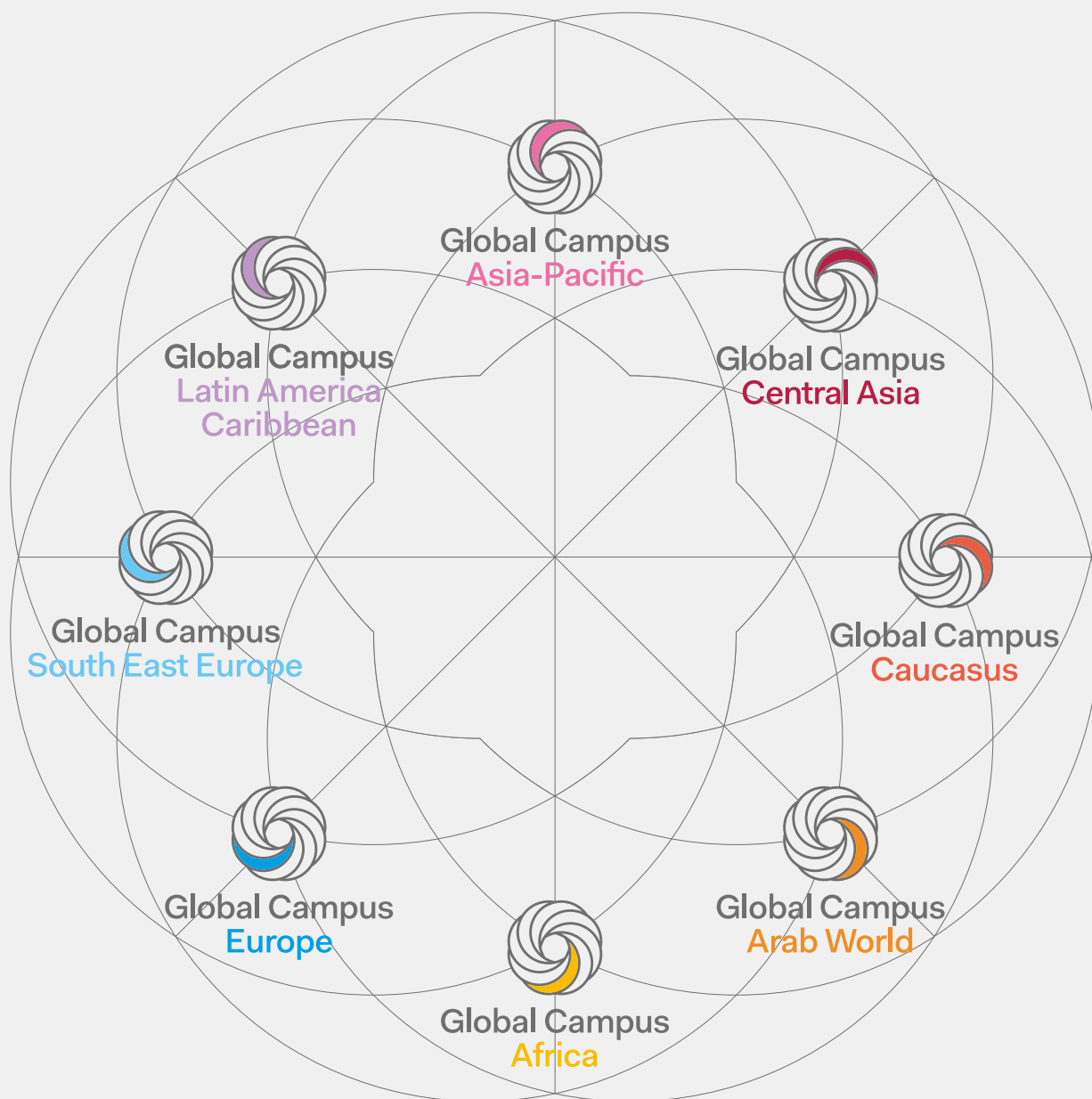




Minh Nguyen

Censorship at the intersection of academic freedom and freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Vietnam







