

World Watch Research

Vietnam: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Vietnam: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
99,498,000	9,778,000	9.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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 Politburo carries out the main executive duties. 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, although challenges remain, and the country is said to benefit from the continuing US-China trade war, although possibly not as much as expected. Political development is slow in comparison.

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, even more so when the new revision becomes law (see below: *Religious landscape*) and the White Book published in March 2023 is implemented (see below: *Political and legal landscape*).

The anti-corruption drive by the Communist Party will continue in which members, even high-ranking 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. Secretary-General Trong is reportedly in poor health (he turned 80 in April 2024), and in April 2021, incumbent Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was appointed to replace Trong as president. While this is a largely ceremonial position, Trong held this position since the surprising death of the former president in 2018. Pham Minh Chinh had been elected to serve as Prime Minister, so that Vietnam could return to a "four pillar strategy" (with the head of the National Assembly included), distributing the workload, advancing careers and balancing regional considerations. However, in a surprise turn of events, President Phuc [stepped down](#) in January 2023, potentially in connection with some of his protégés being entangled in a corruption scandal (BBC News, 17 January 2023). Further resignations in 2024 jeopardized the four pillar strategy and put the Communist Party under a stress test (see below: *Political and legal landscape*) and no major decisions are to be expected until the next National Congress in 2026.

Politics of the Vietnamese Communist Party are notoriously hard to read, but the true position of power remains that of the Secretary-General of the Communist Party, still held by Mr. Trong (see: *Political and legal landscape*). The current 18-member Politburo is described as being "[securocratic](#)", since it has five members with a background in the security services (The Vietnamese, 16 September

2022). This fits observations made by Human Rights Watch which accuses the Politburo of promoting outdated Stalinist policies which belong to past [Communist history](#) (RFA, 21 September 2022).

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

- 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);
- 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;
- 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 serve to maintain the status quo, but this time the head of the Government Committee of Religious Affairs (GCRA) was elevated to also serve as Deputy Minister of the Interior. This is indicative of a continued high government priority to keep religious communities under control, not least the Christian communities in Vietnam.

Political and legal landscape

Within the last two years, Vietnam has seen a period of political turmoil it has not seen in decades before. The reshuffling of Vietnam's leadership (which began in 2023 with 52 year old Vo Van Thuong becoming the youngest ever President of the country) has [shattered](#) some long-held assumptions (The Diplomat, 13 March 2023). However, the Vietnamese parliament accepted the [resignation](#) of President Thuong merely a year after he had been appointed (Reuters, 20 March 2024). Reasons for the resignation point to another potential corruption case. Corruption is one of the major problems the Communist Party is having to contend with: President Thuong's predecessor, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, resigned on 18 January 2023 after a series of corruption scandals. Thus, [two presidents have resigned](#) in just over a year (Fulcrum, 20 March 2024). And as if the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was not already in enough political turmoil, the [National Assembly Chair Vuong Dinh Hue](#) also stepped down (AP News, 26 April 2024). Thus, three pillars of the four pillar strategy are now affected by turmoil and insecurity. By installing a new [president](#) quickly, the authorities signaled an effort to project stability and security (The Vietnamese, 23 May 2024). The presidential appointment of the now former Public Security Minister, General To Lam, shows that the safety and stability of the Communist regime tops all other considerations. At the same time, the fact that his appointment is limited to the remaining presidential term, ending in 2026, would seem to indicate that a long term solution may not have been found yet.

As one country observer put it in quieter times, 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 and environmental activists – many of them Christians – often have to face being harassed, beaten, detained and sentenced.

A 132-page long [White Book on Religions and Religious Policy](#), released on 9 March 2023, shows that nothing will change for Christians and other religions (RFA, 9 March 2023). On the contrary, [Decree No. 95](#), which will be effective from 30 March 2024, replaces other decrees and aims at clarifying and simplifying measures to shut down religious organizations and educational institutions as well as curbing local and international fundraising (Morning Star News, 28 February 2024). The decree contains 33 articles spread over 98 pages and includes the requirement for religious organizations and institutions to immediately report any changes in location and personnel of both local and foreign congregations. Thus it is even stricter than the decrees it replaces. Major terms, such as ‘serious violation’, are not defined, giving authorities wide margins for interpretation. One observer quoted a saying by Ho Chi Minh: "Di bat bien, ung van bien", which can be translated as ‘respond 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, although some have since stepped down because of corruption cases.

