

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

VIETNAM

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Vietnam	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	70	20
WWL 2018	69	18
WWL 2017	71	17
WWL 2016	66	20
WWL 2015	68	16

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note:

The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: 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 held in bounds by strict political control. Civil rights or freedom of religion will still be elusive, especially with the new law on religion enforced.

A "rising star" in the Communist Party was [surprisingly demoted](#) for corruption in May 2017, showing that the Party will fight off any perceived danger. Other members of the Communist Party have been sentenced to long prison terms for corruption and it is not clear if this is more about the Party's efforts to eradicate corruption or rather due to political in-fighting. After the death of the country's president at the age of 61 in September 2018, the General-Secretary of the Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, was appointed to take over the presidency, which shows that the [consolidation of Communist ideology](#) will remain key in the years to come.

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 the UK Home Office in 2014, [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. Whichever figures best reflect reality, both show that Buddhism and ethnic religions do overlap and the latter have a stronger influence than numbers may tell. Christians are tolerated as long as they do not challenge the existing order. 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. An estimated 82.6% of all Christians are Catholics according to WCD 2018.

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 Communist party line. This means that Human Rights or environmental activists – many of them Christians – often have to face being harassed, beaten, detained and sentenced. In June 2017, one Catholic activist was even expelled and [exiled to France](#), despite being a Vietnamese citizen. This policy has continued into 2018.

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 as well as Vietnam's policy of setting up Special Economic Zones, in which China is active. China is claiming the whole South China Sea as its possession, neglecting all claims other states may have, some of which are backed by international law. It 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. Despite all tensions, at least as far as ideology is concerned, Vietnam follows closely in emphasizing Communism.

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. Typical topics are protests against land-grabbing or ecological disasters and how local and national authorities dealt with it. 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, which came into force on 1 January 2018, brought some improvements on paper, its implementation so far did not bring any relief on the ground. 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. 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, especially Christians among the ethnic minorities will remain under the close watch of the authorities.

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 and one observer even called the “M-L-H” (Marx-Lenin-Ho Chi Minh) ideology a religious dogma. No one dares to openly doubt the dominance of the Communist Party but some would like to see a further opening up of the country. A wish that was countered by the General-Secretary of the Communist Party being appointed as president of the country as well. 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 protection of Communist dominance as top priority was made clear once more by two legal changes: 1) A revision of the penal code published on 20 June 2017, in which all lawyers are now required to inform the authorities if their clients are [threatening national security](#); 2) The introduction of new laws on internet control (see Persecution Dynamics below). 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.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Vietnam

- Recent country history: surprisingly demoted
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/demotion-05102017143505.html>
- Recent country history: consolidation of Communist ideology
<https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/meet-vietnams-new-president-the-communist-party-chief/>
- The religious landscape: only around 12%
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Vietnam
- The political landscape: exiled to France
<http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-expels-catholic-activist-to-france/79588>
- The political landscape: modern short-range missiles
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam-idUSKCN10K2NE?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Concluding remarks: threatening national security
<http://www.ucanews.com/news/revise-vietnamese-law-turns-lawyers-into-informers/79599>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
96,491,000	8,555,000	8.9

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

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?

Church networks: Vietnam	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	7,064,000	82.6
Protestant	1,343,000	15.7
Independent	568,000	6.6
Unaffiliated	17,400	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-438,000	-5.1
Total	8,554,400	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,477,000	17.3
Renewalist movement	828,000	9.7

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. 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. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

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 (estimations range to up to 80%) 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) or 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 (published in 2002), there were 230,000-400,000 Protestant Montagnards and 150,000-200,000 Catholics. More recent estimates are not available.

Religious context

Religious Context: Vietnam	Numbers	%
Christians	8,555,000	8.9
Muslim	169,000	0.2
Hindu	56,800	0.1
Buddhist	48,070,000	49.8
Ethnoreligionist	10,043,000	10.4
Jewish	350	0.0
Bahai	424,000	0.4
Atheist	5,972,000	6.2
Agnostic	11,734,000	12.2
Other	11,466,370	11.9

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to the last census in 2009, 57.5% of the population reported to be Buddhist, 34.7% reported to follow an ethnic religion. Christians accounted for 6.2%. However, it is likely that due to the strong bias against Christians, in an official census many people do not report their religious affiliation. This is especially true for Protestants as many of them come from the ethnic minorities, where the census was rather sketchy anyway.

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 strongly 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, detained or forcibly deported 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.

