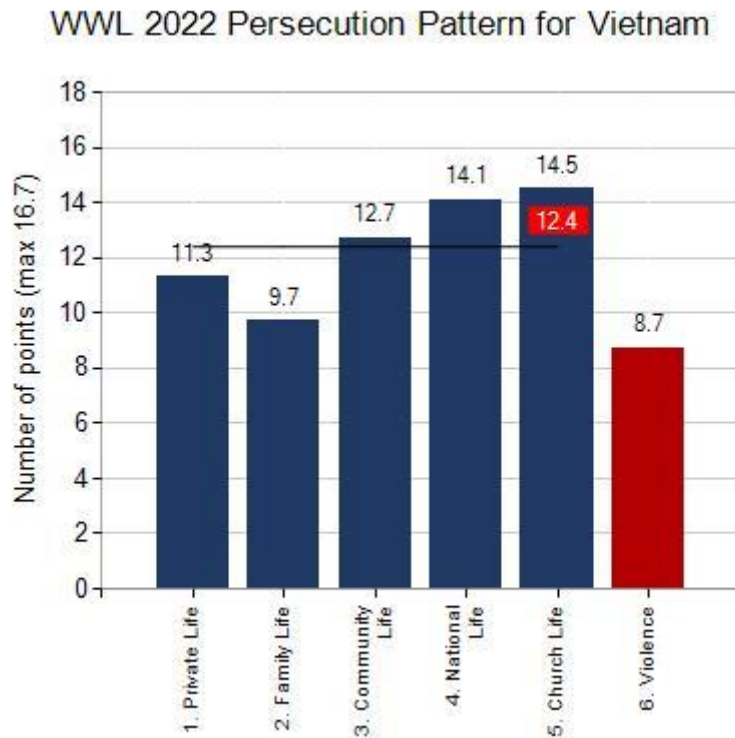
Communities of expatriate Christians: As they cannot mix with local churches in rural areas, which make up the most part of Vietnam, expatriate Christians are involuntarily isolated. This category includes foreign workers from Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines, who face pressure by being monitored.

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 H'mong, the Communist authorities are particularly suspicious of them.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category mainly consists of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. Baptists, Mennonites, Churches of Christ, Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) churches and many others gathering in house churches. They are closely monitored and face discrimination at various levels of government and society.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Vietnam shows:

- Pressure on Christians in Vietnam has remained very high; the average pressure stayed at the same level of 12.4 points as in WWL 2021.
- Pressure is strongest in the Church and National 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 new religion law with its cumbersome requirements and implementation, and an ongoing suspicion towards Christians in general and converts as well as to all ethnic and religious minorities in particular.
- Violence against Christians decreased from 10 points in WWL 2021 to 8.7 points in WWL 2022. 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". Due to the COVID-19 crisis, which only broke out in full in March 2021, it was very difficult and often impossible to get information from all parts of the country.

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 2022 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). (3.00 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 violence. 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 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."

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (2.75 points)

Whereas conversions have not been banned by law, they have been 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 and is strongest in rural areas.

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.). (2.75 points)

As one country expert put it: "Most pastors and leaders are extremely cautious about putting up Facebook pages although some registered churches now do this. The Vietnamese Christians know exactly what limitations they need to self-enforce in order to stay safe. Online teaching is now available on many websites, however, well known pastors stay away from a direct presence on the internet." In this respect, it should also be kept in mind that, in the WWL 2022 reporting period, the social media giants have been accused of [assisting the authorities](#) in cracking down on any (perceived) dissent (UCA News, 2 December 2020).

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (2.75 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, for this 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-believing 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 puts their positions or jobs at risk.

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 and about whom they speak to, when seeking to share 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." In a rare case in the WWL 2022 reporting period, Christian students won the legal right in court to [attend school](#) (ADF International, 16 December 2020). But even when they are allowed to attend school, they are easy targets for being bullied by peers and receive a stricter treatment by teachers. In the WWL 2022 reporting

period, there were cases of this happening to schoolchildren as young as eight years old. At times, non-Christian parents do not allow their children to play with Christian children.