Global Campus of Human Rights

This policy brief is part of the **7th edition of the Global Campus Policy Observatory**, which revolves around the research project on 'Protecting, promoting and enjoying academic freedom: trends, challenges and impacts from a human rights-based approach', which was conceptualized and led by GC Research Manager Dr. Chiara Altafin and involves a team of eight policy analysts selected among alumni* of GC regional programmes, namely Meline Avagyan (CES - GC Caucasus), Anida Gjurgjiali (ERMA - GC South East Europe), Lakshita Kanhiya (HRDA - GC Africa), Luis Fernando Herrera Martínez (LATMA - GC Latin America and the Caribbean), Mostafa Masjedi Arani (ArMA - GC Arab World), Minh Nguyen (APMA - GC Asia Pacific), Dr. Nikolaos Sousos (EMA - GC Europe), and Aylai Tenizbaeva (MAHRS - GC Central Asia). Research outputs include workshop presentations, policy briefs, advocacy plans, and webinars held in cooperation with the GC E-Learning Department.

This policy brief is written by **Nguyen Quach Cong Minh**, a human rights advocate dedicated to civil society development in Vietnam. He holds a Master's degree in Master's in Human Rights and Democratisation in Asia Pacific (APMA) from Mahidol University, Thailand, and Kathmandu School of Law, Nepal. Minh is also an Alumnus of the U.S. State Department's YSEALI Professional Fellows Program, which took place in Washington, D.C., and Nebraska. Minh specializes in international advocacy. He currently works to advocate at the UN human rights mandates on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), human trafficking, LGBTQ+ rights, freedom of expression, and prisoners of conscience. He has spoken at numerous global forums, including the IRF Summit in Washington, D.C., the UPR pre-session, CEDAW, ICCPR reviews in Geneva, and the High-level Conference on FoRB in Prague. Additionally, he manages a Bangkok-based project that guides urban refugees and asylum seekers through the UNHCR status determination process, resettlement, and helps them secure emergency aid.

Contact: nguyenquachcongminh@gmail.com

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Minh Nguyen ¹

Executive summary

This policy brief focuses on censorship policies from Communist countries, with a particular focus on Vietnam, which affect academic freedom and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Shaped by a political framework rooted in Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, Vietnam's expression environment remains one of the most tightly controlled in Southeast Asia. The country's one-party state maintains extensive control over public discourse, academic sphere and inquiry, and religious life. It heavily censors university-related publications, especially related to sensitive religious issues. At the same time, online publications, diaspora distribution and independent publishers have sought to challenge state censorship, prompting a heavy crackdown from the government.

While the 2013 Constitution recognises everyone's right to conduct scientific or technological research, or literary or artistic creation, freedom of expression and freedom of belief and religion, these rights are systematically restricted through a combination of legal instruments, ideological control and self-censorship. Using the art of 'governmentality', the Vietnam Communist Party has controlled academics, students and religious people through a diverse, often non-coercive set of techniques. It encourages people to self-regulate and adjust to its ideology. Academic institutions remain under its strict oversight, with curricula, research topics and publications subject to political vetting. Religious studies, history, political science and sociology are particularly censored when they intersect with sensitive topics such as history, freedom of thought, consciences or indigenous religious relations. Scholars, activists and religious leaders who challenge state narratives face harassment, dismissal, arrest or imprisonment.

By undertaking a human rights perspective, this policy brief addresses how censorship at the intersection of academic freedom and freedom of thought, conscience and religion is not merely a series of isolated violations, but a systemic pattern rooted in the state's political architecture. The central theme of this paper is the politics of state-led vernacularisation processes, where the government normalises the idea that universities, academics and religious leaders need to be self-censored, and the government maintains the absolute authority to censor or ban any forms of research, books and even religious teachings. The brief calls for a shift toward a human rights-based governance framework for academic and religious regulation, grounded in international legal obligations and the nine principles articulated by the UN Working Group on Academic Freedom.

