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Vietnam's new religious decree further burdens local churches

Pastors and religious liberty advocates worry the government's effort to manage religion will bring tighter control.

CALEB MAGLAYA GALARAGA

[CHRISTIANITY TODAY](#) (05.04.2024) - Operating a church in Vietnam just became even more difficult thanks to new government regulations that went into effect over the weekend. Under [Decree 95](#), the government will now require religious groups to submit financial records and allow local government officials to suspend religious activities for unspecified "serious violations."

Nguyen Ti Dinh of Vietnam's religious affairs committee [said](#) the guidelines will improve how the government manages religion by implementing uniform measures for the 2018 [Law on Belief and Religion](#), which requires religious groups to register with the government. Observers believe the decree is Vietnam's attempt to demonstrate to the international community that it is trying to increase religious liberty and to get off the US State Department's [Special Watch List](#) for countries engaged in religious freedom violations.

Yet religious liberty advocates and local church leaders believe the new rules will do the opposite. Instead of making it easier to register churches, the government is requiring more oversight and control. If the Vietnamese government is trying to show the international community that it is serious about religious freedom, noted Hien Vu, Vietnam program manager of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), it needs to explain how the new policy would achieve that.

"With this decree, it's like Vietnam shot themselves in the foot," Vu said.

The Southeast Asian country, where Christians [make](#) up 8 percent of the population, is ranked No. 35 in the Open Doors' [list](#) of most difficult countries to be a Christian. While Christians can worship freely in bigger cities, believers among ethnic minority groups and in rural areas still face social exclusion, discrimination, and attacks. Religious groups involved in human rights advocacy have also been [harassed](#).

Yet due to work by IGE and other international groups, in the past few decades government officials have become more open to listening to Christians and making space for Christianity in the country.

Decree 95 came as a surprise to religious liberty advocates and local church leaders when the government first made it public in December. It expands on a previous decree (Decree 162) by including measures that allow the government to shut down religious

groups and adding requirements for receiving and reporting donations, including from foreign sources, [according](#) to Morning Star News.

In 2022, a draft dubbed the “punishment decree” (due to its focus on punishments for infraction of the religious law) drew harsh criticisms from religious leaders and even some government officials. That decree was eventually tabled. But with Decree 95, the government skipped the step of soliciting public opinion and put the new decree into effect three months after announcing it.

To Vu, the most concerning aspect of the new decree is how it expands the government’s financial oversight of churches. An article of the decree [reads](#), “Within 20 days, religious organizations and religious affiliates that receive financial aid are responsible for sending reports on the results of the use of grants to the competent state agency.”

“The government wants to really know where, how, what—everything about receiving financial support,” Vu said. “The government also needs to know how you spend it.”

While ostensibly the reasoning is to increase financial transparency, realistically, the rules are nearly impossible for many of Vietnam’s Protestant churches to follow, as house churches are often not registered with the government. The government’s own stringent [rules](#) (including that a church must exist for five years before applying) make it difficult to register. Some house churches are denied while others have waited years for recognition without any progress. Other house churches choose not to register due to the regulatory burdens.

In total, Vietnam has 11 legally registered evangelical denominations, according to Morning Star News.

Without legal status, the groups can’t open bank accounts and all their transactions are done in cash. Unlike in the West where tithes and other donations are tax-deductible, such frameworks and practices are nonexistent in Vietnam, and even large donors do not ask for receipts.

A pastor of a registered church in Ho Chi Minh City, who asked not to be named for security reasons, said that while he is familiar with the country’s religion law, the latest guideline on church finances adds confusion as to what the government now requires from them. Churches in his denomination, especially those in rural areas, often rely on foreign funding to construct or expand church buildings, and none of the pastors know how Decree 95 would impact this.

“We need the government to respect the church,” he said. “Something like Decree 95, something like that should not apply to the church. When we apply to have a church in Vietnam, we’re under very strong control from the government [already].”

The pastor believes the government doesn’t need to meddle with the church’s finances, adding that if the government continues to tighten its control on churches, “the future is not good”

A third of the decree’s 98-page document focuses on suspending religious activities for serious violations of the rules. Actions such as “infringing on the morality of our indigenous culture” and “using religion for personal aggrandizement” are forbidden. Vu noted that such vague language allows authorities to stop any group they view as a threat to the government’s one-party rule.

Religious groups have 24 months to rectify their behavior or face permanent dissolution. The decree also empowers more government officials in the communist bureaucracy—all the way down to the commune level or the smallest unit of local governance—to suspend religious activities and organizations.

How the new rules will play out in reality remains to be seen. One Vietnamese leader of a nondenominational ministry told Morning Star News that like previous legislation, “in Vietnam everything is open, everything is negotiable.” Despite what is written on paper, previous regulations have not been strictly enforced, and Christians with close relationships with government officials can continue worshiping in peace.

Vu said that even with the new decree in effect, pastors and church leaders in Vietnam remain steadfast and resilient.