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. (3.00 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. 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 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (2.75 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, and there is a major fear of angering the spirits. Burials can also become a problem in mixed marriages between Buddhists and Christians. On the more technical side of the question, it is often difficult for Christians to have a burial plot of their own, although this is less of a problem for Catholic Christians.

Block 2 additional information:

One country expert explained the 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 authorities to issue the relevant documents.

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 the monitoring of Christian activities and the authorities encourage the use of neighborhood watch systems, a classical 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. Online activities are also heavily monitored, as are the phonedlines of some church leaders.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 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. 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 3.13: 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 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 3.9: 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. Cases have been reported where school principals threatened converts with expulsion. 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. This narrative may well increase because of the economic challenges coming with the COVID-19 crisis. 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."

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." In one report from the WWL 2022 reporting period, after a natural disaster, lists with names of beneficiaries of help were only given to charities after Christian families had been deleted from them. Denying access to shared water wells is also a typical discrimination. But this can even take place the other way around: When a church built a well with water free of charge for everyone, they were boycotted by the villagers. Incidents of discrimination and denial of COVID-19-related assistance have become known in the WWL 2022 reporting period.

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". The new comprehensive "Law on Religion and Belief" came into effect on 1 January 2018.

Assessing the application of the new law, the US State Department's 2020 IRFR states (p.13): "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 asked for 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."

The Communist Party's understanding of freedom of religion has been well explained in a [report](#) published in May 2021 (The Vietnamese, 5 May 2021). A country expert sums up the new law

as follows: "The new Law on Religion provides that there shall be freedom of religion but then provides a wide range of reasons it can be restricted, including, for instance, 'national unity' and 'solidarity'. Essentially the Constitution and the Law on Religion provide that there shall be freedom of religion only to the extent the authorities at any given time think it a good idea."

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Christians are widely regarded as unpatriotic citizens who work against the government and its Communist goals and ideology. Therefore they have to be controlled and discriminated against. One incident in the reporting period of WWL 2022 took place when Christians applied for a government-sponsored water tank program and were excluded. Members of the Communist party are not allowed to profess a religion. As the US State Department's 2020 IRFR noted (p.12): "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."

One of the most visible fields 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 them that, even for the most simple of requests, they must renounce their "American religion".

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) and churches were [blamed](#) for COVID-19 outbreaks, especially on social media, although the authorities curbed such reactions in a second case (Morning Star News, 30 July 2021).

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. A country expert explained pointedly: "In a way this 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." It will be interesting to witness the outcome of the [criminal investigations](#) against the REM church and its pastor because of a COVID-19 outbreak (Morning Star News, 23 June 2021).

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 in interrogations that the harassment would cease if (and only if) ethnic minority Christians leave the house churches and join officially registered churches. Movements of Christian leaders are monitored and access to villages in the northern and central part of Vietnam is restricted, however, the restrictions surrounding the serious outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2021 brought travelling to a standstill for the WWL 2022 reporting period.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

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. For churches in rural areas, the monitoring is even stronger, including neighbors and village leaders also checking on the church. Registered churches submit to the rules of the Committee on Religious Affairs, which is widely known to be composed of 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".

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 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, and 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.

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

As a new Catholic seminary has been set up in Hanoi (see above: *Specific examples of positive developments*), the [denial](#) of permission for the ECVN (S) to hold its church congress in December 2020 has been a strong reminder who in the end 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.

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. 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.

Block 5 additional information:

The issue of church building permits is 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. 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 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. It is also very difficult to obtain permission for setting up courses for training. If Christians speak out against the government two-child-policy, for which abortions are an important tool, they will face severe opposition. 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 5 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. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. 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 WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Vietnam: Violence Block question		WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	1	2
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10	10*
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	10	18
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?	1	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)?	15	29
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?	9	13
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?	5	0
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100*	100*
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	100*

For the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** According to reports, one ethnic tribal Christian was killed during the reporting period. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- **Christians attacked:** In several incidents, at least 15 Christians were attacked, sometimes in connection with police raids on churches and church compounds. Due COVID-19 travel restrictions fully implemented, not all regions could be reached for information, so the true number may well be closer to 100.
- **Christians arrested:** Several pastors and church leaders were detained. For security reasons, no details can be published.

