

Table of Contents

- ***COVID-19 leads to prosecution of house church group***
 - ***About the persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam***
 - ***The collision of religion and the Vietnamese State***
-

COVID-19 leads to prosecution of house church group

Organization's registration suspended.

Morning Star News (02.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3g8CIWV> - A house-church organization in Vietnam is facing government prosecution and community hate due to COVID-19, sources said.

A couple who attended the meeting place of the Revival Ekklesia Mission (REM), an independent, charismatic house-church organization headquartered in Ho Chi Minh City, went to the Gia Dinh General Hospital on May 26 not feeling well. Authorities had imposed a ban on meetings of more than 20 people the last two weeks of May, and by then the church had gone mostly online, with only seven people present, according to REM leader the Rev. Vo Xuan Loan.

When the couple tested positive for COVID-19, Vietnam's highly organized tracing system went into action. By Tuesday (June 1), officials had identified 211 other positive cases connected with the REM center.

Infections had also spread to seven other provinces. Nearly 200,000 residents in 16 districts of Ho Chi Minh City were "associated with this cluster," according to the HCMC Center for Disease Control. Some 50,000 people in the vicinity were to be tested.

Fallout was swift. On Sunday (May 30), the REM's registration was "temporarily suspended," and on Tuesday (June 1), local security police announced the group was under criminal investigation for spreading COVID-19. The deputy minister of Home Affairs said if serious violations were found, REM would suffer much stiffer penalties, including the possibility of "permanent erasure."

Authorities have locked down Ho Chi Minh City over this and other hotspots, and foreign incoming flights have been suspended. Authorities in Hanoi immediately tested people at REM's two Hanoi branches and found negative results, yet all religious gatherings in the capital have been shuttered effective immediately.

Vietnamese media, all under government control, are rife with negative reports, rumors and innuendo about the organization.

The headquarters of the REM is the home of its co-directors, the Rev. Vo Xuan Loan and her husband, the Rev. Phuong Van Tan, and their family. The organization was locally "registered" to carry out religious activities, but this status falls far short of being "legally recognized."

Both Catholics and evangelicals have been appreciative of and compliant with Vietnam's strict and largely successful measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This REM

hotspot, though it had not violated limits on gatherings, appears to have provided officials an opportunity to come down on house churches.

The deputy minister of Home Affairs, Gen. Vu Chien Thang, who also serves as the chairman of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA), asserted that the REM was not a church and that its leaders could not call themselves “reverend” or “pastor.” A GCRA bulletin issued on Friday (May 28) to all provincial and city People’s Committees under federal jurisdiction required local authorities to nearly single out house churches for inspection and education regarding COVID-19 regulations.

Christians fear that authorities, with limited goodwill toward evangelicals at best, are using the REM outbreak as a reason to sternly caution religious bodies and leaders to follow COVID-19 restrictions, but with extra severity toward house churches. In a narrow application of the Law on Religion, Deputy Prime Minister Truong Hoa Binh asserted, “REM is only a gathering point, not a religion,” contrary to its practice as a faith community acknowledged by Christians and even state media.

The Rev. Loan, hospitalized with COVID-19 and on oxygen, composed an emotional, open letter of apology full of remorse to all affected for being an unwitting center of a COVID-19 hotspot. The letter also sincerely thanks authorities for all they are doing, including caring for those who contracted COVID-19 through the REM hotspot. In an interview published on Monday (May 31) in the *Dan Viet* newspaper, the Rev. Loan promised to pay for all government services and medical costs and reimburse everyone who suffered economic loss in connection with the REM COVID-19 spread.

Some Christian leaders are pushing back. A Methodist pastor who says he represents several other denominations wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh begging for clemency and compassion for the REM instead of hostility and prosecution.

