



## VIETNAM: Country Dossier

May 2018



**Open Doors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

May 2018 / 2

[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

[www.opendoorsanalytical.org](http://www.opendoorsanalytical.org)

# World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

## WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries<sup>1</sup>

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

<sup>1</sup> These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

# VIETNAM – Country Dossier (May 2018)

**No copyright** - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

## Contents

World Watch List 2018.....	1
Introduction .....	2
WWL 2018: Keys to understanding VIETNAM .....	3
WWL 2018: Church History and Facts.....	5
WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile .....	7
WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics .....	9
WWR in-depth reports.....	17
Open Doors article(s) from the region .....	17
World Watch Monitor news articles .....	18
Recent country developments .....	18

## Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)<sup>1</sup> including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))<sup>2</sup>. Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)<sup>3</sup> and WWR staff.

VIETNAM		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	69	18
WWL 2017	71	17
WWL 2016	66	20
WWL 2015	68	16
WWL 2014	65	18

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

<sup>2</sup> WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

# WWL 2018: Keys to understanding VIETNAM

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-16567315>

## Recent country 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 only since 2010 have the executive and decision-makers in the politburo started a dialogue with the National Assembly, which has been elected, but not under free and fair conditions. Due to Vietnam's large population and geographical position, the economy is developing fast. Political development is slow in comparison.

More important than the National Assembly are the decisions the Party will be taking in the future. Vietnam determined a new leadership in January 2016 during its 12th Party Congress, leaving the most important and influential post of Secretary-General unchanged. This was a clear sign of continuity and it is therefore to be expected that the government's comparatively liberal economic approach will be held in bounds by strict political control. Civil rights or freedom of religion will still be elusive and it is not yet clear whether the new leadership will look for closer relations with China again or strengthen the more recent ties to the United States.

A "rising star" in the Communist Party was [surprisingly demoted](#)<sup>4</sup> for corruption in May 2017, showing that the Party will fight off any perceived danger.

## The religious landscape

The religious affiliation of Vietnam's citizens is a matter of much debate. Whereas the World Christian Database says that almost half of the population follow Buddhism and just 10% ethnic religions, the last official census of 2009 found that ethnic religions are followed by more than 44% and Buddhism by more than 38%. According to [Wikipedia](#) and the UK Home Office in 2014,<sup>5</sup> only around 12% of the population of Vietnam identified themselves as Buddhist and more than 73% either follow ethnic religions or no religion at all. In any case, Christians are tolerated as long as they are not challenging the existing order and not perceived as a threat. As many of the Protestant Christians belong to ethnic minorities, which historically fought on the American side in the Vietnam War, they are easily seen as trouble-makers. To a lesser extent, this is true for the far larger group of 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 local or national authorities.

<sup>4</sup> "On May 7, the 12th Party Central Committee decided to remove Thang, 56, from the powerful 19-member Politburo and issue him an official warning based on more than 90 percent of votes, for committing 'very serious mistakes and violations' while leading PetroVietnam between 2009 and 2011.", <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/demotion-05102017143505.html>, last accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>5</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_Vietnam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Vietnam), last accessed November 2017.

## The political landscape

As one observer puts it, three groups can be distinguished in Vietnamese politics: regime conservatives, modernizers and those just seeking profit. These key blocs exist within the ruling party, within the structures of the party state, as well as within society and the economic system. Party leaders regularly acknowledge that corruption and rampant abuse of power have held Vietnam back. Citizens commonly complain about official corruption, governmental inefficiency and opaque bureaucratic procedures. The Vietnamese media have played a prominent role in exposing corruption scandals. 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. The Authorities act very harshly against all deviations from the party line. This means that Human Rights or environmental activists – many of them being Christians – often have to face being harassed, beaten up, detained and sentenced. In June 2017, one Catholic activist was even expelled and exiled to France, despite being a Vietnamese citizen.

An additional challenge is the growing tension with Vietnam's big neighbor China. The major stumbling block is China's actions in the South China Sea. China is basically claiming this territory as their possession, neglecting 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 started to build military structures on reefs and rocks to support its claim. This led to violent reactions against Chinese companies in Vietnam and after an international ruling rejecting China's claim, Vietnam reportedly started to deploy modern short-range missiles on its islets in the South China Sea capable of reaching Chinese islets. This is another sign of the general cooling of relations with China while the relationship with former arch-enemy USA has warmed, leading to a visit by US-President Obama in May 2016.