Another challenge is the growing tension with Vietnam’s big neighbor, China. The major stumbling block is China’s action 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. Vietnam has also been [building](#) on Vietnamese islands in the South Chinese Sea, although the authorities claim that the work is just to prevent erosion (Benar News, 3 November 2021). 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 every year is seen as [coercion](#) by Vietnam and other claimants (Hanoi Times, 30 April 2022). And while some observers think that China is [losing strategically](#) (East Asia Forum, 15 March 2024), this is not how it feels for neighboring states. 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*). Reportedly, China tried to [curb an influx](#) of followers of folk religion from Vietnam into neighboring Guangxi province, a movement particularly pronounced among the Zhuang minority (Bitter Winter, 25 May 2022).

Gender perspective

Men and women are, broadly speaking, equal under Vietnam’s laws. For example, they are afforded the [same inheritance, marriage, divorce and custody rights](#) (Women, Business and the Law, 2022). In reality however, the prevailing religious and socio-cultural norms of Vietnam promote a male-dominant society. 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 30% of the seats in parliament and despite marriage laws banning the practice, child marriage continues to take place, particularly in northern Vietnam and mountainous regions (World Bank Vietnam data, accessed 20 August 2024; Law on Marriage and Family, 2014, Article 8). According to Girls Not Brides Vietnam (accessed 20 August 2024), 15% of girls are married before 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 24 months to 36 months, while women, although eligible are typically not drafted (World population review, 2023). Christian men, within this context experience pressure for their faith, as restrictions prevent them from reading their Bible freely (US State Department IRFR 2018 Vietnam/Government practices) or partaking in other Christian practices while on active duty (US Department of State IRFR 2023 Vietnam/Government practices).

Religious landscape

Vietnam: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	9,778,000	9.8
Muslim	217,000	0.2
Hindu	90,900	0.1
Buddhist	47,743,000	48.0
Ethnic religionist	11,525,000	11.6
Jewish	380	0.0
Bahai	458,000	0.5
Atheist	6,073,000	6.1
Agnostic	11,773,000	11.8
Other	11,839,390	11.9
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

The 2019 government census states the following concerning religion under Item No 8 (United Nations Population Fund, 19 December 2019):

- "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 popu-

lation. The remaining religions all had a relatively small proportion of followers."

The Journal of Party Building stated in an article dated 28 July 2022 that out of 1.2 million Protestants throughout Vietnam, [73% belong to ethnic minorities](#), roughly one third living in the northern mountainous region and two thirds in the Central Highlands (The Vietnamese, 4 October 2022). They are a showcase of what it means to be doubly vulnerable to persecution, as ethnic minorities and as Protestants.

As quoted by the US State Department [IRFR 2023 Vietnam](#), the government census was as follows:

- "According to Vietnam's White Book on Religion published by the GCRA in March 2023, there are approximately 26.5 million religious adherents as of December 2021, accounting for 27 percent of the total population at the time. The White Book noted Buddhism replaced Catholicism as the largest religious group in Vietnam since the prior census. According to the White Book, Buddhist membership increased from nearly 10 million in 2008 to approximately 14 million in 2021, accounting for 52.8 percent of the total number of religious believers nationwide and 13.3 percent of the overall population.... According to the GCRA, Catholics ranked as the second largest group with more than seven million followers, accounting for 6.6 percent of the total population. The Catholic population increased by a million followers since the 2019 census. According to the White Book, Protestants were the third largest group, with 1.2 million followers, accounting for 4.5 percent of the total number of believers nationwide and 1 percent of the overall population, followed by 1.4 percent Hoa Hao Buddhist, and 1 percent Cao Dai."