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- What church networks exist today?: “Cultural Profile”
<http://www.culturalorientation.net/content/search?SearchText=Montagnard&SearchButton=Search>

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 70 points, Vietnam ranked 20 in WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

Communist and post-Communist oppression: The Communist government monitors Christian activity and exercises a high level of pressure on all Christians. It is particularly suspicious of the ethnic minorities who live in the central and northern highlands, many of whom are Protestants.

Ethnic antagonism: Some estimates state that up to 80% of Protestant Christians have an ethnic minority background. Tribal leaders will often exclude Christians and new converts from the community, seeing them as traitors of their culture and identity.

Who is driving persecution?

The government from national to local level persecutes the Christian minority through laws - the newest law on religion being implemented on 1 January 2018. Ethnic group leaders regard Christians as traitors of their culture and identity. Villagers also work with the local authorities in disrupting Christian meetings, beating Christians and expelling them from their villages. Non-Christian relatives of Christians are also strong persecutors who cut family ties and deny inheritance; in some cases they force a Christian spouse to divorce and withhold the right of custody of children.

What it results in

Historical Christian communities like Roman Catholics enjoy a certain amount of freedom unless they become active politically which can lead to imprisonment. Where Catholic congregations own large plots of land, these are sometimes confiscated by the State for development purposes. Both non-traditional Protestants and converts from indigenous religions are persecuted more intensively, especially in the remote areas of central and northern Vietnam. Most belong to the country's ethnic minorities, like the Hmong, and face social exclusion, discrimination and attacks. Their homes are sometimes destroyed and they are then forced to leave their village. In several cases, Christians fled abroad and claimed asylum, e.g. in neighboring Cambodia, but were sent back due to Vietnamese pressure.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Vietnam	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	108	186	18	24

WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	1	1086	25	6	11
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Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- In 2018, Vietnam sentenced and jailed a number of Catholic activists, bloggers and Protestant pastors, for example Le Dinh Luong in August 2018 to a [20-year-sentence](#) for an alleged attempt of "overthrowing the government". The unprecedented move to deport a Catholic professor to France and a Protestant pastor to the United States in 2017, has been followed in 2018 by deporting prominent rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, and fellow jailed "Brotherhood for Democracy" group member Le Thu Ha (both Christians) to Germany in June 2018. Finally, in October 2018, famous Catholic blogger Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, better known as "Mother Mushroom", was freed after serving two years of her 10 year sentence, but only under the condition that she goes into exile to the USA.
- In several incidents, Catholic parishes and monasteries in Hanoi, Hue and Ho-Chi-Minh have been attacked and come under pressure to accept demolition and the expropriation of their land, partly at the hands of government-hired thugs.
- 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.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: 20-year-sentence <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/overthrow-08162018144518.html>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 70 points, Vietnam ranked 20 in WWL 2019, just one point higher than in WWL 2018. The score for violence is 1.6 points higher than last year, reflecting how the authorities resort to different forms of violence and seem willing to accept the international negative echo: Churches were closed and Christians forced to leave the country. The new regulations on religion, implemented from 1 January 2018 onwards, have not changed anything substantially, although on paper they looked like an improvement. Tighter regulations on online communication will help in restricting and limiting the space Christians enjoy even further. Pressure and violence against Christians belonging to the ethnic minorities continued unchanged.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Vietnam	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Weak
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Medium
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Very weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

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 one observer noted when stating that Marxist-Leninist-Ho Chi Minh-ideology is “quasi-religious”. 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 are additionally 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 USA 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 and according to existing reports, the growth of Christianity has continued. It should be noted that all non-Catholic Christians in Vietnam self-identify as Evangelicals, many of whom are Pentecostal or Charismatic.

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, where ethnic religions are still strong, 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

Drivers of Persecution: Vietnam	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	WEAK	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	VERY STRONG	WEAK	WEAK	WEAK
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Weak	Weak	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	-	Weak	Strong	-	Medium	Weak	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	Very weak	Very weak	-	Very weak	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	Weak	Weak	-	Weak	-	-	Very weak
One's own (extended) family	-	Weak	Medium	-	Weak	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-	Weak	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression: 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 at the grassroots level, often undergoing misinterpretation. If violence is needed, the government prefers to hire local thugs, which are not directly connected to them, but locally known

as "Red Flag groups". Occasionally, ethnic group leaders, citizens and even one's own family can become additional drivers of persecution.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism: 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 - giving Christians beatings, expelling them from their village, or disrupting 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. To counter this erosion, the Communist ideology is emphasized even stronger and 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, detained and sentenced or expelled, two of them in June 2018 to Germany (see under Violence).