## The socio-economic landscape

With ethnic minorities comprising between 13% and 16.5% of the population, depending on the source, Vietnam is one of the most ethnically heterogeneous societies in the Asian-Pacific region. Communist ideology 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 (yet) been able to challenge the political regime. Of course, this does not mean that the government does not feel challenged, especially as some tribal groups are still aiming to set up their own autonomous state.

It is estimated that two-thirds of all Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including minority groups in the Northwest Highlands (H'mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M'ngong, among others). In a speech in February 2012 summarizing the government's religious policy goals, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc encouraged stronger monitoring on matters related to land and property rights and urged continued government "management" of Protestantism in order to limit its

extraordinary growth. Overall, the deputy prime minister stressed the need to avoid religious “hot spots” forming and to counter “enemy forces” that use religion to “destroy our nation”. These counter-measures may involve the use of violence, either explicitly by police raids or implicitly by (silently) approving of violence against religious communities and venues (including the use of contract thugs and gangs).

Although the new law on religion, scheduled to come into force on 1 January 2018, seems to bring some improvements, it remains to be seen how it is going to be implemented. As the predominant goal of the Communist authorities is to keep all groups and organizations in check in order to preserve their power, no great changes can be expected. The fact that even Catholic bishops have frequently and [publically criticized](#) the law,<sup>6</sup> for instance in June 2017, is no promising sign either. Organizing Christian churches and registering them will be at least as cumbersome as it is now and testifying about one’s faith will remain dangerous.

## Concluding remarks

Communists regard the Church as a dangerous group easily capable of mobilizing masses of people. Modernizers would like to see the principles of “doi moi” (introducing at least partly private economy to instigate growth) translated to several parts of national life and politics. Of course, no one dares to openly doubt the dominance of the Communist Party, but this group would like to see a further opening up of the country. Apart from conservatives and modernizers, a third group simply accepts the status quo and is eager to extort the most from the economic development for their own purposes. Christians or other minorities getting in their way will face arbitrary treatment or even outright persecution.

The fact that protecting Communist rule is the first and foremost goal was made clear once more by a revision of the penal code published on 20 June 2017, demanding all lawyers to inform authorities if their clients are [threatening national security](#).<sup>7</sup> Everything and everybody has to submit to the survival of the Communist Party and its ideology, therefore the authorities will continue to watch Christians with suspicion and – if deemed necessary – act against them.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
95,415,000	8,368,000	8.8

Source: WCD, May 2017

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/support-for-vietnamese-bishops-criticism-of-religious-laws/79574>, last accessed November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/revised-vietnamese-law-turns-lawyers-into-informers/79599>, last accessed November 2017.

## How did Christians get there?

Christianity first came to Vietnam in the 16th and 17th centuries and was 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 during the Vietnam War by radio broadcasts.

## What church networks exist today? <sup>8</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	6,892,000	1,322,000	553,000	17,100	-417,000	1,453,000	806,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

Roman Catholics make up the majority of Christians in Vietnam. However, various Protestant denominations exist such as Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, Church of Christ etc., of which some are united in the over hundred year old Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Many Protestants belong to the ethnic minorities, the most prominent among them being the Hmong people, who fought in the Vietnam War against the Communist forces. There is still a widespread perception today that Christianity is a foreign religion, namely French, if Catholic, and American, when Protestant.

While Protestants make up the minority among Christians, they are particularly widespread among ethnic minorities. Protestantism is especially strong among the Montagnards, although not every Montagnard is a Christian. According to estimates carried out for a [“Cultural Profile”](#) of Montagnards in Vietnam’s mountainous region, around 230,000-400,000 Montagnards are Protestants and 150,000-200,000 are Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>10</sup>
8,368,000	169,000	56,500	47,301,000	10,055,000	360	420,000	28,095,000

Also to note: Chinese folk: 950,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

<sup>8</sup> **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:** Believers 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. **Evangelicals:** 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. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/montagnards-cp>, last accessed November 2017.