Whatever figures are published by the government, there is always 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 2024)* estimates show that just under half of the population follow Buddhism and just 10.4% ethnic religions (with a further 11.6% following 'other' religions, including folk religions), Pew Forum made 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 Roman 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. 77.8% of all Christians are Catholics according to WCD 2024 estimates.

The very restrictive White Book published in March 2023 was followed by Decree 95 (see above: *Political and legal landscape*). Both are complemented by [Directive 24](#) on 'ensuring national security in the context of comprehensive and deep international integration' which was issued back in July 2023 as an internal directive, but has only recently been published (Project 88, 29 February 2024). In a [comprehensive report](#) entitled 'Vietnam's leaders declare war on human rights as a matter of official

policy', Vietnamese human rights organization Project 88 analyzed this directive and found that although religious minorities are not a main focus, they are affected by these measures as well (Project 88, 1 March 2024). The regulations' main aim is to restrict civil society activity and the implementation of human rights, including those the Vietnamese government has agreed to by signing international agreements.

Project 88 states in this report:

- "Finally, under Directive 24, discrimination against ethnic and religious minority groups will continue, if not increase. The directive makes a number of statements about ethnicity. In one section of the directive, Vietnamese authorities are ordered to take action 'to prevent the establishment of labor organizations on the basis of ethnicity and religion' (p.4). In addition, the directive calls for the creation of a national cultural value system, which would assuredly elevate Kinh cultural values at the expense of the cultures of ethnic minority groups in the country. This is particularly troubling given the history of efforts by the Vietnamese government to erase minority cultures and assimilate members of ethnic minority groups into the majority Kinh culture."

Vietnam [objected strongly](#) to being placed on the US Special Watch List (SWL) for religious freedom in December 2022 (RFA, 16 December 2022). This was the country's first 'demotion' since Vietnam was removed from the worst Country of Particular Concern (CPC) category in 2006. At least partly as a reaction to this demotion, Vietnamese authorities published four books on managing religion, among them the already mentioned "White Book" (see above: *Political and legal landscape*). A country expert explained:

- "The most damaging of the books was a frank account by the Ministry of Public Security of their problems in managing Evangelical churches. It was a no-holds-barred criticism of all groups and leaders, legally registered or not. The openness of this intra-government contention came as a bit of surprise to some and reveals the regressive attitude of the government agency with the real power. The tension also partially explains the continued inconsistency in enforcement of the Law on Religion."

As long as religious groups are not recognized and registered, they are considered illegal. While this affects all religions and all Vietnamese, it has greater consequences for the country's ethnic minorities, of whom a considerable number adhere to Protestant Christianity. These ethnic minorities, already watched with suspicion by the authorities, face frequent raids on their church meetings, constant surveillance and the accusation that they are in cahoots with foreign forces. They are frequently blocked from any contact with the outside world, so that it becomes next to impossible to speak out for them about their situation.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's [Human Development Report Vietnam](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 10.814
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 1.9% 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 3.2% "The half million Vietnamese migrant workers in foreign countries sent a whopping \$13 billion-plus home through remittances in 2017, according to the United Nations International Labor Organization" (Vietcetera, 2 December 2022).

According to the [World Bank Vietnam data](#) (accessed 20 August 2024):

- The World Bank classifies Vietnam into the lower-middle income group
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 11.397
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 7.2% (up from 1.7% in 2021; in 2019 it was 6%)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 6% (2022). 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% – is made up of 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. One of the main challenges in this respect is - as explained above in the section *Political and legal landscape* - corruption of party officials, with new cases emerging on a regular basis and - as developments in the last two years have demonstrated - even at the very top. 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, although the effect has been overshadowed by the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.