He points out that REM is a victim, not a willing or careless initiator. Pastors of other denominations have made it known that they are scrambling to write another supportive open letter. In a letter on Monday (May 31) to Catholic priests, Ho Chi Minh City Archbishop Giuse Nguyen Nang stated that REM is a victim of COVID-19 like so many others and should be treated with brotherly compassion and care, not criminal suspicion.

The Province of our Queen of Martyrs order published an article in Vietnamese on the Da Minh Viet Nam website on Monday (May 31), entitled, “Don’t accuse, rather empathize with the Revival Ekklesia Mission.” It describes a vicious social media campaign against the REM and its members, including attacks on their faith.

The article ask why the REM should be so publicly singled out when much larger hotspot sources previously went without mention. It concludes with this appeal: “At times like this we need more love for each other and forgiveness of one another, not accusations and slander. Let’s support each other in prayer and encourage one another to overcome this current hardship.”

Christians doubt that Vietnamese authorities will hear this message.

Vietnam ranked 19th on Christian support organization Open Doors’ 2021 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Photo : edarabia.com

About the persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (11.05.2021) – No less than 36 believers of all faiths are currently behind bars in Vietnam because of their religious activities. [HRWF's Database of FORB Prisoners](#) comprises of 2 Catholics and 7 Protestants, 6 Hoa Hao and 21 An Dan Dai Dao Buddhists. One ADDD Buddhist was sentenced to life imprisonment while the others got prison terms ranging from 10 to 17 years.

As of July 2018, the US government estimated the total population to be 97 million in Vietnam. According to statistics released by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), 26.4% of the population is categorised as religious believers: 14.91% identify as Buddhist, 7.35% Roman Catholic, 1.09% Protestant, 1.16% Cao Dai, and 1.47% Hoa Hao Buddhist.¹

In Vietnam, government restrictions have greatly limited all religious activities for both registered and non-registered groups. In 1981, six years after the Communists took power, the government unified several Buddhist organisations under the umbrella group *Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam* (BSV) which was placed under its authority.

The *Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam* (UBSV), which was founded in 1964 to unite 11 of the 14 Buddhist groups, refused to pledge allegiance to the Communist regime and was consequently banned. The UBSV was denied the official authorisation needed to operate. The UBSV Patriarch, Thich Quang Do, who had been under house arrest since his appointment in 1999, died in February 2020 at the age of 92.

Religious teachings are considered incompatible with communist ideology, and any form of assembly is perceived as a threat to the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Thus, the government attempts to maintain strict control over all religious groups. Buddhist leaders who refuse allegiance to the Communist Party are harassed and imprisoned while their groups are declared illegal or banned.

Two groups are particularly persecuted: An Dan Dai Dao and Hoa Hao Buddhists.

An Dan Dai Dao (ADDD) is a Buddhist group founded in 1969 that was quickly outlawed and persecuted after the Communist takeover in 1975. Most of ADDD properties have now been expropriated, and its followers were forced into hiding. The leaders of ADDD have long been treated as criminals, including Phan Van Thu — its founder and leader — who was accused of working for the US and intending to 'rebel' against the regime.²

¹ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on International Religious Freedom: Vietnam 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/>.

² "Update on Political Prisoner Phan Van Thu from His Family, March 2020," The 88 Project, Kayleedolen, March 22, 2020, accessed March 2020. <https://the88project.org/update-on-political-prisoner-phan-van-thu-from-his-family-march2020/>.

Phat Giao Hoa Hao (known as Hoa Hao)³ was established on 4 July 1939 by Buddhist reformer Huynh Phu So in the southern Vietnamese province of An Giang. Hoa Hao Buddhism is described as 'an amalgam of Buddhism, ancestor worship, animistic rites, elements of Confucian doctrine, and indigenous Vietnamese practices'.⁴ The government officially recognises the Hoa Hao religion, but imposes harsh controls because it is an independently organised religious group. Since they are not state-sanctioned, they are denied registration and the government cracks down hard on their gatherings and temples.