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Introduction

Censorship in Vietnam is not merely a restriction on freedom of speech; it is a comprehensive system that shapes how people think, study, worship and understand the country's history. Emblematically, Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America* was published in Vietnamese under the title *The Governing of People in America* because the word 'democracy' is sensitive. In this context, academic freedom and freedom of thought, conscience and religion are deeply intertwined. They are the backbone of any society committed to human dignity, pluralism and democratic governance. Understanding censorship in Vietnam, therefore, requires a human-rights-based perspective that situates academic freedom within the broader bunch of rights that are enshrined in international law.

As a one-party state, Vietnam maintains extensive control over universities, research institutions and religious communities. This control is exercised through legal restrictions, administrative oversight, ideological monitoring and punitive measures, which are not in line with Vietnam's binding obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Besides grounding its analysis in these hard law standards, this policy brief also takes into account the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom which were drafted by an international working group, presented in 2023 at the UN Human Rights Council (which took note with appreciation of them in Res 59/9 of 2025), and also endorsed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education (WGAF 2024; Shaheed 2024: paras 20–23). They articulate nine crucial aspects of academic freedom: (1) the right to develop knowledge and ideas; (2) protection by international human rights law; (3)

institutional autonomy; (4) intramural and extramural expression; (5) access to information; (6) freedoms of movement and association; (7) essentiality to all education levels; (8) students' right to academic freedom; and (9) shared responsibility for its respect, protection and promotion (WGAF 2024). These principles are seen as a useful guidance to adopt a comprehensive approach to academic freedom; they can be contextualised and applied regionally. By applying them to Vietnam, the policy brief addresses how censorship at the intersection of academic freedom and freedom of thought, conscience and religion is not merely a series of isolated violations, but a systemic pattern rooted in the state's political architecture.

According to Michel Foucault, who analysed how governments control populations through 'governmentality', this concept describes the modern techniques of governance that shape behaviour and thinking. The history of the expansion of the power of the modern state is the increase in the ability to make people feel constantly monitored, thereby voluntarily adjusting their behaviour according to the state's wishes. The central theme of this policy brief is the politics of state-led vernacularisation processes, where the government normalises the idea that universities, academics and religious leaders need to be self-censored, and the government maintains the absolute authority to censor or ban any forms of research, books and even religious teachings.

Within this context, academic freedom and the free circulation of ideas face substantial restrictions. Scholars, students, writers, publishers and religionists operate under a system where the access or dissemination of knowledge may be contingent upon political considerations rather than academic merit or freethinking. There would not be academic freedom without freedom of thought.

Problem description

Vietnam's 2013 Constitution in article 40 recognises everyone's 'right to conduct scientific or technological research, or literary or artistic creation, and to enjoy the benefits brought about by those activities'; in article 25 it guarantees 'freedom of speech and freedom of the press', the right of access to

information, the right to assembly, the right to association, and the right to demonstrate; and in article 24 it recognises 'freedom of belief and religion'. However, these rights are subordinated to the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV or Communist Party)'s policy, which can change drastically and

unpredictably. CPV controls tightly the publishing industry, social media, newspapers and religious activities. Anything deemed politically subversive to the idea of one-party control will be heavily modified or even banned. Related structural constraints affecting academic freedom deserve special attention.

a. Outlaw ban of books

Academic freedom has been suppressed in cases involving historically complex or politically sensitive figures. The censorship on Trương Vĩnh Ký (Petrus Ký), a famous yet controversial scholar during the French colonisation of Vietnam, provides a salient example. Scholar Truong Vinh Ky (1837–1898) is a prominent Christian Vietnamese historian who contributed widely to the development of the current writing alphabet system of Vietnam (Chu Quoc Ngu). He was the first editor of *Gia Dinh Bao*, the first Vietnamese newspaper to promote the alphabet written system. Though celebrated for his contributions to modern Vietnamese literature and culture, his collaboration with French colonisers and Christian background led the CPV to view him as unpatriotic. The book about his life was banned four days before its release (Phan Huy Lê 2017), showing the Vietnamese Government's censorship.