In its [Vietnam overview](#), the World Bank sums up some of the challenges as follows (last updated 19 April 2024):

- "Vietnam has grown bolder in its development aspirations, aiming to become a high-income country by 2045. To achieve this goal, the economy would have to grow at an annual average rate of about six percent per capita for the next 25 years. Viet Nam also aims to grow in a greener, more inclusive way. At COP27, it pledged to reduce methane emissions by 30 percent and halting deforestation by 2030 while achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. To achieve these targets, Viet Nam unveiled the 'One Million Hectares of High-Quality Low-Emission Rice' Program at COP28. The World Bank is actively collaborating with Viet Nam on this program's design and implementation."
- "A few megatrends are shaping the future of Vietnam. The country's population is rapidly aging and global trade is declining. Environmental degradation, climate change, and the rise of automation are growing. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis presented unprecedented challenges that might undermine progress towards development goals. To rise to these challenges, Vietnam needs to dramatically improve its performance to implement policies particularly in finance, environment, digital transformation, poverty/social protection, and low-carbon infrastructure. Adapting to climate impacts and pursuing a growth strategy that steers the economy away from carbon-intensive production will help the country achieve its climate objectives while expanding its GDP per capita by around six percent a year – the average rate needed to become a high-income country by 2045."

Christians have been affected by the general economic downturn just as they had previously benefitted from the economic progress and will most likely benefit from the economic recovery. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many people who had migrated to the cities may well 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 and felt this even more during the pandemic crisis. There were many cases where Christians were excluded by local authorities from various government relief programs. With the violent incident in Dak Lak province in June 2023 (See above: *Brief description of the persecution situation*), it is to be expected that the Hmong and other ethnic minorities will come under closer scrutiny of local and national authorities. And even this June 2023 incident was partly motivated by underlying [economic](#), land rights-related, and other social grievances (The Vietnamese, 24 June 2023).

The Communist Party (CPV) has set ambitious goals for the mid- and long-term. According to the Vietnam country report published by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI report 2024](#)):

- "At the 13th Party Congress in 2021, the CPV outlined ambitious development goals for the next five years, 10 years and 25 years. By 2025, Vietnam aims to become a developing country with a modernized industry and an income that surpasses the low-middle level. By 2030, on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPV, Vietnam hopes to achieve the status of a developing country with a modern industry and a high-middle income. By 2045, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam), Vietnam aspires to transform itself into a developed country with a high

income level. However, institutional reforms are progressing slowly. Several critical issues remain unaddressed, including: (1) the lack of clear hierarchy and assignment of roles and responsibilities for policy formulation and implementation in both central government agencies and between the central and local governments, resulting in overlapping mandates with conflicting rules and decisions; (2) the absence of merit-based management of public servants, which negatively affects the quality of public administration; (3) a discrepancy between rhetoric and practice regarding citizens' ability to observe, participate and influence political decision-making processes; (4) elections and electoral mechanisms that do not allow for genuine citizen representation; and (5) the absence of an effective system of checks and balances between the three branches of government."

Gender perspective

Men remain the primary breadwinners in Vietnam. Whilst Vietnam has one of the highest female workforce participation rates in the world, averaging at 69.1% in 2022 ([World Bank Vietnam data](#), accessed 20 August 2024), men typically have [higher positions](#) than women in the workplace (VOA, April 16, 2019). Christian men also face discrimination and harassment at work, especially if employed by the state; 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 (GSO and NFPA, 2020).

Social and cultural landscape

According to UNDP's [Human Development Report Vietnam](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook Vietnam](#) (accessed 20 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kinh (Viet) 85.3%, Tay 1.9%, Thai 1.9%, Muong 1.5%, Khmer 1.4%, Mong 1.4%, Nung 1.1%, other 5.5% (2019 est.)
- **Main languages:** Vietnamese (official), some English, French, Chinese, Khmer, mountain area languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 39.5%
- **Literacy rate:** 95.8% (15 years and above)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 8.5
- **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 [World Bank Vietnam data](#) (accessed 20 August 2024):

- **Age distribution:** People under the age of 14: 22.2%; People of 65 years and above: 9.2%. Vietnam is ageing fast.
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 110%; the enrolment rate is 123% (2018).
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 1.7% (2022), the rate of vulnerable employment is 52% (2022), both modelled ILO estimates.

