

[Freedom House is an organization promoting civil rights and bourgeois democracy. The following is an excerpt focusing on the suppression of ideas and freedom of the press in Vietnam from their 2019 report on that country. (The full report is at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-world/2019> ) ]

## Civil Liberties

### D Freedom of Expression and Belief

#### D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	1 4
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Although the constitution recognizes freedom of the press, journalists and bloggers are constrained by numerous repressive laws and decrees. Those who dare to report or comment independently on controversial issues also risk intimidation and physical attack.

The criminal code prohibits speech that is critical of the government, while a 2006 decree prescribes fines for any publication that denies revolutionary achievements, spreads “harmful” information, or exhibits “reactionary ideology.” Decree 72, issued in 2013, gave the state sweeping new powers to restrict speech on blogs and social media. Websites considered reactionary are blocked, and internet service providers face fines and closure for violating censorship rules. The state controls all print and broadcast media.

In June 2018 the National Assembly approved a restrictive cybersecurity law that will, among other provisions, force companies like Facebook and Google to store information about Vietnamese users in Vietnam, making it potentially more accessible to state authorities. The law, which was set to come into force in

January 2019, could also lead technology companies to censor content and otherwise cooperate with state investigations.

New arrests, beatings, criminal convictions, and cases of mistreatment in custody involving journalists and bloggers continued to be reported throughout 2018. In July, authorities detained an independent journalist who often worked for US media outlets; he was still being held in pretrial detention at the end of the year. In August, authorities beat a jailed videographer affiliated with Radio Free Asia, possibly to compel him to testify against an environmental activist who was then on trial. Also in August, a well-known blogger and activist, Phạm Đoan Trang, who had been detained multiple times during the year, was one of at least three people who were singled out for beatings after a police raid on a dissident singer's concert. In October, under intense foreign pressure, Hanoi released prominent blogger Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh, known as "Mother Mushroom," from prison, where she was serving a 10-year term. She went into exile, and said the next month that the Vietnamese government has a concerted strategy of pushing bloggers and other online writers to go into exile. As of December, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that 11 journalists were behind bars in Vietnam as a result of their work.

**D2 0-4 pts**

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	1 4
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Religious freedoms remain restricted. All religious groups and most individual clergy members are required to join a party-controlled supervisory body and obtain permission for most activities. A 2016 Law on Belief and Religion, which has been gradually rolled out, reinforced registration requirements, will allow extensive state interference in religious groups' internal affairs, and gives

authorities broad discretion to penalize unsanctioned religious activity. Members of unregistered Christian, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and other religious groups also face regular arrests and harassment from local and provincial authorities, and dozens of people are believed to be behind bars in connection with their religious beliefs.

**D3 0-4 pts**

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	1 4
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Academic freedom is limited. University professors must refrain from criticizing government policies and adhere to party views when teaching or writing on political topics. There have been reports that university students who participated in human rights advocacy have been prevented from graduating.

**D4 0-4 pts**

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1 4
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Although citizens enjoy more freedom in private discussions than in the past, authorities continue to attack and imprison those who openly criticize the state, including on social media. The government engages in surveillance of private online activity.

**E Associational and Organizational Rights**

**E1 0-4 pts**

Is there freedom of assembly?	1 4
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Freedom of assembly is tightly restricted. Organizations must apply for official permission to assemble, and security forces routinely use excessive force to disperse unauthorized demonstrations. After nationwide anti-China protests in

June 2018, during which dozens of participants were assaulted and arrested, the courts convicted well over a hundred people of disrupting public order, and many were sentenced to prison terms. The protests were driven in part by opposition to a draft law allowing long-term leases of land in special economic zones that critics said would be dominated by Chinese companies. The legislation in question was postponed and still pending at year's end.

**E2 0-4 pts**

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	0 4
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A small but active community of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promotes environmental conservation, land rights, women's development, and public health. However, human rights organizations are generally banned, and those who engage in any advocacy that the authorities perceive as hostile or unwanted risk arrest and imprisonment.

Criminal prosecutions and violence against activists persisted in 2018. Among other incidents during the year, in June and July unknown assailants repeatedly attacked the home of a prominent labor activist. In August, a farmer and activist who had joined the June anti-China protests died after reportedly being beaten by police. Separately that month, environmental activist and blogger Lê Đình Lượng was sentenced to 20 years in prison after a five-hour trial on charges of attempting to overthrow the government and cause social disorder.

Foreign human rights activists also face restrictions. In September, for example, authorities detained and deported the secretary general of the International Federation for Human Rights after she arrived in the country to attend a World Economic Forum event.

**E3 0-4 pts**

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	0 4
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The Vietnam General Conference of Labor (VGCL) is Vietnam's only legal labor federation and is controlled by the CPV. The right to strike is limited by tight legal restrictions. In recent years the government has permitted hundreds of independent "labor associations" without formal union status to represent workers at individual firms and in some service industries. However, independent labor activists remain subject to harassment, travel restrictions, and heavy prison sentences.