Vietnam

Hill-tribe Christians in the Central Highlands are especially at risk of state persecution
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Anti-Christian violence is an ever-present danger for church leaders and members in Vietnam, which has been under Communist rule since 1975 and where Christians make up just 9% of the population. In just two incidents from 2012, a pastor was beaten unconscious with iron bars, suffering multiple injuries, and a woman was left with a fractured skull when a congregation was attacked as they gathered for a service; dozens of others were injured. The assaults were the work of thugs believed to have been hired by the authorities to harass and intimidate Christians.

It is striking that those injured in these incidents belonged to churches that were actually registered with the authorities. Registration is required by law and allows congregations to obtain official approval for their places of worship. But registered churches are regulated and controlled, and their legal protections are vague and uncertain. The registration process is also slow, and some applications are unsuccessful.

The position of Vietnam's unregistered churches is even more insecure. Because their activities are illegal, the government sees them as a threat to its authority, and they are particularly vulnerable to harassment, arrests and imprisonment. In 2012 the pastor of a house church was jailed for eleven years on a charge of "disrupting national unity". His congregation is based in the Central Highlands, where the authorities have been increasing the pressure on the local hill-tribe Christians, who suffer discrimination, intimidation and violence at its hands.

Despite the authorities' supposed approval of charitable work, the past year has also seen cruel attacks in the capital, Hanoi, on both a Christian orphanage and a church-run colony for leprosy patients. The children were beaten by the attackers, and the residents of the colony were terrorised by abuse and threats.

All this is happening in a country whose constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief. Yet local officials often claim that nation-level laws do not apply under their jurisdiction. They also point out that the 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief states that it is illegal to "undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity", and that the Penal Code sets down penalties for offences such as "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and non-believers".

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