IDPs/Refugees

- According to [IDMC](#) (accessed 20 August 2024), in 2023 there were 68,000 IDPs. This figure refers mostly to disaster displacement triggered by storm and flood events.
- According to [UNHCR](#) (accessed 20 August 2024): "Viet Nam receives only a small number of cases involving claims for international protection per year. The country is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, and there is no framework for identifying international protection needs or refugee protection."
- Nearly 50 years after the fall of Saigon, many refugees who escaped from Vietnam are still residing in Thailand. As per the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR, 10 September 2022): "There are six different groups of Vietnamese and Montagnard asylum seekers and refugees in Thailand, totaling approximately 1,700 people: 'boat people', former prisoners of conscience and activists at risk, the Montagnards, the Hmong, and the Khmer Krom."

According to UNDP's [Human Development Report Vietnam](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.726, Vietnam ranks 107th in the list of 193 countries. Its development has been fast and impressive, but slowed down in the last years.
- **Life expectancy:** The average life expectancy is 75.6 years
- **Median age:** 32.7 years
- **GINI coefficient:** 35.7
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.378, Vietnam ranks 91st of 166 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, religious 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. During the COVID-19, such protests 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. 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 possibly climatic changes) 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. China pledged to share more data on the Mekong with its downstream neighbors (South China Morning Post, 5 July 2022), but the details remain unclear and a similar promise had been reported already two years ago.

According to the World Bank's Poverty and Equity Assessment 2022, p. 91, ethnic minorities are more prone to poverty than the average ethnic Kinh population. This is telling, since these groups are not only neglected because they are living in remote areas and are considered somewhat backward. 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 their economic and social status at a controlled level, although there are some social and economic development projects taking place. The World Bank Poverty and Equity Brief published in April 2024 sums the situation up and provides the most recent update.

Gender perspective

Whilst some people groups in Vietnam reportedly once [had an ancient matriarchy](#), it has entrenched patrilineal norms (Le Minh Khai history, 21 March 2014). Despite socialist ideals of equality, women bear an unequal load of domestic work, reflecting the subsisting vestiges of indigenous Vietnamese values. Within marriages, women can face oppression and threats of divorce from their husbands, reinforcing the feeling that they are second-class citizens, especially in the case of Vietnamese '[marriage migrants](#)' (Women and Migration, November 2021). As women and girls are socially in a weaker status than men, young women and girls are more at risk of [sexual exploitation](#), including rape (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 31 August 2020). Sources report that young women are at particular risk when in police custody and rural areas. Lockdowns during 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. Christian women as part of a minority in Vietnam are no strangers to severe forms of pressure and violence, especially [converts](#) from Buddhist or ethnic-animist backgrounds (Christian Post, 24 April 2023).

Trafficking remains another key area of concern; according to the [UN Human Persons in Trafficking Report](#) (July 2022), both men and women are trafficked; men for forced labor and child soldiers, and women as brides and/or for sexual exploitation.

Technological landscape

According to [Datareportal: Digital 2024 Vietnam](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 79.1% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 73.3% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 169.8% of the total population

In comparison to neighboring countries and other emerging economies around the world, Vietnamese women are well connected to the digital world. According to Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security ([GIWPS Vietnam, accessed 20 August 2024](#)), in 2023, 94% of women in Vietnam had access to a mobile phone.

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net report 2023 Vietnam](#):

- "Internet freedom remained restricted in Vietnam. The government continued to enforce stringent controls over the country's online environment and introduced new internet regulations concerning data localization and personal data protection. Authorities aggressively pressured global internet companies to comply with content moderation and user data requests. Activists and ordinary people are often punished for their online activities, while media outlets face punitive fines in relation to their reporting."
- Consequently, Freedom House categorizes Vietnam as "Not free" and its score remained at a very low level - 22/100.