The book *Petrus Ký, The Injustice of the Century*, edited by the veteran researcher Nguyen Dinh Dau, is an elaborate work that collects articles by many authors past and present. It had been accepted by the Publishing Department and passed the legal retention period, meaning its circulation is allowed, and was organised by publishing units to launch at Saigon Book Street on the morning of 8 January 2017. Invitations to the launch were sent out. But unexpectedly, on 4 January 2017, an 'oral order' was issued to cancel the book launch. Many sources of information from within the relevant circles said that this order came from the opinion of a retired former leader of Ho Chi Minh City sent to the competent 'superior' (Phan Huy Lê 2017).

The CPV's view and outlaw ban of the book erase the achievements of scholar Truong Vinh Ky, also denying the study by researcher Nguyen Dinh Dau. This act deprived intellectuals of their freedom of thought and academic freedom, denouncing to the public the methods of stifling the freedom of publication that is officially protected by the Constitution and other national laws.

b. Academic censorship

To understand the CPV's strict control on academics, we need to understand the history of the party. At the start of the Vietnam War, when the country was

divided into two, the Communist Party started to crack down on academics in North-Vietnam in the late 1950s, including those with high ranking in the government. This movement later became known as the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair, when the intellectuals, who were mainly influenced by the French colonisers, issued many newspapers or publications which demanded freedom of speech, creativity and academic independence. In 1956, the government began to retaliate against the intellectuals and condemned the publications as 'anti-socialist elements' (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 2011; Thụy Khuê 2004). The government also began to harass the editors of Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm for opposing the publishing law because they did not deposit three copies of the journal to the censored agencies before publication. As a result, in 1958, about 400 writers were sent to the re-education camps or asked to undertake self-criticism. The Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair was short in the North Vietnamese political history; however, it still shaped the contemporary Vietnamese society. As the earliest and most formative manifestation of organised intellectual dissent under the Communist Party's rule, the party's crackdown on it has not changed much over the years (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 2011).

The CPV still controls heavily over academic institutions and scholars. Specifically, article 55(7) of the 2012 Law on Higher Education (amended and supplemented in 2018) stipulates that lecturers are allowed to 'remain independent in teaching and scientific research in harmony with interests of the State and society'.

Notably, in 2023, Colonel, Master of Science Truong Thanh Quang from the National Defence Academy published in the *People's Army Newspaper* an article titled 'Be wary of the rhetoric of "promoting academic freedom" aimed at undermining the ideological foundations of the Party'. This mentioned that 'hostile and reactionary forces' were using academic freedom to 'separate education from politics and undermine the ideological foundation of the Party' (Trương Thanh Quảng 2023). This paper shows the precaution of the CPV against the idea of academic freedom. This framing clearly positions academic freedom not as a safeguarded human right but as a potential vector of subversion, legitimising heightened scrutiny and control.

In reality, Vietnamese higher education institutions, irrespective of their level of independence from the government, always have mandatory content for courses related to Marxist-Leninist philosophy, Ho Chi Minh thought, and the CPV history. This even concerns foreign-funded universities, like Fulbright Vietnam and Vietnam-German University, who also

need to include those subjects inside their curriculum (BBC News 2024). This requirement ensures that higher education operates, at least in part, as a vehicle for ideological reproduction rather than a forum for critical inquiry.

Significantly, the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) updates in 2025 and 2026 ranked Vietnam at the bottom of 20-30 percent of countries with the least index (Kinzelbach et al 2025 and 2026). At the individual level, AFI indicators include the freedom to research and teach, the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination and the freedom of academic and cultural expression, while at the institutional level, AFI indicators include institutional autonomy and campus integrity.

In this last regard, in February 2026 the Ministry of Home Affairs published a paper titled 'Autonomy in Public Service Institutions – Human Resource Policy in the Context of University Autonomy', which discusses university autonomy and the relationship with academic freedom. This research mentioned the Ministry's efforts to allow universities to have a certain autonomy. However, the Vietnamese Government seems to tend to explain university autonomy as independence from the financial and administrative process rather than as academic independence (Ministry of Home Affairs 2026).

