

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

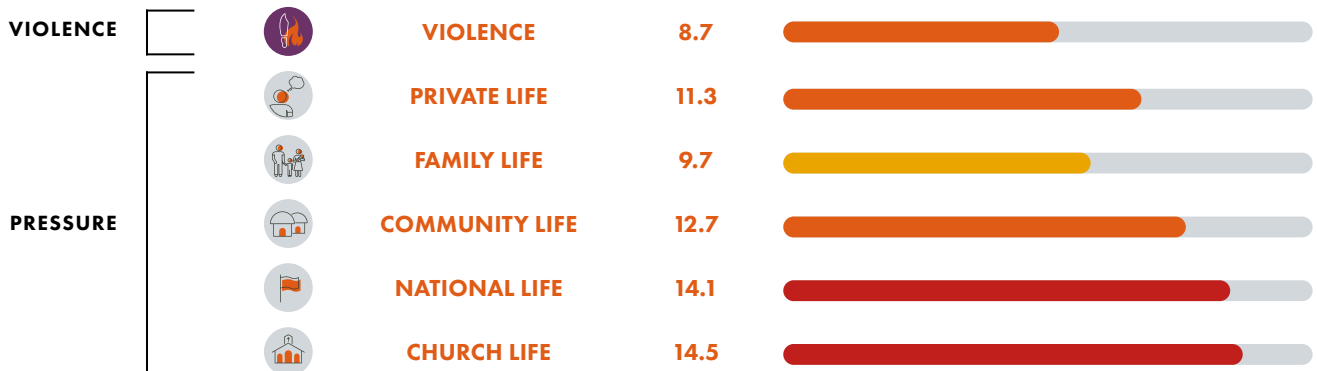
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
19

Vietnam



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

Historical Christian communities like Roman Catholics enjoy a certain amount of freedom unless they become politically active, which can lead to imprisonment. Where Catholic congregations own large plots of land (such as convents, schools or hospitals) these can be confiscated by the state for development purposes. Both non-traditional Protestants and converts to Christianity from indigenous religions face intense 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 on ethnic grounds. They are sometimes forcibly expelled by demolition of their homes.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Quick facts

LEADER

President Nguyen Xuan Phuc

POPULATION

99,284,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

9,159,000 (9.2%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Communist State



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	9,159,000	9.2
Buddhists	49,881,000	50.2
Agnostics	11,847,000	11.9
Others	11,711,370	11.8

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source³

Vietnam continues to follow its Doi Moi (economic renovation) policy. This was introduced in 1986, and successfully doubled the GDP within the last decade, reduced poverty and increased employment. However, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has been strong, seen in the GDP growth rate which [sharply dropped](#) from a level of 6-7% over many years to 2% in 2020 (2.9% according to the World Bank). Still, Vietnam was one of the few countries worldwide to record GDP growth, reflecting how well the country dealt with the pandemic in 2020. A large wealth divide persists, as does extreme corruption, which stand at odds with the regime's communist ideology. There is growing tension with neighboring China, whose provocations in the South China Sea have upset many nations in the region and triggered violent reactions against Chinese companies in Vietnam.

As in most Communist countries, Christians are regarded as unpatriotic and anti-government and, as such, are strictly monitored, censored, and discriminated against. Christians are not only barred from positions of power within the Communist Party but also disqualified from officer ranks in the military, and receive harsher punishments when charged by police. Almost 81% of all Christians are Catholics, according to WCD 2020.

While the Party Congress within the reporting period did not bring any surprises and Communist politics will most likely preserve the status quo, there is one exception to this rule: the elevation of the head of the 'Government Committee of Religious Affairs' (GCRA) to serve as Deputy Minister of the Interior is indicative of a high government concern to maintain the control of religion.

How the situation varies by region

Pressure and violence targeting Christians among the ethnic minorities is especially strong in the central and north-west highlands in the following provinces: Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Bin 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.