- **Churches attacked:** In more than ten incidents, church buildings have been attacked and/or destroyed, mainly house churches. Among them were also house churches, as referred to in the section above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period*. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** There have been several attacks on houses where Christians live and against their businesses.

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 2018 - WWL 2022	
Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	12.4
2021	12.4
2020	12.4
2019	12.3
2018	12.3

The table above shows how the average level of pressure on Christians has been stable at a very high level over the last five reporting periods. It has levelled off at 12.3/12.4 points since WWL 2018.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

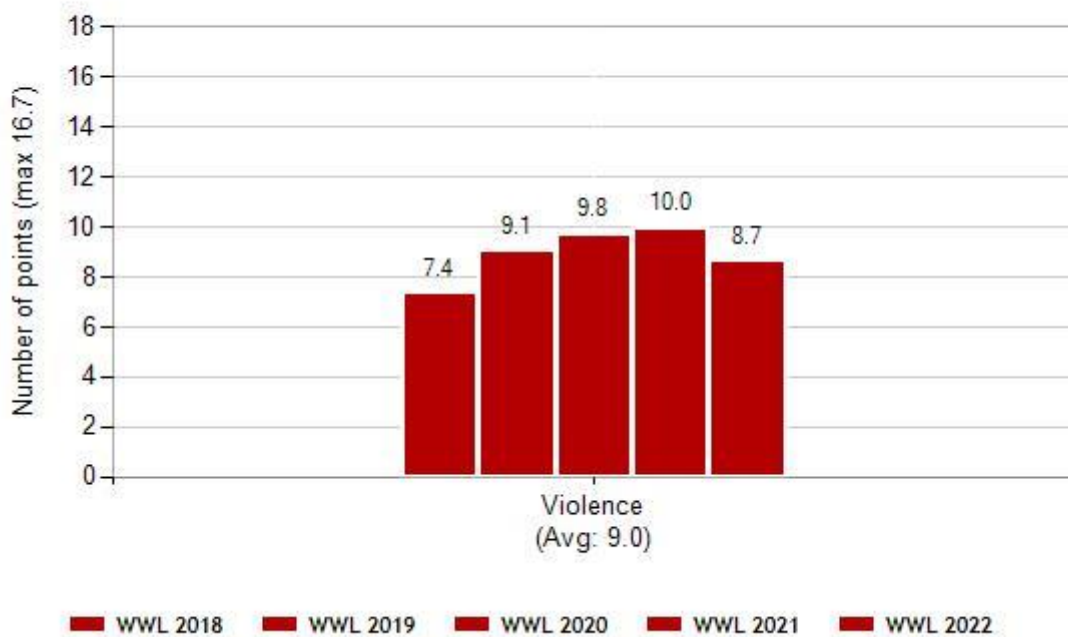
The chart below shows that the pressure on Christians in all *spheres of life* has consistently been at a very high level or higher (except in *Family life*) over the last five reporting periods. The pressure in *Church life* has now plateaued at the extreme level of 14.5 points. This reflects the severity of the state restrictions, not least by the introduction of the new law on religion in 2018 and tighter internet restrictions. The pressure in *National life* has also remained at an extremely high level in WWL 2022.

WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern for Vietnam
(Spheres of life)



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern for Vietnam
(Violence)



Persecution in Vietnam has always involved violence. The chart above shows the very high scores over all 5 years, 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 decrease in score to 8.7 points in WWL 2022 may not necessarily mean there have been less violent incidents occurring.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions
Political and Legal	Forced divorce
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Gender equality has been a topic given much attention in Vietnam. Unlike so many countries where women are at a significant economic disadvantage, Vietnam has one of the highest participation rates of women in the workplace. 79% of women are in the workforce, compared to 86% of men (The Economist, 8 June 2019). Nevertheless, women bear an unequal share of domestic work in the home. As in much of Communist Asia, women are traditionally expected to care for their parents, which requires a significant investment of time and energy. Despite socialist ideals of equality, Confucian values remain, embodied in sayings such as “1 boy is something, 10 girls is nothing” (Inside Asia, accessed 24 November 2021). 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 (VN Express, 19 July 2020).