These findings align with documented cases of retaliation against scholars who challenge politically sensitive narratives or powerful actors. For instance, Pham Dinh Quy, a lecturer at Ton Duc Thang University, was arrested 'urgently' on 23 September 2020. The indictment was announced shortly afterward, related to his accusation that Bui Van Cuong, the CPV Secretary of Dak Lak province, plagiarised his doctoral dissertation. Dr Quy was arrested for daring to expose the plagiarism of Bui Van Cuong, a CPV provincial leader, meaning he is one of the few hundred elite members of the CPV Central Committee (Trung 2020).

Furthermore, the Vietnamese Government, on the one hand, has tried to make themselves open for academic freedom but, on the other hand, has tried to limit the impact of that freedom. In November 2025, several scholars were reported to be excluded from the speaker lineup, which was shortened at the last minute, at the 7th International Conference on Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi, which was attended by CPV General Secretary To Lam, because of the sensitivity of their topics that might have hurt the CPV (The Vietnamese Magazine 2025). It is also reported that officials responsible for censoring foreign guests attending the conference identified 19 guests as

'politically and security concerns', resulting in many scholars being excluded from the list of speakers (BBC News 2025).

c. Closure of independent publishers

Beyond formal academic institutions, the state has also targeted independent publishing initiatives that seek to circumvent official censorship. Entities such as the 'Nhà Xuất Bản Giấy Vụn' (Paper Scraps Publishing House), the 'Nhà Xuất Bản Vô Danh' (No Name Publishing House) and the 'Nhà Xuất Bản Tự Do' (Liberal Publishing House) have attempted to introduce politically and philosophically diverse texts into the Vietnamese public sphere.

The first publisher who tried to challenge the government censorship law was the 'Paper Scraps' publishing house (Nhà Xuất Bản Giấy Vụn). They tried to publish books, poems and novels that criticised the Vietnamese Government and were sensitive to the communist regime, like *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. They started an independent publishing movement in Vietnam. In 2011, the government arrested a poet, Bui Chat, after his Paper Scraps publishing house received the Freedom to Publish Prize from the International Publishers Association (IPA), headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland (Trùng Dương 2011).

Subsequent initiatives included the 'Nhà Xuất Bản Vô Danh' (No Name Publishing House), which was created by a writer, ICIÊT (or Kiet). The No Name Publishing House tried to publish books which were heavily monitored or banned by CPV, including *Liberalism* by Ludwig von Mises and *The Road to Serfdom* by Friedrich von Hayek. The latter was censored in Vietnam because they mentioned the dangers of authoritarianism which are unavoidable when the state controls economic decision-making through centralised planning. They also published books that were banned in Vietnam because the writer was a sensitive historical figure, including the memoir *A Gust of Dust* (*Một Con Gió Bụi*) by Tran Trong Kim, a first Prime Minister of Vietnam of a government established by the Japanese fascists in 1945, and *Chinh De Viet Nam* which was written by Ngo Dinh Nhu, political advisor to the President of South Vietnam, the enemy of CPV. Given the political sensitivity of those books, the founder ICIÊT disappeared and most books from this publishing house are no longer circulating. Their online versions were also taken down.

In 2019 to 2020, another independent publishing house was created by a group of dissidents, 'Libral Publishing House' (Nhà Xuất Bản Tự Do). In one year, they published about 11 books, including *Politics for*

the Masses, Politics of a Police State and *Non-Violent Resistance*. These books are considered sensitive by the government, and their publication is effectively banned. In 2021, the government sent two people to jail, including famous dissident Pham Doan Trang, from this publishing house. Trang is serving nine years' incarceration (HRW 2019). In 2020, IPA also awarded Liberal Publishing House for the Prix Voltaire 2020 (RFA 2020; Khiêm 2020).

The state's response – ranging from arrests and enforced disappearances to the dismantling of distribution networks – demonstrates a consistent intolerance for independent publishing. The prosecution of individuals associated with these initiatives, including the detention of publishers and the suppression of award-winning efforts recognised by international bodies, further illustrates the breadth of academic freedom violations.

d. Control of religious training facilities

The government is also famous for controlling religious freedom in Vietnam (USCIRF 2024). It has controlled religious studies through state-sanctioned organisations and religious schools in Vietnam. In particular, to control religious bodies, it has established the Vietnamese Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) – Ban Tôn Giáo Chính Phủ – under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA). GCRA has controlled all the aspect of religious training and teaching inside any religious school in VN.