<sup>10</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

According to the last census in 1999, around 80% of the population reported themselves to be non-religious. However, it is likely that at least 50% of the population live according to Buddhist rules and rites.

## Notes on the current situation

- Over the past years, the Communist government has been tightening controls on the freedom of expression, association and assembly. Media censorship is increasing, especially on the Internet.
- New converts to some Protestant communities face discrimination, intimidation, and pressure to renounce their faith. Individuals (including Catholic leaders and activists) continue to be imprisoned or detained for religious activity.
- Christians cannot print their own Bibles in Vietnam, especially not in minority languages; a notable exception is the much loved children's Bible. Especially converts and Christians in remote areas appreciate its easy to understand stories.
- Many Christians lack foundational biblical knowledge thus making them vulnerable to false teaching. Many church leaders see this development as more threatening than persecution.

## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 69 / Position: 18**

WWL 2017 Points: 71 / Position: 17

WWL 2016 Points: 66 / Position: 20

## Where persecution comes from

The government from national to local level persecutes the Christian minority by the laws they pass and on how these laws are being implemented (and misinterpreted) at the grassroots level. A new law entered into force on 1 January 2018. Ethnic group leaders in their pursuit of maintaining the tribe's culture also exclude Christians and see them as traitors of their culture and identity. Villagers also persecute Christians conniving with one another or with local authorities in beating believers, kicking them out of their village, or disrupting Christian meetings by stoning their place of worship. Non-Christian relatives of Christians are also strong persecutors cutting family ties and denying inheritance; in some cases forcing a Christian spouse to divorce; and withholding the right of custody of the Christian parent to his/her children.

## How Christians are suffering

Historical Christian communities like Roman Catholics, who make up the vast majority of Christians in Vietnam, generally have more space to move, aside from being monitored. However, if Catholics get active politically, be it as bloggers, be it as activists against



environmental pollution or something similar, they are targeted by the authorities and can get arrested and sentenced. In several cities and provinces, the Catholic congregations own large plots of land which state authorities grab for development and monetary purposes. Protests against this practice are quashed.

Converts from folk religion and non-traditional Protestants are persecuted more intensively, especially if they are based in the rural and remote areas of Central and Northern Vietnam. Most belong to the country's ethnic minorities, like the Hmong, and are facing all forms of persecution, from social exclusion, harassment and discrimination to violent attacks, leaving their homes destroyed and being chased from their villages. In many cases, the local Communist authorities are not directly involved, but hire thugs to act against Christians. In several cases, Christians fled abroad and claimed asylum, e.g. in neighboring Cambodia, but were sent back due to Vietnamese pressure.

## Examples

- Ethnic minority Christian children are discriminated against in schools and do not get the same attention as others; also their medical needs are often neglected. Some are not even allowed to attend school because of their Christian faith. When tribal students in the central highlands converted to Christianity, their college principal threatened them with expulsion. Teachers also try to discourage Christian students by saying that no one would employ them as Christians after they graduate anyway, so it would be better for them to give up their faith altogether.
- The continuing saga of Montagnard Christian refugees who left central Vietnamese provinces because of persecution and fled to Cambodia took a new turn in the WWL 2018 reporting period. While more than 100 refugees have been repatriated, it was reported in April 2017 that since March 2017, 50 Montagnards [fled from Cambodia to Thailand](#),<sup>11</sup> illustrating just how strongly they seek to avoid persecution in Vietnam.
- On 7 June 2017, vandals attacked a Catholic church building again, whose congregation is known for its outspoken criticism of the government's handling of a devastating toxic waste spill that took place in 2016.
- In the first six months of 2017, Vietnam jailed several Catholic activists and bloggers and Protestant pastors. In an unprecedented move, they even deported a Catholic professor to France and a Protestant pastor to the United States.