One additional challenge is the lasting difficult relationship with Vietnam's big neighbor China. Although 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 being claimed by China exclusively, 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 also started to build military structures on reefs and rocks to support its claim. After violent reactions and Vietnam's deployment of [modern short-range missiles](#) on its islets in the Sea, China and Vietnam came to an [agreement](#) in May 2017 not to increase tensions further. Whether this means that relations are warming up again, remains to be seen; interestingly, the apparent growing closeness to former arch-enemy USA has not continued. Another point of contention is the setting up of special economic zones leased long-term to China. The government quashed all protests against this policy [harshly](#).

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. It has become increasingly clear that the Communist Party will not [reform its politics](#) the way it reshaped its economy more than 30 years ago, despite that reform policy being quite a success. Civil rights and freedom of religion remain elusive and Christians not surprisingly, did not see any increase in freedom or any real benefit from the [new law on religion](#). In October 2018, the Chairman of the Communist Party was elected to fill in the office of presidency following the death of Tran Dai Quang who died in office in September 2018 at the age of 61. This shows that ideology is seen as key and the leadership is trying to close its ranks.

Christian communities and how they are affected

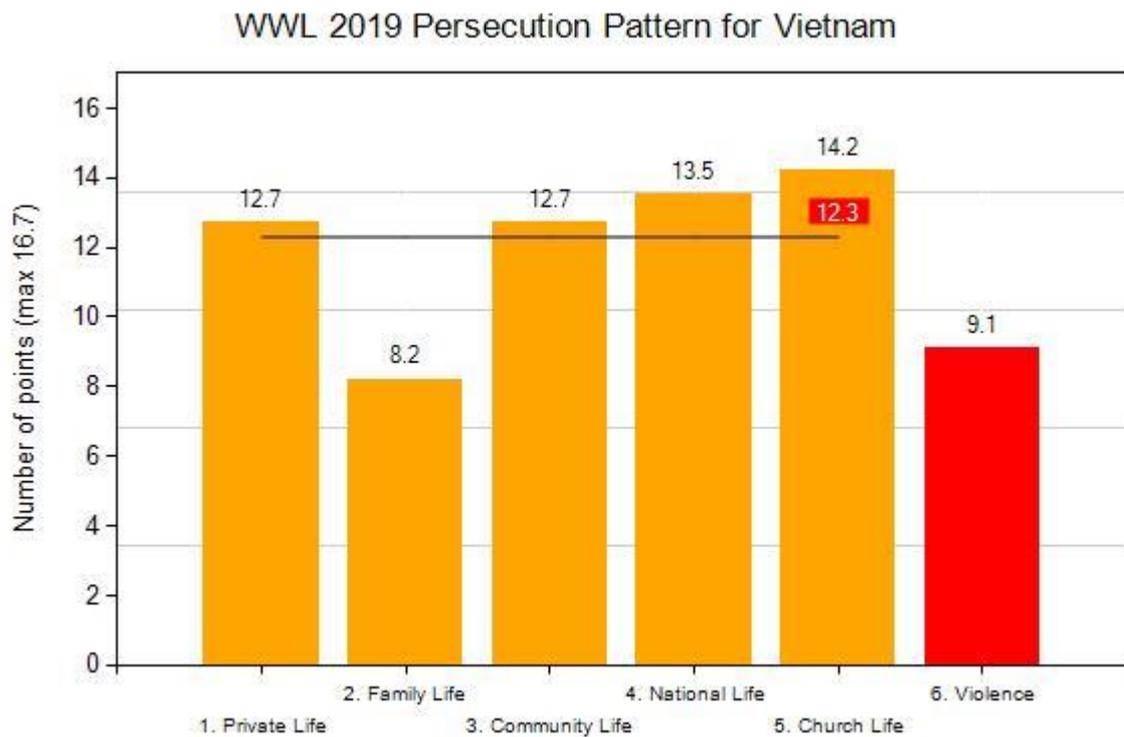
Communities of expatriate Christians: As they cannot mix with local churches, expatriate Christians are involuntarily isolated. This category includes foreign workers from Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines, who face pressure by being monitored.

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 increased and the arrest of Catholic activists show that historical Christian communities continue to face severe problems.