An update of the [Legal Framework of Religious freedom in Vietnam](#) was published in September 2020 by Vo Quoc Hung Thinh (Legal Initiatives for Vietnam).

Buddhists in Prison in Vietnam

Two Buddhist groups are particularly persecuted because they refuse to swear allegiance to the Communist Party: **An Dan Dai Dao** and **Hoa Hao Buddhists**.

Buddhists behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 May 2021, HRWF documented **36 cases** of detained Buddhists in its Prisoners' Database.⁵ Of these cases, 21 were members of the An Dan Dai Dao group and 21 of them were arrested in 2012. Almost all of these individuals were charged with subversion under Article 79 and accused of writing documents critical of the government.

The remaining six cases involve members of the Hoa Hao Buddhist group. Five were arrested in 2017, with one arrest in 2011. In most of these cases, the charges were 'causing public unrest' under Article 245.

Articles of the Penal Code

Buddhist followers were charged under these articles of the 1999 Vietnamese Penal Code:

Article 79 stipulates that those who carry out activities, establish or join organisations with the intent to overthrow the people's administration 'shall be sentenced to between twelve and twenty years of imprisonment, life imprisonment or capital punishment'.

Article 88 states that conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, such as distorting and/or defaming the people's administration, spreading fabricated news to create confusion, is punishable with 'between three and twelve years of imprisonment'.

Article 245 outlines that those who 'foment public disorder' shall be sentenced to a fine and non-custodial reform for up to two years or between three months and two years' imprisonment. If the offender used weapons during the offence, they 'shall be sentenced to between two and seven years of imprisonment'.

Article 258 stipulates that those who 'abuse the rights to freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of belief, religion, assembly, association and other democratic freedoms

³ Australian Government, *Country Advice: Vietnam*, Refugee Review Tribunal (VNM38054) February 3, 2011. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4df9ef982.pdf>.

⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Hoa Hao," Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., June 18, 2014, accessed May 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hoa-Hao-Vietnamese-religious-movement>.

⁵ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Buddhists, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

to infringe upon the interests of the State' shall be subject to a warning, non-custodial reform for up to three years or a prison term of between six months and three years.⁶

In most cases, the government liberally applies Article 79, which carries the harshest sentences, as a deterrent against those it perceives to disobey its rule and to assert control. It also demonstrates that references to national security plays a central role in the detention of many religious followers. By invoking vaguely worded provisions in the Penal Code such as 'subversion' or 'abuse of democratic freedoms', the government incriminates and silences Buddhists who practice their freedom of religion or belief outside of state-sanctioned religious organisations.

International advocacy

The **European Parliament** has regularly followed Vietnam's overall dire human rights record, in particular violations of FoRB.

In its [November 2018 resolution on Vietnam](#), the European Parliament noted that religious freedom is repressed in the country and that non-recognised religions, such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, continue to suffer severe religious persecution. It called on the government to remove all restrictions on freedom of religion and to put an end to the harassment of religious communities. It further urged the government to bring its legislation into conformity with international human rights standards and obligations.

On 21 January 2021, the European Parliament adopted [a resolution on human rights in Vietnam](#). It noted that "on 1 January 2018, Vietnam's first ever law on belief and religion came into effect, obliging all religious groups in the country to register with the authorities and to inform them about their activities." It however remained concerned about the fact that "the authorities can reject or hinder registration applications and ban religious activities which they arbitrarily deem to be contrary to the 'national interest', 'public order' or 'national unity';" and it called on the Government of Vietnam to remove all restrictions on freedom of religion and to put an end to the harassment of religious communities.

In October 2020, the **German Parliament** published [a 162-page report](#) about religious freedom in 30 countries in which it devoted a section to Vietnam. It was discussed at [a hearing of the Parliament on 14 April 2021](#).