---

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/montagnards-04032017130748.html>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

# WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 69 / Position: 18**

WWL 2017 Points: 71 / Position: 17

WWL 2016 Points: 66 / Position: 20

## Contents

Position on World Watch List (WWL).....	9
Persecution engines .....	9
Drivers of persecution.....	10
Context .....	11
Christian communities and how they are affected .....	12
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence .....	13
Gender profile of persecution.....	16
Future outlook.....	16
Policy considerations.....	17

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The WWL 2018 score for Vietnam (69) is two points lower than in WWL 2017. Although the score for violence dropped by almost four points, there was an increase of pressure registered, reflecting preparations Christians have been making in order to cope with the new regulations on religion to be implemented on 1 January 2018. Pressure and violence against Christians belonging to the ethnic minorities continued unchanged.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Vietnam <sup>12</sup>	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Weak
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Very Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Very Strong
Secular intolerance	Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

<sup>12</sup> The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

### **Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):**

Vietnam – or as the official name reads: the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” – is one of the five remaining countries in the world which is still ruled by a Communist party. Vietnamese Communism is more than just cosmetic as was shown in its latest leadership transition in 2016, countering all hopes for a more reformist approach. The government monitors Christian activity and exercises a high level of pressure on all Christians. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community in the country, but government authorities have a shaky relationship with it as Roman Catholics are tied to a foreign power, the Vatican, and thus often seen as a remnant from French colonial days. Stereotypes such as “Catholics are French and Protestants are American” still prevail, especially in rural areas. In 2017, this statement was even underlined when two Christians were expelled from Vietnam and had to go into exile to France and the United States, respectively. The government is particularly suspicious of the ethnic minorities who live in the central and northern highlands and are known as “Montagnards”. Many of them are Protestant Christians<sup>13</sup> and according to existing reports, the growth of Christianity has continued.

### **Ethnic antagonism (Medium):**

No-one knows the exact figures, but the majority of Christians come from a tribal background and some estimates state that up to 80% of Protestant Christians have an ethnic minority background, many of them being Hmong or Bru. If new Christian believers of a tribal background are discovered by co-villagers or village leaders, they are forced to keep following the age-old norms and values of their community. In order to maintain the tribe’s culture, tribal leaders will often exclude Christians from the community, seeing them as traitors of their culture and identity. The community itself will often react violently against new Christian converts as well and expel them from their villages. The authorities cooperate with local tribal leaders to the disadvantage of those converts.

## **Drivers of persecution**

<b>Drivers of persecution in Vietnam</b>	<b>Level of influence</b>
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Weak
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Weak
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Weak
Own (extended) family	Medium
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that all non-Catholic Christians in Vietnam are Evangelicals and self-identify as such. Many of them are Pentecostal or Charismatic.

The government persecutes the Christian minority at national, regional and local level. The Communist Party often does this by strengthening ideology and by promoting those who hold Communism in esteem. Laws are passed and then implemented (often being misinterpreted) at the grassroots level.

To protect their tribe's culture, ethnic group leaders see converts to Christianity as traitors to their tribal identity and usually cut them off from resources or expel them from their villages altogether, destroying their fields etc. Villagers persecute Christians – also by conniving with local authorities - to give Christians beatings, expel them from their village, or disrupt Christian fellowship by throwing stones at their place of worship. Non-Christian relatives of Christians also act as persecutors by cutting family ties and denying inheritance; in some cases this means forcing a Christian spouse to divorce and withholding rights of child custody.

## Context

Vietnam continues to follow its *doi moi* policy (literal translation: renovation), introduced in 1986, and aimed at reforming and improving the economic sector. It delivered good results in doubling the GDP within the last decade as well as in poverty reduction and in increasing employment. 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 which 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. However, the authorities act strongly against all who deviate from the norm - especially human rights activists. A growing number of them, many of them Christians, have been harassed, beaten up, detained and sentenced or expelled, which seems to be a new form of persecution the government is trying out (see under Violence).

One additional challenge is the lasting tension with Vietnam's big neighbor China. Though it is Communist in name as well and Vietnam's majority people (Kinh) are basically ethnic Chinese (Viet Nam means literally "Land in the South", seen from China based in the north), relations have become increasingly tense. The major stumbling block is China's actions in the South China Sea which is basically being claimed by China exclusively, neglecting 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 also started to build structures on reefs and rocks to support its claim. After violent reactions and Vietnam's deployment of [modern short-range missiles](#)<sup>14</sup> on its islets in the Sea, China and Vietnam came to an [agreement](#)<sup>15</sup> in May 2017 not to increase tensions further. If this means that the relation is warming again, remains to be seen; interestingly, the apparent growing closeness with former archenemy USA has not continued.

