

Human Rights Watch HRW Report 2023: Vietnam

English

Source: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023>

Events of 2022



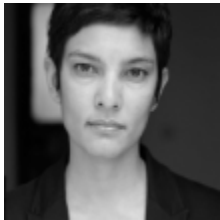
Vietnamese political detainees and prisoners, from upper left: Do Nam Trung, Can Thi Theu and Trinh Ba Tu, Le Trong Hung, Trinh Ba Phuong; lower left: Nguyen Thi Tam, Pham Doan Trang, Pham Chi Thanh, Le Van Dung, Bui Van Thuan.

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Keynote



[Tirana Hassan](#)

Acting Executive Director

Vietnam systematically suppresses basic civil and political rights. The government, under the dictatorial one-party rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), severely restricts the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, movement, and religion.

Government prohibitions remain in place on independent labor unions, human rights organizations, and political parties. People trying to establish organizations or workers' groups outside approved government structures face harassment, intimidation, and retaliation from the authorities. Authorities require approval for public gatherings, and systematically refuse permission for meetings, marches, or public gatherings they deem to be politically unacceptable.

A decree issued on August 31 restricts international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Vietnam from doing anything against "national interests, laws, national defense, security, social order and safety" and "social ethics, national fine customs and practices, national traditions, identity or great national unity" of Vietnam. No definitions of these terms are provided in the decree, but groups deemed to violate these provisions will be shut down.

Authorities blocked access to sensitive political websites and social media pages, and pressured social media and telecommunications companies to remove or restrict content critical of the government or the ruling party.

Critics of the government face police intimidation, harassment, restricted movement, arbitrary arrest and detention, and imprisonment after unfair trials. Police regularly hold political detainees for months without access to legal counsel and subject them to abusive interrogations. Party-controlled courts sentence bloggers and activists to long prison sentences on bogus national security charges.

In March, Vietnam lifted all Covid-19 requirements for both domestic and international travel, but it continued to restrict freedom of movement for rights activists, dissidents, and government critics.

In October, Vietnam was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2023-2025 term despite concerns about rights abuses.

Freedom of Expression, Opinion, and Speech

Political dissidents and human rights activists face systematic harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest, abuses in custody, and imprisonment.

Vietnam currently holds more than 160 people in prison for peacefully exercising their basic civil and political rights. During the first nine months of 2022, the courts convicted at least 27 people for voicing criticism of the government, and campaigning on human rights, environment, or democracy causes, and sentenced them to long prison sentences. They included citizen journalist [Le Van Dung](#) and democracy activist [Dinh Van Hai](#).

In August, a court in Hanoi rejected the appeals of [prominent blogger Pham Doan Trang](#), and [land rights activists Trinh Ba Phuong](#) and [Nguyen Thi Tam](#). At time of writing, police were holding at least 14 other people in pretrial detention on politically motivated charges, including human rights defenders [Nguyen Thuy Hanh](#), [Nguyen Lan Thang](#), [Bui Van Thuan](#), and [Bui Tuan Lam](#).

In 2022, Vietnam stepped up its repression of NGO activists. Courts convicted journalist Mai Phan Loi, environmental lawyer Dang Dinh Bach, and environmental defender Nguy Thi Khanh on politically motivated charges of alleged tax evasion and sent them to prison. Nguy Thi Khanh is a 2018 winner of the internationally prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, honoring grassroots environmental activists.

Freedom of Media, Access to Information

The government prohibits independent or privately owned media outlets, and imposes strict control over radio and television stations, and print publications. Authorities block access to websites, frequently shut down blogs, and require internet service providers to remove content or social media accounts deemed politically unacceptable.

In October, a [new decree](#) went into effect that requires technology companies to open physical offices in country and to store users' data in Vietnam. This highly problematic [decree](#) will give the government greater ability to pressure companies and is likely to lead to violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association, and privacy. [US business groups](#) sent a letter of [complaint](#) regarding these new requirements to Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. It is unclear if he responded to them.

Freedom of Movement

The government routinely violates the right to freedom of movement and other basic rights by subjecting activists, dissidents, human rights defenders, and others to indefinite house arrest, harassment, and other forms of detention. Authorities frequently detain activists just long enough to prevent them attending public protests, trials of fellow activists, meetings with foreign diplomats, and other human rights-related events.

Security agents keep people under house arrest by stationing plainclothes security agents outside homes, using padlocks to lock people inside, erecting roadblocks and other barriers to prevent people from leaving their homes and others from entering, mobilizing neighborhood thugs to intimidate people into staying home, and even applying very strong adhesives—such as “superglue”—on homeowner’s locks.