Every year since 2002, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) has recommended that Vietnam be designated as a [Country of Particular Concern \(CPC\)](#) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The collision of religion and the Vietnamese State

By Aerolyne Reed

The Vietnamese (05.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3o3q51O> - The Separation of Church and State is a concept that has been accepted and promulgated by several democratic

⁶ "Vietnam Penal Code" (No. 15/1999/QH10) approved December 21, 1999, *National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Xth legislature*, 1999.
https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/vnm/penal-code_html/Vietnam_Penal_Code_1999.pdf.

countries in the modern era. While the seeds of this idea were planted during the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, it was only during the early years of the establishment of the United States of America that this idea started to blossom.

While this concept is often construed to simply mean that religion should not intertwine with politics, the more comprehensive meaning is as follows: "it is the right to practice any faith, or to have no faith [at all]." As such, the state has no right to interject, interfere, or hinder an individual's practice of his or her beliefs; ideally, no laws or statutes will be passed that will limit a person's free exercise of his or her faith. The Vietnamese Communist Party, however, has chosen to take a radically different approach towards religion.

Legal Initiatives For Vietnam (LIV) released its legal research in September 2020, penned by Vo Quoc Hung Thinh, in which the author presented the many difficulties, challenges, and hurdles that religious organizations face when they deal with the Vietnamese state. The writer also highlights the existing institutionalized discrimination against religions in Vietnam and gives us a glimpse into how the state's direct interference affects believers as well.

Faith and Law

Several documents and resolutions have been passed by the VCP that perfectly illustrate its stance towards religious organizations.

Vo Quoc Hung Thinh noted in his research that in its *Resolution 297/CP Concerning Policy on Religion (1976)*, the Vietnamese government, at least on paper, claimed to acknowledge the right of freedom of religion and supposedly guaranteed equality under the law.

However, it also emphasized, "that religions shall not be 'exploited' to bring harm to the Socialist State." This resolution then states that the faithful "shall be educated to ensure the spirit of socialist patriotism" and that "[r]eactionary' elements hiding inside religions shall be eradicated."

This resolution seems to assume that religious organizations are going to be used to subvert state authority. And while it is possible for this to happen, this is not something specific for religion itself; any coalition or gathering of people can fulfill this role just as well or even better than a Sunday Bible Study group; to focus on religion is discriminatory and goes against the concept of equality under the law.

Vo Quoc Hung Thinh also noted in his legal research that *Resolution 40 -NQ/TW*, which focused on religion management in the new situation (October 1, 1981), mentioned several religions that existed in the former Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975) and discussed the "state of socialist enlightenment" among practitioners who belonged to them.

For instance, regarding the Catholic Church that existed in the former Republic of Vietnam, the current Vietnamese government believed that the followers of this religion were "vulnerable to anti-communist propaganda."

Another example would be that of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (UBSV). The resolution stated that the leaders of this religion were already somewhat "re-educated" but that the party needed "to abolish UBSV and unify Buddhism in Vietnam under the supervision of the Communist Party."

While this resolution document is quite outdated and old, through it, we can catch a glimpse of how the VCP deals with religious groups.

The Communist Party monitors both followers and spiritual leaders in Vietnam, gathers data about them, and directly interferes in the teachings and belief systems of religion. This runs contrary to the right of freedom of religion and the separation of church and state.

Vo also noted that *Resolution 25 – NQ/TW*, which focused on the National Central Committee on Religion Management (2003), was drafted after the Doi Moi era when Vietnam wanted to join the World Trade Organization.

This resolution, therefore, removed most of the aggressive language used in prior legislation but kept several “core principles” intact. This particular document stated that “any religion must be recognized by the State and religious activities shall be subject to [the] State’s regulations and supervision.” It also maintained that there were still “reactionary elements” hiding in various religious groups and that the government shall prepare to defeat any of them.

All three of these resolutions illustrate, that despite the passage of time, not much has changed in the way the VCP thinks about religious organizations. They are still seen as threats to the Party’s power, and as such, have to be destroyed or controlled. And despite what the VCP might claim, the Party does not respect freedom of belief nor provide these groups equal protection under the law.