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.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Vietnam shows:

- Pressure on Christians in Vietnam remained very high in almost all spheres of life, causing the average pressure to remain at 12.3 in WWL 2019.
- 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 strong pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled by increasing levels

of Communist rhetoric, the new religion law and its cumbersome requirements and a continuing suspicion towards converts as well as to all ethnic and religious minorities.

- Violence against Christians increased from a score of 7.4 in WWL 2018 to 9.1 in WWL 2019. There were no killings reported, but many churches have been attacked. In the reporting period, Vietnam continued its policy of arresting and exiling outspoken Christian dissidents to the USA and Germany.

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 Christians from families with strong connections to the Communist Party.

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). 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. Christian children are sometimes prevented from attending school because of their faith or that of their parents. Ethnic minority Christian children are sometimes denied scholarships which are open to poor ethnic minority children, because of their faith. They receive harsher treatment from teachers and are easy targets for being bullied as well.

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. In northern Vietnam, police threatened church members with removing their health benefits if they continue to meet as a church. In another case, three families were expelled from their house which was then destroyed and their farmland confiscated.

National sphere:

Vietnam follows its Communist ideology strictly 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 laws known under the heading "Decree 92".

The new comprehensive "Law on Religion and Belief" came into effect on 1 January 2018. Analyzing the law, the 2017 IRF Country report by the US State Department states: "The new law reduces the waiting period for a religious group, and its affiliate group or groups, to obtain recognition from 23 years to five years, reduces the number of religion-related procedures requiring advance approval from authorities, aims to clarify the process by which religious organizations can obtain registration for their activities and recognition, and for the first time specifies the right of legal status for recognized religious groups and their affiliates. The law also specifies that religious groups be allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws, but does not specify which law controls in instances in which the law may contradict other laws, or where other laws do not have clear provisions, such as the Law on Education."

Thus there are a few sections in which the new law could be considered to be an improvement for Christians but the practical implementation so far shows no relief for churches. The regulations on registration in particular continue to create great difficulties; the bureaucratic nightmare for churches goes on. 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 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

as several incidents in May and July 2018 showed. 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:

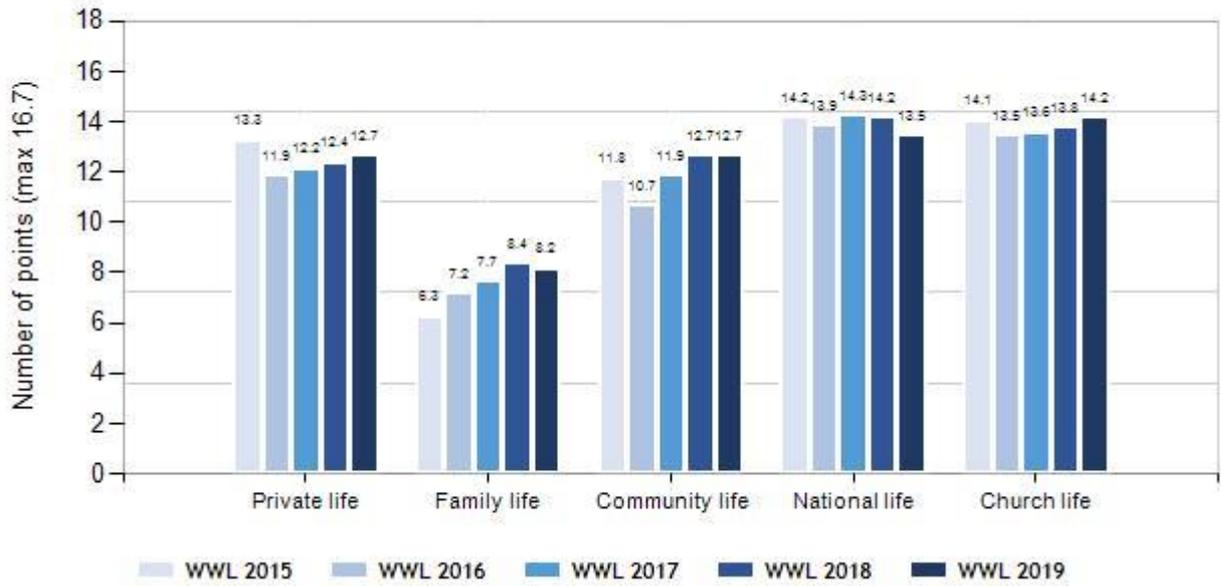
Prominent rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, and fellow jailed Brotherhood for Democracy group member Le Thu Ha were sentenced to 15 years in prison in April 2018 for an "attempt to overthrow the Communist government". On 7 June 2018, they were released and [expelled](#) from their home country to Germany. In August 2018, Le Dinh Luong 2018 was even sentenced to a [20-year-sentence](#) for an alleged attempt of "overthrowing the government".

