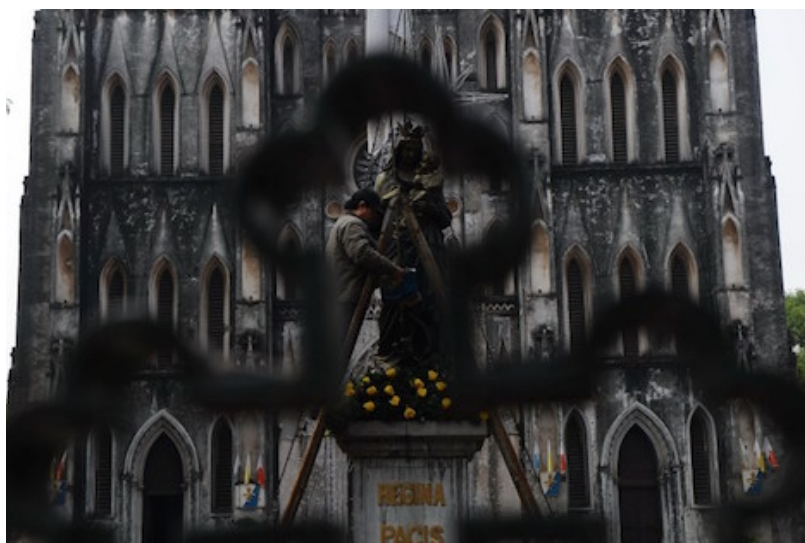


Vietnam to pass restrictive religion bill

Law would require religious groups to register with government or be outlawed



Vietnam is moving closer to passing a restrictive law on religion, Christian groups have warned.

The country's most powerful political organ, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, discussed the bill Aug. 14 with few signs major amendments would be made before passing next year, said the religious freedom advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

“We know from our research that many religious leaders and community representatives have serious concerns about the draft, which could, in its current form, lead to further interference into religious life in Vietnam,” said Andy Dipper, the group's chief operating officer.

Lawmakers consulted with religious groups on the law — currently in its fourth draft — although there have been few subsequent changes to its wording so far.

Critics of the draft warn it would require all group religious activity to be registered with authorities or face being outlawed, a system similar to China.

Vietnam has no current law managing faith groups, instead relying on a religious ordinance passed in 2004, followed by decrees in 2005 and 2013.

The draft law — if passed — would be considered "a step backward", said Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the Vatican's nonresident representative to Vietnam.

"The pontifical representation is monitoring the ongoing legislation about religion and belief," Archbishop Girelli told ucanews.com.

"The local Church hopes to be more involved in the consultation in view of the new law being passed."

Setback

In a strongly worded letter to Hanoi in May, Vietnamese bishops said the draft shows the communist regime "completely imposes its power on religious organizations and creates loopholes for executive bodies to carry out abuse of power".

Observers warn the law represents the first major setback for religious freedom since Vietnam re-established ties with the Vatican, leading to Girelli's appointment in 2011.

The U.N.'s special envoy for freedom of religion, Heiner Bielefeldt, made a landmark visit to the country in July last year in another sign of progress.

Vietnam ranks among the least religious nations in the world with just 27 percent of people recognized as followers of organized religions, according to a census last year. However, the population represents a diverse and often overlapping mix of faiths, with as many as 45 percent practicing folk religions,

more than 12 percent Buddhist and nearly seven percent Catholic.

While authorities have recently improved their treatment of followers of organized religions, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the United Nations, minority faiths continue to face harassment by authorities, particularly those viewed as a political threat.

Minority Christian Montagnards living in Vietnam's southern highlands face among the worst persecution of any group, Human Rights Watch said in a report in June.

Montagnard De Ga Protestants and Ha Mon Catholics continue to flee to Cambodia to escape “propaganda, proselytization and struggle” against unauthorized forms of Christianity. But many are forced back across the border by a Cambodian government that maintains close ties to Vietnam, Human Rights Watch said.

ucanews.com reporter, Beijing