The Vietnam government also systematically blocks rights activists, bloggers, dissidents, and their family members from domestic and international travel, including by stopping them at checkpoints, airports and border gates, and denying passports or other documents that would allow them to leave or enter the country.

In February, Human Rights Watch published a report, “[‘Locked Inside Our Home’: Movement Restrictions on Rights Activists in Vietnam](#),” detailing Vietnam’s systemic and severe restrictions on freedom of movement between 2004 and 2021.

In March, security agents prevented [eight democracy supporters](#) from attending [an event](#) in Hanoi in support of Ukraine. In August, police prohibited [human rights lawyer Vo An Don](#) and his family from leaving Vietnam for the United States, citing national security.

Freedom of Religion

The government restricts religious practice through legislation, registration requirements, and surveillance. Religious groups must get approval from, and register with, the government and operate under government-controlled management boards. While authorities allow government-affiliated churches and pagodas to hold worship services, they ban religious activities that they arbitrarily deem to be contrary to the “national interest,” “public order,” or “national unity,” including many ordinary types of religious functions.

Police monitor, harass, and sometimes violently crack down on religious groups operating outside government-controlled institutions. Unrecognized religious groups—including Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Christian, and Buddhist groups—face constant surveillance, harassment, and intimidation. Followers of independent religious groups are subject to public criticism, forced renunciation of faith, detention, interrogation, torture, and imprisonment. As of September 2021, Vietnam [acknowledged](#) that it had not officially recognized about 140 religious groups with approximately 1 million followers.

Children’s Rights

Violence against children, including sexual abuse, is pervasive in Vietnam, including at home and in schools. Numerous media reports have described cases of guardians, teachers, or government caregivers engaging in sexual abuse, beating children, or hitting them with sticks.

Women’s Rights

In April, poet Da Thao Phuong [publicly accused](#) a former colleague of raping her 23 years ago and explained how the case was hushed up. The case spread quickly over social media, inspiring hopes that it would serve as a springboard for growth of a #MeToo movement in Vietnam, but there was little follow up and the authorities took no action.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In recent years, the Vietnamese government has taken modest strides to recognize the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, including by removing prohibitions on same-sex relationships and legal gender change.

In August, Vietnam's Ministry of Health officially confirmed that [same-sex attraction and being transgender are not mental health conditions](#), and issued orders to hospitals and health providers to end discriminatory and abusive treatment of LGBT people.

Key International Actors

Vietnam tried to balance its relationships with China, its largest trade partner, and the United States, its second largest trade partner. On both the issues of Russia's invasion of [Ukraine](#) and US-China tension in the region, Vietnam proclaimed that it would not take sides.

Vietnam repeatedly voiced protests against China's military drills and increasing militarization on the disputed sea.

In March, Vietnam abstained from a vote at the United Nations General Assembly on passage of a resolution calling on Russia to end its military offensive in Ukraine and denouncing Russia's violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. In October, Vietnam again abstained from a vote to condemn Russia's unlawful annexations in Ukraine. In 2022, Vietnam celebrated the 10th anniversary of the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia.

In [May](#), Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh attended the US-Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit in Washington DC and met President Joe Biden at the White House. Ahead of the Summit, US legislators pressed Biden to raise human rights concerns with Pham Minh Chinh. While Biden did not publicly raise the issues, it is unclear if he mentioned them in private.

The European Union issued some [statements](#) of concern around intensifying repression in Vietnam and held fruitless human rights consultations with the government. In September, Bernd Lange, chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on International Trade, visited Vietnam. EU claims that the conclusion of a bilateral free trade agreement in 2020 would contribute to more freedom and open space for civil society in Vietnam proved wrong; the bloc had yet to make any use of the supposedly stronger [leverage](#) to address human rights abuses by Hanoi that the deal allegedly provides.

Australia's bilateral relationship with Vietnam continues to grow, even as an Australian citizen, [Chau Van Kham](#), remained in prison in Vietnam for his alleged involvement in an overseas political party declared unlawful by the Vietnamese government.

Japan remains the most important bilateral donor to Vietnam. In May, Japan [Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited Vietnam](#), and in September, Vietnam President Nguyen Xuan Phuc [visited Japan](#). As in previous years, [Japan failed](#) to use its economic leverage to publicly urge Vietnam to improve its human rights record.

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