

Prepared by BPSOS

April 8, 2024

Benchmarks to assess Vietnam's intention to respect religious freedom and belief

(1) Issue ID cards and household registration for undocumented Hmong Christians:

Over 20,000 Hmong households in Vietnam's Central Highlands were undocumented at the end of 2018, according to a public statement made by then-Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc during his visit to Dak Lak Province. Many of these undocumented Hmong were evicted or had to flee from their ancestral home villages in the Northwestern Mountainous Region due to their Christian faith. After years of wandering around and being expelled by governments in Northern provinces, they settled in the jungle in the Central Highlands. Being undocumented – typically because their national identification cards and household registrations, the basic documents required in order to live, work, attend school, or receive social services in Vietnam, had been confiscated when they were evicted -- they are effectively stateless persons in their own country.

(2) End the forced conversion of Montagnard Christian house church members

The Vietnamese government systematically denies the right to freedom of religion or belief and other internationally recognized human rights to members of unregistered Montagnard house churches and often forces their members to join government-sanctioned churches such as the Evangelical Church of Vietnam - South. The government has taken advantage of the June 11, 2023 shootings in Dak Lak Province, which caused 9 deaths, to threaten charges of terrorism against Montagnard Christians who remain active in unregistered house churches or in independent denominations. In January 2024, Evangelist Nay Y Blang of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands was sentenced to 4.5 years of imprisonment for resisting the government's order to disband his house church in Phu Yen Province. On March 28, 2024, his fellow church member, Y Krec Bya, was sentenced to 13 years in prison followed by 5 years of house arrest – he had previously served an eight-year prison sentence. On March 8, 2024, another evangelist of the same church, Y Bum Bya, was found hanged to death from the dome of a tomb after being ordered to a rendezvous with public security officers at a cemetery near his home – in December 2023, he had been subjected to public denunciation in front of his fellow villagers for not disbanding his house church. Meanwhile, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security issued an arrest warrant against Pastor A Ga, the founder of that church who is now a resident in the United States.

(3) Stop the crackdown on Khmer Krom Buddhists who resisted control by government-created Vietnam Buddhist Sangha

On March 26, 2023 the police arrested Abbot Thach Chanh Da Ra of the Khmer Krom Dai Tho Pagoda in Vinh Long Province, which follows Theravada Buddhism. After his

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declaration that his pagoda was not member of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) -- an institution the government created in 1981 after abolishing the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and which dominantly follows Mahayana Buddhism -- VBS officially announced the dismissal of Abbot Thach Chanh Da Ra even though he had never been a VBS member. Two of his Buddhist followers were also arrested for defending him. On March 28, the police arrested four additional Khmer Krom Buddhist monks and a follower who vocally protested the crackdown. Prior to their arrest, the four Buddhist monks were “defrocked” by public security officers, which violated the Theravada Buddhist tradition where a monk may only be defrocked by his immediate monastic superior. On April 1, the government moved in and destroyed the lecture hall belonging to Dai Tho Pagoda.

(4) Stop committing transnational repression against refugee advocates for religious freedom

Following the shootings in Dak Lak Province, Vietnam’s Ministry of Public Security (MPS) has intensified its campaign to silence Montagnard and Hmong advocates for religious freedom who seek refugee protection in Thailand, including young champions for religious freedom who founded Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSFJ) and the Hmong Human Rights Coalition (HHRC). MSFJ, founded in 2018 by young Montagnard refugees in Thailand, serves as a liaison to the international community for persecuted Montagnard Christians inside Vietnam. In January 2024, MPS declared MSFJ a terrorist organization and a Vietnamese court sentenced MSFJ’s founder in absentia to ten years in prison. Similarly, HHRC, founded in 2020 by young Hmong Christians, has been labeled by MPS a hostile, reactionary, anti-government force. Both organizations have produced over one hundred reports for submission to the US Department of State and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) as well as to UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies. Their members have spoken at many international forums, including the annual Ministerial on International Religious Freedom, the annual Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAFORB) Conference, and the annual International Religious Freedom Summit. Some 30 young champions in these two organizations are at risk as MPS has sent delegations to Thailand to gather information about their whereabouts.

(5) Return Cao Dai temples – especially the “Holy See” in Tay Ninh -- to Cao Dai followers in time for their religion’s centennial

After having abolished the Cao Dai Church that was established in 1926, the Vietnamese government created a new Cao Dai Sect in 1997 and has since presented this sect to the world as the Cao Dai Church. In August 2023, a Texas court ruled this government-organized Cao Dai Sect to be a criminal enterprise and ordered it to pay compensation for

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harms caused to US citizens and to a US-based Cao Dai temple. Pursuant to that ruling, the Vietnamese Communist Party acknowledged that the “1997 Sect” is not the same as the 1926 Cao Dai Religion. Yet the 1997 Sect is occupying the central temple in Tay Ninh (referred to by Cao Dai believers as their “Holy See”) and buildings and lands on its premises as well as hundreds of local temples belonging to the 1926 Cao Dai Religion. Cao Dai followers are waging a global advocacy campaign to get back all these temples in time to mark the centennial of their religion in November 2025.

(6) Lift travel bans against religious leaders and religious freedom advocates

The government has placed many outspoken Catholic priests, Cao Dai lay leaders, and Buddhist monks under travel bans so that they cannot participate in international or regional forums on freedom of religion or belief, including the Southeast Asia ForB Conference, the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit, and the Ministerial on International Religious Freedom. Partial list of those who have been prevented from leaving the country to attend international events with date of travel ban imposition:

<https://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/List-of-clergy-members-and-lay-leaders-under-travel-ban-04-03-2024.pdf>

(7) Free religious prisoners of conscience

The list that follows is a small sample of religious prisoners of conscience. Releasing these and other religious prisoners – not just one or two – and discontinuing the practice of prosecuting independent religious believers for such crimes as “using democratic freedoms to injure the national unity” should be a prerequisite to any improvement in the United States Government’s assessment of the Vietnamese government’s record on religious freedom:

1. Nay Y Blang: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/nay-y-blang>
2. Y Krec Bya: <https://www.state.gov/on-the-convictions-of-vietnamese-ethnic-minority-and-religious-freedom-advocates/>
3. Y Pum Bya: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/y-pum-bya>
4. Tô Hoàng Chương: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/hoang-chuong>
5. Thạch Cường: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/thach-cuong>
6. Lê Tùng Vân: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/le-tung-van>

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7. Cao Thị Cúc: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/cao-thi-cuc>
8. Dương Văn Tư: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/duong-van-tu>
9. Đoàn Văn Cừ: <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/doan-van-cu>