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

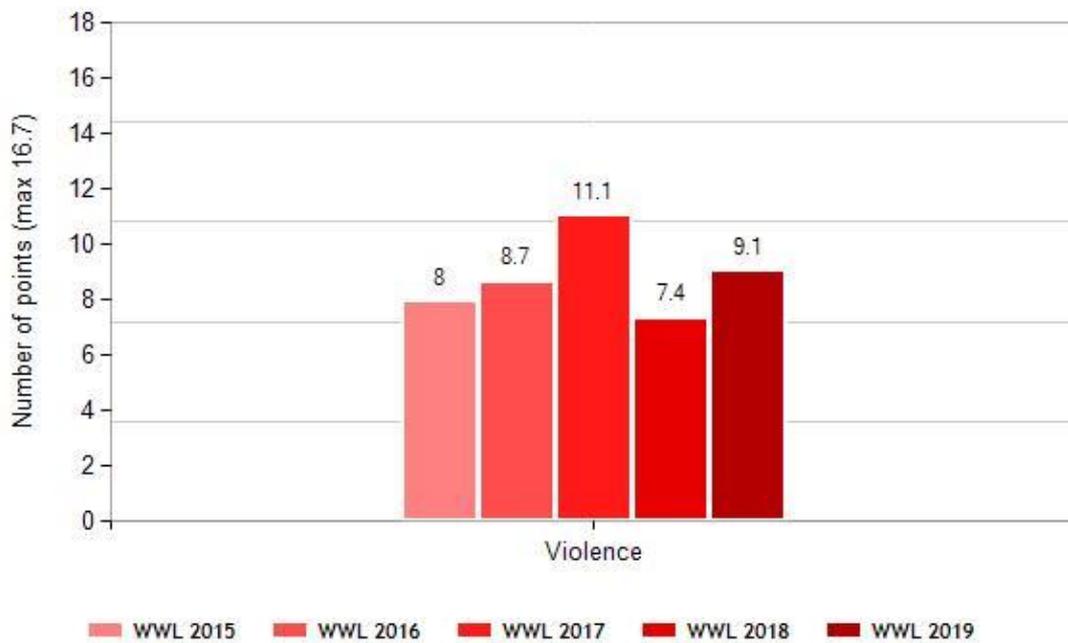
The five-years-trend shows in Chart 1 that the pressure on Christians has always (except in *Family life*) been at a very high level. The pressure in *Church life* and *National life* has more or less levelled off at an extreme and very high level respectively, partly due to the newly implemented law on religion. Similarly, although with lower scores, the very high pressure in *Community life* would appear to have stabilized. As can be seen in Chart 2, the average level of pressure on Christians has more or less stabilized at a very high level - only dipping below a score of 12.0 in WWL 2016 and WWL 2017. Persecution in Vietnam has always been violent. Chart 3 shows the very high level scores over all 5 years, with a peak in WWL 2017. Killings (as in the WWL 2017 reporting period) are a rare exception, the preferred means of the Communist government is prison and/or deportation.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Vietnam (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Vietnam	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	12.3
2018	12.3
2017	11.9
2016	11.4
2015	12.0

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Vietnam (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Generally, persecution in Vietnam does not distinguish according to gender. As women and girls are socially in a weaker position, they are more at risk of sexual abuse in police custody. However, it is very difficult to establish how many women have been victims of sexual harassment and assault, due to the particularly sensitive nature of the violation. Women in the poorer regions of Vietnam are as well prone to human trafficking in order to be married to Chinese men, but this is not related to religion. As in most cases, men are still the main breadwinners in the family; if Christian men lose their job or are driven out of the village, this will affect the whole family. Most pastors are male, and it is often the pastors who are targeted for pressure when the authorities are seeking to close down a church.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Being Communist, the government acts against all religions, including Buddhists, Cao Dai, 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 2019 reporting period – even the country. Particularly members of the country's ethnic minorities are on the authorities' radar. As is well known from all Communist governments, the authorities seek to keep all religious groups under control. As long as they are organized under government-controlled councils and thus meet with the government's knowledge, the latter will leave them alone, except for controlling what is preached. Independent groups, however, come under serious pressure from the government, especially their leaders. This can lead to serious health issues and even end up with the imprisonment of [unruly monks](#) from one of the many Buddhist sects.

