

Country Updates on Human Rights and Democracy 2019

Vietnam

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2019, Vietnam expanded its legal framework in line with international standards, particularly in the field of labour rights. However, the trend of shrinking the space for civil society continued.

The new cyber security law, which entered into force in January, provide the opportunity for restricting freedom of expression online.

The relevant authorities continue to harass, intimidate, apply travel bans, physically attack, arbitrarily detain and imprison political and human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers for peacefully expressing their opinion, either online or offline. Human rights defenders face harsh conditions in detention, including denial of access to medical care, legal counsel and family contact, transfer to remote prisons as well as lengthy sentences. Freedom of assembly is also arbitrarily curtailed. Deaths in police custody remain a serious concern.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's priorities for 2019 continued to be on freedom of expression (online and offline), freedom of assembly, labour rights, freedom of religion or belief, abolition of the death penalty and fight against human trafficking. The EU advocated curbing the emerging trend of intimidation and criminalisation of environmental defenders. The EU also focussed on the implementation of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) and on the follow up to the recommendations of the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights featured prominently across bilateral discussions with Vietnamese authorities at all levels. The EU commented draft legislation and offered technical input. The EU–Vietnam human rights dialogue took place on 19 February in Hanoi.

The EU substantially advocated and provided technical assistance for the revision of the labour code and the ratification of all core ILO Conventions and their implementation. The Government of Vietnam ratified the Core ILO Convention 98 on freedom of association. Moreover, the National Assembly adopted the new labour code, which contains the main principles of core ILO Conventions. Vietnam also committed to ratify the pending ILO Conventions 105 on forced labour in 2020 and 87 on freedom of association by 2023.

In bilateral discussions as well as at the human rights dialogue, the EU expressed serious concerns about the situation of human rights defenders and the negative trend of detentions, travel bans, arrests and sentencing meant to restrict freedom of expression both online and offline. The EU repeatedly called the Vietnamese authorities to immediately release all bloggers and human right activists imprisoned for having peacefully expressed their views.

Finally, the EU regularly requested the possibility to observe the trials of human rights defenders and insisted on access to legal aid, medical support and family visits for prisoners.

4. EU financial engagement: Civil society organisations' actions are supported through grants in the domains of children's rights, gender equality and prevention of gender based violence, empowerment of civil society, business and human rights, as well as cultural rights.

In addition, the EU and the relevant Vietnamese authorities implemented activities on the prevention of human trafficking.

5. Multilateral context: In January 2019, during the 3rd cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, Vietnam received 291 recommendations: it fully accepted 220 recommendations and 21 partially.

Following the third periodic report to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, the Human Rights Committee adopted recommendations in August 2019. Vietnam is expected to report on the implementation of these recommendations by March 2021.