A new leadership was chosen in January 2016 during the 12th Party Congress, leaving the most important and influential post of the Secretary-General unchanged. Although Prime Minister

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam-idUSKCN10K2NE?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 25 November 2016.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-vietnam/china-vietnam-agree-to-keep-south-china-sea-tensions-in-check-idUSKCN18B0HK?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

Dung, who stood for a more liberal political approach, was widely seen as the most natural candidate, he was effectively side-lined. The leadership called for a [public dialogue on governance](#)<sup>16</sup> in May 2017, but - given the track record the government has with listening to critics - not too much can be expected. Civil rights and freedom of religion remain elusive and it is not yet clear whether the new leadership will look for closer relations with China again or strengthen the more recent ties to the United States. In any case, Christians should not expect any increase in freedom or any real benefit from the [new law on religion](#)<sup>17</sup>.

Being Communist, the government acts against all religions, including Buddhists, Cao Daists, Hoa Hao Buddhists and Muslims. This starts with harassment and may end up in detention or expulsion from their homes, villages or – in the WWL 2018 reporting period – even the country. Particularly members of the country's ethnic minorities are on the authorities' radar.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### Communities of expatriate Christians:

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

### Historical Christian communities:

These are especially the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Whereas the former managed to open a Catholic university in 2016, problems with land-grabbing by authorities, the arrest of Catholic activists or the expulsion of a Catholic rights activist show that historical Christian communities continue to face severe problems.

### Communities of converts to Christianity:

Converts come either from Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and face the strongest persecution, not only from the authorities, but also from their families, friends and neighbors. As most of them come from ethnic minorities, the Communist authorities are particularly suspicious.

### Non-traditional Christian communities:

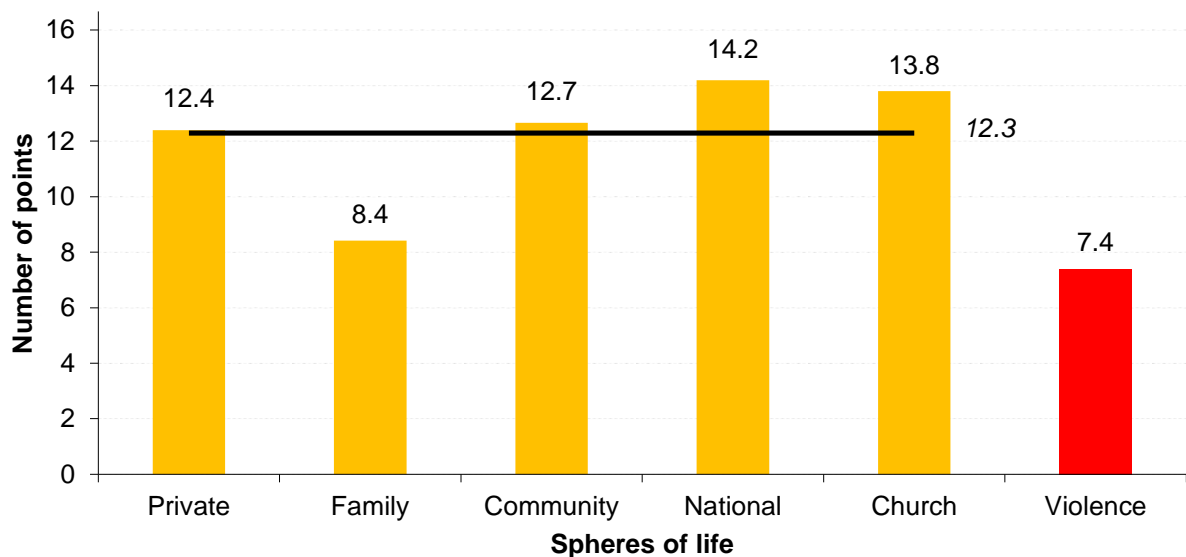
This category mainly consists of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. Baptists, Mennonites, Churches of Christ and many others gather in house-churches. They are closely monitored and are also facing discrimination at various levels of society.