Any religious training academy in the country need to use textbooks on history and Vietnamese law, which were compiled and published by the GCRA. According to article 39 of the 2016 Law on Beliefs and Religions, all the religious training facilities need to be under religious organisations controlled by the GCRA. Under article 39(4), religious training institutions must also report the training results of each course to GCRA.

The GCRA has also controlled the professors and school board of administrators of those religious schools. The 2016 Law on Beliefs and Religions stipulates that religious organisations must submit 'resumes, criminal record certificates, and summaries of the religious activities of the representative and those expected to lead the training institution'. Moreover, if any religious school want to send their students to study in other countries, then they need to get permission from the GCRA (Thanh 2021a). According to GCRA Head, Vu Chien Thang, sending religious leaders abroad for training without permission poses a 'potential risk of being exploited by malicious forces to sow discord between religion and the government' (baochinhphu.vn 2025).

The GCRA has been heavily influenced by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), a police force, and its Department of Homeland Security (A02). Since 2012, GCRA's leadership has been dominated by officials from the MPS, revealing the securitisation of religious institutions and policies. The GCRA is supposed to assist the MoHA in managing religious affairs, but there are no official functions related to security or anti-terrorism. However, the successive appointments of high-ranking police officials to key positions within the GCRA suggest a strategic manoeuvre by the Communist Party. In particular, in 2012, Pham Dung, a Lieutenant General and Director of the department A02, under the MPS, served as the 15th Head of GCRA. Pham Dung is a Lieutenant General of the Police, Associate Professor, Doctor of Law and awarded hero of the People's Armed Forces. He is considered an expert on foreign politics, national security, religion and law (Thanh 2015). Moreover, since 2017, the GCRA Head position has been assigned to Major General of Public Security Vu Chien Thang, currently Deputy Minister of Home Affairs. This man graduated from the Security Academy with a PhD in Law (from Security Academy under MPS) (Thanh 2015). In February 2021, Police Colonel Nguyen Tien Trong, who graduated from Security Reconnaissance, was appointed GCRA Deputy Head; previously, Colonel Trong was Deputy Director of the A02, MPS. In January 2022, Vu Hoai Bac, a police colonel, became GCRA Head. Before being appointed to this position, Vu Hoai Bac held the position of director of Tra Vinh Provincial Police since March 2020 and the position of director of the Security Investigation Department under the MPS since 2021. Similarly, Police Colonel Nguyen Tien Trong Mr Bac has ten years of experience working at department A02 (Thanh 2021b). All such appointments fuel scepticism regarding the GCRA's purported role in managing religious affairs, with many questioning the emergence of a de facto 'religious police'.

Notably, the Buddhist Institute in Ho Chi Minh City also requires candidates to pass a test about Marx-Leninism to be accepted for studying there, despite the contradiction of the communist philosophy toward religious study (BBC News 2019).

In 2020, GCRA Head, Vu Chien Thang, mentioned that the ministry had discussed and guided religious organisations in selecting church leaders who are closely associated with the government (baochinhphu.vn 2025). In those state-controlled religious institutions, academic freedom is not guaranteed; there would be no school of thought that it should be accepted in those institutions.

Importantly, the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC 2019: para 43) expressed concern that the 2016 Law on Religion and Belief ‘unduly restricts the freedom of religion and belief, such as through the mandatory registration and recognition process for religious organisations and restrictions on religious activities based on vague and broadly interpreted legal provisions related to national security and social unity’. It also added that ‘members of religious communities and their leaders...face various forms of surveillance, harassment, intimidation, property seizure or destruction, are forced to renounce their faith, pressured to join a competing sect and are subject to physical assaults, which sometimes leads to death’. It was also ‘disturbed by reports that non-State

actors...attack Catholic communities and are involved in propaganda activities that promote and incite religious discrimination, violence and hate speech’. Therefore, it recommended that Viet Nam bring its legislation into conformity with Article 18 of the ICCPR and refrain from any action that might restrict the freedom of religion or belief beyond restrictions permitted under that article. Viet Nam should also take measures to prevent and effectively respond to all acts of undue interference with the freedom of religion, and any incidents of hate speech, incitement to discrimination, violence or alleged hate crime, and ensure that those responsible were brought to justice (HRC 2019: para 44).