Vietnam struggles to keep online dissent in check, as the country is among the world's top ten in having the highest number of Facebook members. New rules, forcing social media giants into removing content and services deemed illegal within 24 hours, block illegal livestreams within three hours of notice, and immediately remove content that endangers national security, have been condemned as an "[existential threat](#) to freedom of expression in Vietnam" by international human rights organizations like Amnesty International (RFA, 20 April 2022).

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). There are reports that Vietnam is following in neighboring China's footsteps in terms of [digital monitoring](#) and control (The Vietnamese, 12 August 2022).

An amendment to the Telecommunications Law was made later in 2023, introducing a [mandatory identity verification](#) for social media users, thus further restricting freedom of expression online (The Diplomat, 10 May 2023). For many citizens, social media sites have more or less replaced other sources of information such as newspapers. Indeed, Vietnam is the country with the seventh largest number of Facebook users in the world, and sixth largest number of TikTok users. As a result, scams and internet fraud have become a very serious problem, both for the country and wider region. However,

the new regulations can, at the same time, be used to stifle criticism, opposition or, as the Ministry of Information stated when announcing a probe into TikTok, ‘against anything toxic, offensive, false and superstitious which poses a threat to the country’s youth, culture and tradition.’ Christian content can be very easily subsumed under this broad classification. In addition, Catholics and, to a lesser extent, Protestants, have a history of activism dealing with social justice and environmental issues. The new regulations will make it easier for the authorities to target such Christian activists and other citizens perceived as dissidents. The [Ministry of Information](#) announced a proposal in 2023 to block individuals and organizations committing online violations from accessing internet and social media services (The Diplomat, 20 July 2023).

The Communist Party has added a new instrument for potentially tightening control by making [iris scans](#) obligatory for the country’s newly issued ID cards. As set out in the 2023 Law on Identification, which comes into effect on 1 July 2024, these scans and other biometric specifics will be integrated into the national population database under the management of the Ministry of Public Security (The Vietnamese, 22 April 2024).

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.

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 (along with the Philippines), 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. For years, there were no longer any active fighting insurgency groups in existence, but the attack against policemen and government authorities in Dak Lak province in June 2023 shows that a violent potential is simmering below the surface, which in turn gives the authorities reasons for keeping very tight control over these regions and making access very difficult. The fact that Vietnamese authorities immediately claimed that an independency group named [FULRO](#) (French acronym for "United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races") which was long believed to be defunct since the 1990s as being responsible, does not bode well for the rights of ethnic minorities (The Vietnamese, 4 July 2023). In a very concrete step, Vietnam listed [two Hmong political organizations](#) based in the USA as terrorist groups (Reuters, 6 March 2024). These minorities are often Protestant Christians, especially those from the Hmong minority.

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	7,609,000	77.8
Protestant	1,854,000	19.0
Independent	581,000	5.9
Unaffiliated	20,100	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-286,000	-2.9
Total	9,778,100	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,792,000	18.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	869,000	8.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Roman Catholic Church makes up 77.8% of all Christians in Vietnam and while it is following the Vatican in its doctrine, there are subtle and less subtle attempts by the government at influencing it, possibly most visibly in the election of bishops. The Vatican and Vietnam are on their way to improve diplomatic relations and it is possible that the Vatican will have a [resident](#) papal representative in the country, after an agreement seems ready to be signed (Reuters, 16 July 2023). Some [commentators](#) have been very critical of this agreement, even going so far as saying that the agreement resembles the one the Vatican has with China and highlighting that it does not even give the right to send a nuncio to Hanoi (UCA News, 25 July 2023).

Protestants are split into many denominations, two larger state-recognized ones are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN-S) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN-N), but there are also many Reformed, Baptist, Anglican, WEC, Seventh-Day Adventists and others. Mennonites and Baptists have been officially recognized by the state, but they have only a small number of followers from tribal and ethnic minority background. Vietnam Christian Mission (VCM) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North and South) have an estimate two thirds membership with tribal and ethnic minority background. Even being state-recognized does not protect against state interference, as was shown when the authorities denied the ECVN-S permission to convene its traditional congress.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

External Links

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