Within this context, female Christians face pressure both for their faith and their gender. Some Christian women, particularly converts and those in tribal cultures, may be under pressure in the home from family members. A country expert explains: “Mostly when the wife or the child in a family converts to Christ, she would be kicked out of the house, have her inheritance taken back, [and be] mocked by relatives.” For example, within marriages, women face oppression, violence and threats of divorce from their husbands. This reinforces the feeling that they are unequal, creating fear and despondency.

Christian women and girls continue to be victims of sexual assault for their faith, in ongoing situations resulting from forced marriage and the trafficking of brides to China among Hmong women (in northern provinces). Reports also indicate the targeting of ethnic and religious minorities (Global Human Rights Defence, 6 October 2021).

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Economic harassment via fines; Imprisonment by government
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Although men generally have [higher positions than women](#) in the workplace (International Labor Organization), Christian men also face discrimination and harassment at work, with some losing their jobs altogether because of their faith. Government officials have monitored and interfered with the work of known Christians. As men are the primary providers in Vietnam, this paralyses the whole family economically and weakens their place within society. If they are church leaders, their congregations are weakened and may even face closure.

Christian men in Vietnam are targets for arrest (on faith-related grounds) and abduction, causing many to flee their villages. According to a [2019 Amnesty International report](#), 128 prisoners of conscience were in prison at the time of publication, including several Catholic activists who were speaking out for religious freedom. Generally, once in custody, Christian detainees suffer harsh treatment, physical beatings and are put under pressure to renounce their Christian faith. A country expert recounts: “A brother was beaten by authorities after he and other believers were caught doing Bible study in his home and they were arrested where they spent a day and a night in the prison.” Male Christians can also expect physical violence from villagers or the authorities, even risking death for their faith.

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

According to the US State Department’s IRFR 2020 (p.19):

- "From June to October, independent Hoa Hao followers in An Giang reported that local authorities and state-recognized Hoa Hao Buddhists groups in Phu Tan District, An Giang Province, advocated tearing down the 100-year-old An Hoa Pagoda, one of the first independent Hoa Hao pagodas founded by Prophet Huynh Phu So, citing a purported 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."

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. 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 the Human Rights Watch 2021 report (HRW 2021): "Unrecognized religious groups, including Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Christian, and Buddhist groups, face constant surveillance, harassment, and intimidation. Followers of independent religious group are subject to public criticism, forced renunciation of faith, detention, interrogation, torture, and imprisonment."

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Communist and post-Communist oppression - blended with Dictatorial paranoia

The headline of the aforementioned [article](#) by the Voice of Vietnam (31 May 2021) sums up the prevailing sense of the Communist Party and authorities: "Vietnam cannot grant free reign to operations of religious groups". Civil rights and freedom of religion will remain elusive and *Communist oppression* will continue to be heavily felt by Christians for the time-being. This pressure may even increase if relations with Vietnam's big neighbor China warm up again, what is at least possible after Vietnam asked for China's help in vaccinating its population. Ethnic minorities will continue to be watched with suspicion, especially when they are following 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.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: "Montagnards - <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/vietnam-montagnards-10232018155849.html>
- 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.). (2.75 points): assisting the authorities - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/tech-giants-accused-of-helping-vietnams-online-crackdown/90536>
- Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.00 points): attend school - <https://adfinternational.org/news/teenagers-win-legal-struggle-to-attend-school-in-vietnam/>

- 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 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (4.00 points): blamed - <https://mailchi.mp/morningstarnews.org/mixed-messages-in-vietnam-amid-covid-19>
- Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (4.00 points): criminal investigations - <https://mailchi.mp/morningstarnews.org/criminal-investigation-of-church-in-vietnam-over-covid-19-confirmed>
- 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-churchs-congress/90469>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: higher positions than women - <https://www.ilo.org/hanoi/Areasofwork/equality-and-discrimination/lang--en/index.htm>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: 2019 Amnesty International report - <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA4103032019ENGLISH.pdf%22%20/>
- Future outlook: article - <https://english.vov.vn/en/politics/vietnam-cannot-grant-free-reign-to-operations-of-religious-groups-862179.vov>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

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