Rationale for action

Academic freedom in Vietnam is not effectively guaranteed from a human rights-based perspective (Thi Minh Ngo 2019). The range of aforementioned failures represent breaches of Vietnam’s binding obligations under international law. In particular, academic freedom is not an isolated entitlement but an enabling right that underpins, *inter alia*, freedom of expression as well as freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which are enshrined in Article 19 and Article 18 of the ICCPR. These freedoms are directly engaged in academic enquiry and religious scholarship.

Simultaneously, Vietnam is legally bound to respect, protect and fulfil other interdependent rights that collectively underpin academic freedom under the ICESCR. According to its monitoring body’ General Comment No 13, the right to education under Article 13 encompasses academic freedom and institutional autonomy as essential components of higher education systems, and it ‘includes the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work’ (CESCR 1999: paras 38–40). Unfortunately, there are no references to these considerations in CESCR’s concluding observations on the second to fourth periodic reports of Vietnam (CESCR 2014). Moreover, the right to access to, and participate in and to enjoy, science under Article 15 entails various state parties’ obligations to protect other key elements supporting academic freedom (CESCR 2020: paras 13, 14, 22 and 46).

Academic freedom can be attacked through multifaceted violations, as highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression who recommended to address them as autonomous violations (Kaye 2020: para 57); by the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights in the report considering the issue of the writing and teaching of history, with a particular focus on history textbooks (Shaheed 2013: paras 27, 30, 33 and 86), and the report on the right to participate in science (Xanthaki 2024: paras 70–73); and by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education who has *inter alia* addressed the issue of censorship, the banning of particular subjects or the introduction of compulsory subjects in many countries (Shaheed 2024: paras 72–74).

Importantly, the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom (WGAF 2024) provide an authoritative framework for assessing state compliance. Looking at their nine core dimensions, several can be commented in relation to the critical situation in Vietnam, particularly to explore the intersection between academic freedom and freedom of thought conscience and religion.

- Principle 3 on the autonomy of academic, research and teaching institutions: autonomy in higher education in Vietnam is not considered to be substantive but conditional. Institutions lack independent authority over intellectual and organisational matters. Vietnam’s system structurally subordinates universities and religious training institutions to CPV by embedded party cells within universities influencing governance

and decision-making, and mandatory ideological curricula, including Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought. This obligatory module also applies for the religious training institutions.

- Principle 4 on the right to engage in expression and discourse with persons and groups inside and outside the academic, research and teaching sector: in Vietnam academic discourse is filtered through political acceptability rather than scholarly merit, limiting both domestic debate and international collaboration. The cited political vetting and censorship of conference participation about Vietnam study in Hanoi in 2025 is emblematic (eg, exclusion of ‘sensitive’ scholars). It also shows the restrictions on international academic engagement, especially in religious training, especially the requirement for permission for studying abroad for religious people. Furthermore, the violation also relates to the suppression of independent publishers that facilitate intellectual exchange.
- Principle 5 on the right to information, sources of information: even though people can access the internet and actually have one of the fastest internet connections in all of Asia, the Vietnamese official academic sphere is heavily monitored and restricted. Digital censorship and surveillance restrict access to online content and the government has also reported sending requests to block a number of Facebook and YouTube accounts that seem to be harmful to the regime. Also, the state exercises monopoly over approved academic and religious materials.
- Principle 6 on freedoms of movement and of association: in Vietnam freedom of association exists only within state-approved structures. Surveillance and scrutiny of collaborations, especially with foreign institutions or religious networks, are applied. There is also a high risk of reprisals for associating with dissident groups or independent intellectual networks (Project 88 2025).
- Principle 7 on the essentiality of academic freedom to all levels of education, from early childhood through adult education, and all types of academic research and teaching institutions: in Vietnam academic freedom is systematically constrained across the entire educational ecosystem, not just higher education. The direct state regulation of religious training institutions (curricula, leadership, reporting obligations) is emblematic. Alternative schools of thought lack space. Censorship practices extend, beyond universities, to publishing, informal education and religious learning. State policies

systematically limit permissible areas of study, particularly in disciplines related to religion, history and political science.