“They are used to these restrictions,” Vu said. She described their attitude as “We’ll deal with it when it comes, but we’ll do whatever God calls us to do.”

Christian jailed for holding prayer meeting in his home

[CSW](#) (01.02.2024) - **A Vietnamese Montagnard Christian was [sentenced](#) to four-and-a-half years in prison on charges of ‘succession and incitement’ for holding prayer meetings in his home.**

Nay Y Blang, 48, a member of the Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ, was sentenced on 26 January. Local media reported that Mr Blang was not given access to legal representation, and he was found guilty of inciting others to ‘infringe upon the interests of the State’.

Mr Blang has been previously fined and imprisoned for practicing his faith. In April 2005 he was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison by Phu Yen province for ‘undermining the unity policy,’ and in September 2022 he was fined four million Vietnamese Dong (approximately GBP £130) by the People’s Committee of Song Hinh district for ‘abusing democratic freedoms and belief freedoms.’

The Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ members belong to the Montagnard minority ethnic group which consists of approximately 30 indigenous tribes. The majority of Montagnards are Christians and live in Vietnam’s central highlands, where they have a long history of conflict with the Vietnamese government.

On 22 January authorities in the Central Highlands concluded a four-day trial in which over 100 Montagnards were [convicted](#) on various terrorism-related charges. The trial took place after an attack on provincial Communist party offices in Dak Lak, Vietnam on 11 June 2023 that left nine dead, including local party officials and police.

Ten Montagnards were sentenced to life in prison, while other sentences ranged from three-and-a-half to 20 years in prison. Several Montagnard human rights activists based overseas were also charged in absentia. The charges specifically highlighted US-based

Vietnamese-American activists as having masterminded and coordinated the attacks; they deny all allegations.

The speed of the trial for such a large group has drawn criticism from human rights observers as evidence of predetermined charges and lack of judicial due process. Family members of the convicted have reported that the charges were based on confessions made under duress. The defendants were given limited access to defence lawyers who were state-appointed.

Since the June attacks the Vietnamese government has arrested Montagnard pastors, illegally confiscated land owned by Montagnards, demolished churches, and has declared human rights groups such as Montagnards Stand for Justice as terrorist organisations. Several prominent Montagnard leaders and pastors have fled the country due to fear for their safety. Christian and Buddhist groups are reluctant to gather for church services due to fear of government interference and harassment.

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: ***'CSW is deeply concerned at the lack of due process in the court hearings of Mr Blang and over 100 Montagnards. The Vietnamese government views the simple act of prayer as a direct threat to their power and legitimacy. No person should fear jail for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. These recent developments show that the human rights situation in Vietnam continues to deteriorate. We emphasise that this is part of a wider pattern of the targeting of religious and ethnic minorities across Vietnam that is often more severe in rural areas, and we urge the Vietnamese authorities to cease all harassment of religious and minority ethnic groups across the country.'***

HRWF List of 76 FORB Prisoners in Vietnam: Click on the names for details

Christians – Catholics (11)

[A JEN](#)

[A KUIN](#)

[A TACH](#)

[A TIK](#)

[DINH KUH](#)

[HO DUC HOA](#)

[JU](#)

[KUNH](#)

[LUP](#)

[RUN](#)

[RUNH](#)

Christians – Protestants (28)

[A DAO](#)

[DINH NONG](#)

[DINH YUM](#)

[KPUIH KHUONG](#)

[KSOR KAM](#)

[KSOR PHIT](#)

[KSOR PUP](#)

[KSOR RUK](#)

PUIH BOP
RAH LAN HIP
RAH LAN RAH
RMAH BLOANH
RMAH KHIL
RO LAN KLY
RO MA DAIH
RO MAH PLA
RO MAH THEM
SIU CHON
SIU DIK
SIU DOANG
SIU HLOM
SUNG A KHUA
Y HRIAM KPA
Y MIN KSOR
Y PUM BYA
Y TUP KNUL
Y WO NIE
Y YICH

Buddhists – Hoa Hao (5)

-
BUI VAN THAM
BUI THI BICH TUYEN
BUI VAN TRUNG
LE THI HONG HANH
NGUYEN HOANG NAM

Buddhists – Unspecified (28)

CAO THI CUC
DO THI HONG
DOAN DINH NAM
DOAN VAN CU
LE DUC DONG
LE DUY LOC
LE PHUC
LE THANH HOAN NGUYEN
LE THANH NHAT NGUYEN
LE THANH NHI NGUYEN
LE THANH TRUNG DUONG
LE TRONG CU
LE TUNG VAN
LUONG NHAT QUANG
NGUYEN DINH
NGUYEN KY LAC
NGUYEN THAI BINH
PHAN THANH TUONG
PHAN THANH Y
PHAN VAN THU
TA KHU
TRAN PHI DUNG
TRAN QUAN
VO NGOC CU
VO THANH LE

TU THIEN LUONG
VO TIET
VUONG TAN SON

Duong Van Minh Religion (4)

DUONG VAN LANH
DUONG VAN TU
LY VAN DUNG
LY XUAN ANH