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/dialogue-05192017164857.html>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/vietnams-religion-policy-practice-contradictions-continue/>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

### WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Vietnam



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Vietnam shows:

- Pressure on Christians in Vietnam increased in almost all spheres of life, causing the average pressure to be at a very high level. It rose from a score of 11.9 in WWL 2017 to 12.3 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National sphere* (extreme level), followed by the *Church* and *Community spheres*. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, but all Christians face a growing pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fuelled by a return to Communist rhetoric, the new religion law and a continuing suspicion towards converts as well as to all ethnic and religious minorities.
- Violence against Christians has returned to its more usual level with a score of 7.4. (It rose sharply to 11.1 in WWL 2017 when three Christians were killed.) In the WWL 2018 reporting period, Christians were arrested and forced into exile to France and the United States of America.

#### Private sphere:

Since families in Vietnam, especially those in rural areas, usually live with three generations under one roof, Christian converts have to be particularly careful about how to practice their faith and to whom to share it with. Christianity is seen as a threat for family members who follow ancestral worship since they fear that nobody would take care of them in the after-life. In some cases, family members evicted converts and ostracized Christian relatives. Converts also have to be cautious when keeping Christian materials. Under these circumstances, meetings with other Christians can become very difficult and in many cases, family members will hinder the new converts from having fellowship with other believers. This is true not only

for converts from a Buddhist or animist background but also for believers from families with strong bonds to the Communist Party as well.

**Family sphere:**

There have been reports that Christians from minority tribes were denied birth certificates and that in other cases government officials forced them to change their surnames into “Ho” (after Revolutionary Communist leader Ho Chi Minh). At least in two cases, Catholic weddings have been hindered by authorities as they “disturbed unity” when displaying Christian symbols in the village. Baptisms in rural areas have to be done in secret if converts are involved, and burials have to be performed according to traditional rites, especially by Christians from the ethnic minorities. Converts who are married may be threatened with divorce and it is common for families to disown, evict and cut off support from family members that convert to Christianity.

There were many reports of Christians asking local officials to certify their documents for education, school and employment. But when the local authorities discovered they were Christian, they refused to certify the documents - especially if in the past the Christians had not obeyed warnings to stop attending Christian meetings.

Christian children are taught Communism at school, and at home Christian families are often put under pressure to join in ancestral worship. But children are not just taught Communism; in the Central Highlands grown-up children of pastors were being put under pressure to make their parents stop preaching and teaching, threatening them with losing their job if unable to convince their parents to cease such ministry.

**Community sphere:**

Local communities frequently assist in the monitoring of Christian activities. Local authorities encourage the community to restrict Christian groups as these are seen as foreign and dangerous. Online activities are also heavily monitored, as are the phone lines of some church leaders. There are many reports that Christians, especially from the ethnic minorities, are denied government benefits, whether in the form of disaster relief, agricultural micro-finance loans or student grants. In school, pupils are required to show reverence to a photo of Ho Chi Minh. In rural areas they have to participate in tribal practices. Cases have been reported where school principals threatened converts with expulsion. Christian students are frequently told to forget about pursuing an education, because as Christians no one would hire them after their graduation. It is very common that pastors and church leaders are interrogated and called in by police. One pastor said that he could measure summons by the police “by the kilo”.

**National sphere:**

Vietnam follows its Communist ideology and reveres the state founder Ho Chi Minh, or “Uncle Ho” as he is fondly referred to, but this is not comparable to the reverence shown to leaders in North Korea. All beliefs other than Communist ideology are opposed, and religion is curbed by a law known as Decree 92. While the decree and a related ordinance remained in force throughout 2017, the new comprehensive “Law on Religion and Belief” was adopted by the National Assembly on 18 November 2016 and is scheduled to come into effect on 1 January

2018. Whereas there are a few sections in which the new law could be considered as an improvement for Christians, the regulations on registration in particular will definitely cause churches great difficulties. Overall, not much will change, but it could create a bureaucratic nightmare for churches. The national ID cards (as well as the family records) include a section on religious affiliation. Converts find it hard to have their affiliation changed and, those who have tried, have frequently ended up with the entry “non-religious” or have been denied documents altogether.