Faith and Red Tape

For religions to be formally recognized in Vietnam, and for them to also have some semblance of protection against state forces, they have to register and be approved by the government.

Human Rights Watch reported in October 2020 that failure to do so can lead to the arrest, imprisonment, interrogation, and torture of the leaders or followers of these religions. Hence, for the sake of self-preservation, it is in their best interest to comply. However, this process is far from convenient.

In order to be recognized, religious groups in Vietnam first need to obtain a Certificate of Religion Operation. Five years later, they then need to formally apply for official recognition. Only upon completion of these two requirements are they, at least on paper, afforded all the rights, benefits, and protections that they should have been given 10 years earlier.

This process, which is explained in detail in *Vietnam’s Law on Religions and Beliefs 02/2016/QH14 (LBB)*, passed on November 18, 2016, is also vulnerable to abuse by the Vietnamese authorities.

LIV’s research paper also highlights the case of the religious group An Dan Dai Dao (ADDD), which was established in 1969. It is a sect of Buddhism which had a network of 14 temples and thousands of followers before 1975. After Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, the new ruling Vietnamese Communist Party accused ADDD of working with the Central Intelligence Agency.

ADDD was also not granted registration, which led to its properties being taken away by the government; their followers were also forced into hiding.

In 2003, adherents tried to jumpstart their religion once more due to the perceived reforms going on in Vietnam. However, they were once again persecuted by the state.

In 2013, Phan Van Thu, the leader of ADDD, was sentenced to life imprisonment while 21 other leaders were sentenced to a collective total of 299 years in prison and 105 years of house arrest. To this day, the ADDD situation holds the record of having the highest sentence ever imposed in a political-religious case in Vietnam.

Those incarcerated are currently dealing with abuse and maltreatment, and are faced with the very real possibility of death.

In denying the ADDD sect the right to register, the Vietnamese state branded the group as criminals and treated them as such despite ADDD's lack of involvement in any political activities.

The followers of this religion have faced persecution for more than 40 years for simply practicing their faith and holding firm to a belief they deem essential to their human existence. This situation casts a bright light on the black bleeding heart of the VCP and exposes the lengths the government is willing to go to destroy its own people.

Faith and Freedom

Even state-approved religious organizations have to constantly deal with the ever-watchful eye of the VCP.

LIV research also states that these organizations are required to get the state's permission and approval for various things such as hosting religious events whether inside or outside their designated place of worship or for something as simple as a change in leadership within their organizations.

The locations where religious structures can be built also require the state's consent. In effect, rather than portraying strength, the VCP presents itself as being unhealthily obsessed with religious groups, their leaders, and the many people who are part of them.

This is not at all surprising; as Marx, the father of the hammer and sickle, once stated "religion is the opium of the people."

In Communism, religion is seen as something undesirable, as something taboo, and as something that must be purged. We've seen this in the history of many Eastern and Central European countries when they were under the rule of the former Soviet Union. Vietnam is going through the same motions. Yet, we've also seen that after the fall of the USSR, religion never truly went away.

In religion, people find hope; people find something greater than themselves that they aspire to attain, whether it may be the afterlife, heaven, nirvana, or enlightenment. In faith, they find purpose; they find direction and guidance to help them navigate the tumultuous sea of life with the company of those who choose to travel the same path.

In belief, they find freedom.

And this is what the VCP fears the most: that the people will no longer be dependent on them for subsistence and survival. They fear for a time when their countrymen start to dream or come to know of a world outside the Party's tiny dictatorship. They fear a populace that holds another being in higher regard than the crumbling corpse of Ho Chi Minh.

The VCP fears becoming obsolete. Yet in the end, that is exactly what it fated to be.

Long after Vietnam has risen above the shackles of authoritarianism and long after it has reached a future of true and genuine democracy, the Party will be gone.

But religion will be there to stay.

Photo : Legal Initiatives for Vietnam