Future outlook

The political outlook: 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 (as discussed above in "Context"). On the contrary, the authorities are increasingly relying on Communist rhetoric and ideology and act against dissidents and all movements perceived as threatening to its rule. Dreams of an open civil society in Vietnam with public 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](#) 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 be targeted by this law. Another sign for this is a [new law on online privacy](#), limiting freedom in the country even further. The fact that private user-data has to be submitted to authorities clearly shows how important control for the government is. Vietnam's [June 2018 law on cyber security](#) forces internet companies such as Facebook and Google to store their users' data in the country and open offices there, leaving the very active Christian (especially Catholic) community there, barely any space.

The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- **Communist and post-Communist oppression:** It is no surprise that the new "Law on Religion and Belief" does not bring any tangible positive change. The registration and running of Christian churches will be at least as cumbersome as it is now, and speaking about one's faith in public is likely to remain dangerous. 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. In the WWL 2019 reporting period, there were visible similarities between both countries as far as the growing pressure on Christians and the emphasis on ideology is concerned.

- **Ethnic antagonism:** Many Vietnamese follow age-old traditions of worshiping ancestors and spirits. Whoever decides not to join in these traditions puts themselves outside of the family and community and will therefore be put under strong pressure to belong again. As family bonds are still strong, especially in the rural areas, this pressure will not cease for Christians coming from this background.

Conclusion: In a surprising move in September 2018, Vietnam introduced the Chinese Yuan [as parallel currency](#) in seven provinces bordering China in an effort to boost economy, against the warnings of economic experts. Unlike China, Vietnam struggles to keep online dissent in check, as the country is among the top ten in having the highest number of Facebook members - a reported [59 million](#). But it will strive to crackdown heavily on blogs showing deviating thought as shown by the [sentencing](#) of the Catholic blogger known as “Mother Mushroom” to 10 years imprisonment in June 2017, her appeal being rejected in [December 2017](#). The fact that the Vietnamese government [kidnapped](#) the former chairman of state-run Petro Vietnam from Germany in August 2017, thereby annoying an important ally, and subsequently sentenced him to death, shows the growing boldness of Vietnam’s leadership. He was [sentenced to life imprisonment](#) in February 2018, despite all protests and investigations into those assisting in the abduction. This is not good news for any form of public dissent.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: "Montagnards"
<https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/vietnam-montagnards-10232018155849.html>
- Context: modern short-range missiles
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam-idUSKCN10K2NE?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Context: agreement
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-vietnam-idUSKCN18B0HK?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Context: harshly
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-security-trials/vietnam-jails-10-more-for-protests-over-economic-zones-idUSKBN1KD1CW>
- Context: reform its politics
<https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/the-beginning-of-a-political-doi-moi-takeaways-from-the-vcps-seventh-plenum/>
- Context: new law on religion.
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/vietnams-religion-policy-practice-contradictions-continue/>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: expelled
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-frees-exiles-jailed-christian-human-rights-lawyer/82511>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: 20-year-sentence
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/overthrow-08162018144518.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: unruly monks
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/hermit-sentence-01232018153825.html>

- Future outlook: report clients
<http://www.ucanews.com/news/revised-vietnamese-law-turns-lawyers-into-informers/79599>
- Future outlook: new law on online privacy
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Vietnam's-new-law-on-online-privacy-and-freedom-of-thought-generates-fear-44159.html>
- Future outlook: June 2018 law on cyber security
https://international.la-croix.com/news/vietnams-communists-intensify-control-of-internet/8161?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=28-07-2018&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae
- Future outlook: as parallel currency
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Hanoi-gives-green-light-to-Yuan-in-seven-provinces.-Economists:-Damaging-for-the-country-44858.html>
- Future outlook: 59 million
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>
- Future outlook: sentencing
<http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnamese-catholic-blogger-sentenced-to-10-years-in-jail/79638>
- Future outlook: December 2017
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/appeal-11302017162232.html>
- Future outlook: kidnapped
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-security/vietnam-court-sentences-to-death-petrovietnam-ex-chairman-in-mass-trial-idUSKCN1C40KW?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Future outlook: sentenced to life imprisonment
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-security/court-hands-vietnam-oil-official-another-life-sentence-for-corruption-idUSKBN1FP0FU?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

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World Watch Monitor news articles

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