Movements of Christian leaders are monitored and access to villages in the northern and central part of Vietnam is restricted. Media reporting on Christians is biased and slander against them is frequent. For example, Christians are portrayed as a tool to reinstate colonial ideology. Perpetrators against Christians are almost never brought to trial, indeed local authorities often hire thugs for acts of violence against Christians. Those Christians who have had to go to court have not received a fair trial. An example of this is the stream of Catholic bloggers being given prison sentences, or the protests caused by the Formosa case where a Taiwanese steel plant caused an environmental disaster and (mainly Catholic) fishermen and activists started protests against the government cover-up. When they tried to get justice, authorities clamped down on them. They have been subjected to smear-campaigns in the local media and accused of disruptive and anti-government activities as well.

#### **Church sphere:**

Churches are closely monitored and occasionally meetings are hindered or disturbed. Church registration demands a tremendous amount of administrative work and there is no guarantee of actually getting the permit in the end. This is just one way the government controls the growth of the Church and keeps it under Communist rule. Even churches affiliated to registered churches find it difficult to be recognized by the government and the local authorities. The issue of church building permits is regulated by Decree No. 92 and is handled by the authorities in a highly restrictive way. Land-grabbing by the authorities also continues and especially the Catholic Church faces problems in keeping possession of their property. The Catholic Church owns a variety of large plots of land (churches, schools and hospitals), especially in the larger cities, and there has been more than one clash, when authorities made repeated attempts to take this property away, allegedly for development purposes. The new law requires each church to create a dossier proving that they are registered as an approved Christian group, have the right to gather and that the land is owned by the church. This is then sent to the authorities for approval. It is an extremely lengthy process and the authorities can easily deny permits by claiming that the land is not meant for religious purposes, or the land is residential, or that the church is not a registered group.

There have been reports that youth gatherings were raided. The publication and distribution of Christian materials is possible, but highly restricted. Any illegal material is confiscated by the police. It is also very difficult to obtain permission for setting up courses for training. In addition, every October registered churches have to submit a list of topics of their sermons for the complete coming year. The revised Law on Belief and Religion is not likely to change things substantially, as the overarching goal of the government remains control.



### Violence:

The continuing saga of Montagnard Christian refugees, who left Central Vietnamese provinces because of persecution and fled to Cambodia took a new turn in the reporting period. While more than 100 refugees have been repatriated, it was reported in April 2017 that since March 2017, 50 Montagnards [fled from Cambodia to Thailand](#)<sup>18</sup>, illustrating how strongly they seek to avoid persecution in Vietnam. And while Catholic journalist and religious activist Dang Xian Dieu was [forced into exile](#)<sup>19</sup> to France in February 2017 and Peter Pham Minh Hoang [shared his fate](#)<sup>20</sup> in June 2017, Lutheran pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh was [deported with his family](#)<sup>21</sup> to the United States in July 2017. This recent trend shows that the Vietnamese maxim mentioned above still holds some truth: “Catholics are from France and Protestants are from the United States.”

## Gender profile of persecution

**Female/Male:** No data available.

## Future outlook

The adoption of the Constitution and anti-conversion law has legitimized the persecution of The economic *doi moi* policy has not spilled over into the social and political spheres of society and is not expected to do so in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, restrictions against dissidents have increased in the WWL 2018 reporting period and dreams of an open civil society in Vietnam with debates on political, economic, social and religious issues (as common in a democratic society) are still far off. Another example of this is a law which was passed in June 2017 giving Vietnamese authorities the right to force lawyers to [report clients](#)<sup>22</sup> known to have committed “crimes against the state”. If one recalls how broad this term is usually interpreted in Communist countries, Christians and other religions may easily come under this law.

Another decision to be watched is how the new “Law on Religion and Belief”, adopted in 2016, is going to be implemented, now that it is coming in force from 1 January 2018 on. Christians and other religions [cannot expect any relief](#)<sup>23</sup> from it, neither do they expect any tangible positive changes. The registration and running of Christian churches will be at least as cumbersome and it is now, and testifying about one’s faith is likely to remain dangerous.

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/montagnards-04032017130748.html>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-forces-journalist-religious-activist-into-exile/78439>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>20</sup> See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-expels-catholic-activist-to-france/79588>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-frees-kicks-out-ailing-lutheran-pastor-and-family/79874>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/revised-vietnamese-law-turns-lawyers-into-informers/79599>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>23</sup> See: [https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/news/?filter\\_date\\_from=2016-04-01&filter\\_date\\_to=2016-04-30&filter\\_tag=0&filter\\_country=56&filter\\_category=0](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/news/?filter_date_from=2016-04-01&filter_date_to=2016-04-30&filter_tag=0&filter_country=56&filter_category=0), last accessed 1 October 2017.