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

³Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Buddhist or Animist background face the most severe violations, not only from the authorities, but also from their families, friends and neighbors. Since most of them belong to ethnic minorities, Communist authorities are particularly suspicious and hostile towards them.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist and post-Communist oppression blended with dictatorial paranoia:

The Communist Party violates the rights of the Christian minority in the central highlands, north-west and north-east regions by harassing them and requiring all religious institutions to be supervised by the government's Committee on Religious Affairs. The government even employs local criminals, known as 'Red Flag' groups whom they tacitly encourage to assault Christians and expropriate church property. Due to the pandemic, those groups have been less active than in former reporting periods. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community and therefore the government's primary target. This suspicion is elevated by Catholic insistence on highlighting social injustice and environmental issues under Communist rule, which often results in punitive violence and confiscation of church-owned land.

Clan oppression:

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

Organized corruption and crime:

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

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Despite having one of the highest female workplace participation rates, women bear an unequal share of domestic work and are considered subservient. The country holds socialist ideals of equality, but Confucian values remain, embodied in sayings such as ‘one boy is something, 10 girls is nothing’. Female Christians may be forced into early marriages, especially converts and those in tribal cultures. Within marriage, they risk oppression, violence and threats. Christian women and girls are also vulnerable to sexual assault. Trafficking of Hmong women as brides to China (in northern provinces) also remains prevalent.

- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence - physical
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Men often face discrimination and harassment at work, risking job loss and monitoring due to their faith. This can economically paralyze families and weaken congregations. Tribal Christian men are targets for arrest, false charges and abduction on faith-related grounds. Once in custody, detainees face harsh treatment, physical beatings, and pressure

to renounce their faith. Pressure is particularly high for Hmong Christians, several of whom have been arrested. There is also pressure within compulsory military service, with men unable to freely read the Bible or partake in other Christian practices.

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	19	70.94
2021	19	72.16
2020	21	71.58
2019	20	70.45
2018	18	68.87

The score for violence in the 2022 World Watch List decreased by 1.2 points because of fewer reported cases of violence. However, this does not necessarily mean violence has decreased, because reporting, particularly from ethnic minority regions, was hindered by COVID-19 restrictions.



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Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **On 30 January 2021**, 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).
- 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.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians' business property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced
2022	1	10	5	100
2021	2	10	0	1000

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

Private life

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

Family life

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

Community life

Tribal communities in hotspot areas assist in the monitoring of Christians. Local authorities encourage the community to restrict Christian groups as these are seen as foreign and dangerous. Christians applying for jobs, and those due for promotion,

sometimes experience discrimination and exclusion both in public and private sectors. Within the military and police, Christians are not eligible to be selected as officers. In northern Vietnam, state authorities are known to threaten to cancel healthcare benefits of Christians if they resist state mandates or continue to meet as a church. Incidents of discrimination and denial of COVID-19 support have become known in the reporting period.



National life

Vietnam follows Communist ideology strictly and all other beliefs are opposed. The government does not respond to registration applications or approve requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often does not specify reasons for refusals as required by law. Members of the Communist Party are not allowed to profess a religion and commissioned military officers are not permitted to be religious believers. In the media, Christians are portrayed as trying to reinstate colonial ideology and are accused of disruptive and anti-government activities. Perpetrators of violence against Christians are almost never brought to trial. During the reporting period, after an outbreak of COVID-19 a Protestant church was attacked and smeared in mainstream and social media. The authorities intervened and moderated comments online in a second case concerning a seminary of the ECVN (S).

Church life

Churches are monitored and occasionally meetings are disrupted. Churches are required by law to register activities with the authorities. Obtaining Christian materials in bulk is extremely difficult as all published material requires approval by the government and all imports are highly restricted. However, obtaining small numbers of Christian materials is possible. Catholic and Protestant church leaders and activists are often arrested or forced into exile for criticism of the government or advocacy on behalf of human rights. In the reporting period, authorities denied the ECVN (S) to hold its congress after its leaders refused to promise to submit a premeditated outcome.



International obligations & rights violated

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 in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christians are killed because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6.1)
- Christians are arrested for speaking up for their rights (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 19)
- If arrested, Christians experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian children are ostracized at school 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)

Situation of other religious minorities

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



Open Doors in Vietnam

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

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

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