Under the “new” leadership, civil rights and freedom of religion will remain elusive and *Communist oppression* will be heavily felt by Christians for the time being. This pressure may even increase if relations with its big neighbor China are warming up again, especially as the interest of the United States seems to be waning. Unlike China, Vietnam struggles to keep [online dissent in check](#)<sup>24</sup>, as the country is among the top ten in having the highest number of Facebook members - a reported 52 million. But it will strive to crackdown heavily on blogs showing deviating thought as shown by the [sentencing](#)<sup>25</sup> of the Catholic blogger known as “Mother Mushroom” to 10 years imprisonment in June 2017. In August 2017, the Vietnamese government [kidnapped](#)<sup>26</sup> former high-ranking Communist Party member and businessman, Trinh Xuan Thanh. He had been working for state-run Petro Vietnam in Germany and was spirited away to Vietnam. This abduction annoyed an important ally, Germany, and showed the growing boldness of Vietnam’s leadership. It was also Vietnam’s warning signal against any form of public dissent.

## Policy considerations

Currently under review.

## WWR in-depth reports

No in-depth reports on Vietnam are currently available at:  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Vietnam available at:  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

---

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-internet/vietnams-facebook-dissidents-test-the-limits-of-communist-state-idUSKCN1B92UQ?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>25</sup> See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnamese-catholic-blogger-sentenced-to-10-years-in-jail/79638>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

<sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-vietnam-berlin-idUSKBN1AK17Q?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 12 January 2018.

## World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/vietnam/>

- [Hmong Christians hospitalised after mob attack in Vietnam’s northwest](#)  
15 March 2018  
Four Vietnamese Christian families – 24 people in all – have been attacked by a mob led by the village chief.
- [Vietnam’s religion policy and practice – contradictions continue](#)  
23 November 2017  
Optimists are hard to find ahead of Vietnam’s impending introduction of its new Law on Belief and Religion, scheduled to come into effect on 1 January 2018.
- [The ‘remarkable religious transformation’ of Vietnam’s Hmong](#)  
16 November 2017  
Christianity started spreading among the Hmong in the highlands of northwest and central Vietnam in the late 1980s through a Hmong-language Christian radio program broadcast from Manila.
- [Vietnamese pastor punished for ‘reports’ to US diplomats; Catholic blogger to be expelled to France](#)  
15 June 2017  
A pastor imprisoned in south-east Vietnam is being further punished for telling a visiting US diplomatic delegation about abuses he has suffered.
- [Vietnam’s Law on Belief and Religion ‘deeply flawed’](#)  
6 December 2016  
On 18 November 2016, Vietnam’s National Assembly finally ratified its Law on Belief and Religion amid extensive criticism from parliamentarians, human rights and religious groups.

## Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Vietnam> (password: freedom).

- [Vietnam/China: New law turns lawyers into informers](#)  
8 August 2017  
A new law was passed on 20 June 2017 which gives Vietnamese authorities the right to force lawyers to report clients known to have committed “crimes against the state”.

- [Vietnam/Cambodia/Thailand: Montagnard refugees now aiming for Thailand](#)  
7 May 2017  
Since March 2017, 50 Vietnamese Montagnard refugees have fled from Cambodia to Thailand to join over 200 others there seeking political asylum. Virtually all Montagnard refugees are Christian and have been threatened with repatriation to Vietnam by the Cambodian authorities.
- [Cambodia/Vietnam: More Montagnards sent back to Vietnam](#)  
23 January 2017  
Cambodia sent back thirteen Montagnard Christians to Vietnam, as they did not qualify for refugee status. According to the Cambodian authorities, there are still another 156 Montagnards in Phnom Penh seeking refugee status on grounds of oppression by the Vietnamese government.
- [Vietnam: New law on religion about to be adopted](#)  
3 November 2016  
Vietnam's new law on religion has been strongly criticized by human rights organizations and lawmakers belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization comprised of ten Southeast Asian states promoting intergovernmental cooperation.

[Return to top of document](#)