Therefore, when measured against these principles, Vietnam’s current framework reveals significant gaps. The persistence of political vetting of curricula, the imposition of mandatory ideological content and the control of religious education through state-sanctioned bodies directly contravene the international standards on institutional autonomy and freedom of inquiry. Moreover, the use of vaguely defined national security provisions to sanction scholars and restrict publications fails to meet the ICCPR requirements.

The foregoing point shows that violations of academic freedom and religious freedom in Vietnam are systemic, stemming from the constitutional supremacy of the CPV (Freedom House 2015), to this party cells embedded in universities, the securitisation of religion and academic inquiry, the criminalisation of peaceful expression and the expansion of digital surveillance.

The aforementioned empirical indicators and documented cases consistently demonstrate that Vietnam’s regulatory and political framework constrains the production, dissemination and exchange of knowledge – particularly where academic inquiry intersects with religion, history and political thought. Together, these elements create an environment in which academic actors operate under constant risk, leading to widespread self-censorship and intellectual conformity.

Another critical policy failure is the conflation of university autonomy with administrative and financial decentralisation, while excluding substantive academic independence. In this context, there is a clear and pressing need to reconceptualise autonomy in both higher education and religious training institutions. Academic institutions in Vietnam require genuine independence, not only in financial and administrative matters but also in intellectual domains. This includes the ability of universities and religious schools to design curricula, pursue research and engage in scholarly debate free from political direction or ideological constraints. The continued influence of the CPV over academic content, staffing and research priorities fundamentally limits the development of a critical and pluralistic academic environment.

Policy options

Addressing the systemic constraints on academic freedom and the autonomy of religious institutions in Vietnam requires structural reform rather than incremental adjustments. Comparative experiences from Taiwan, the Czech Republic and East Germany offer three distinct but complementary reform trajectories. In particular, Taiwan and Vietnam shared the same culture and Confucius ideology-driven society, so learning from it could make it easier for readers to see what Vietnam should change into. The Czech Republic and East Germany also lived under a communist regime and transformed themselves after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Scenario 1: Gradual liberalisation through legal reform (Taiwan model)

Following Taiwan's democratisation, particularly after the lifting of martial law in 1987, academic freedom underwent a profound transformation, moving from direct state control to a model emphasising autonomy, research diversity and student participation. The 1993 and 1994 amendments to the University Law played a critical role in dismantling the previous system of strict political monitoring, allowing universities autonomy over curriculum, personnel and funding.

The 1994 University Act accelerated the transition from bureaucratic control to **institutional autonomy**. Universities were empowered to define their own curricula without 'politically correct' restrictions, and faculty gained the ability to elect university presidents (Warangkana 2019).

The atmosphere of political liberalisation allowed students and faculty to move away from self-censorship, enabling **freedom of speech** and the creation of independent, **self-governing student associations**. Moreover, decentralisation and expansion occurred when the state's influence over education weakened, allowing for a rapid **increase in the number of universities** from 28 in 1986 to over 100 in subsequent decades. A shift in curriculum and identity took place as well: curriculum moved away from rigid 'Sinicisation' toward including local history, culture and more diverse viewpoints, reflecting a '**Taiwanisation**' of education.

The experience of Taiwan illustrates how a politically controlled academic system can evolve toward autonomy through phased legal and institutional

reforms rather than abrupt systemic change. Like Taiwan, Vietnam operates within a Confucian-influenced social structure emphasising hierarchy, order and state-led development.

For Vietnam, this represents the most immediately actionable pathway. Taiwan removed 'politically correct' constraints; Vietnam could gradually eliminate mandatory ideological content or make it optional rather than prescriptive (Warangkana 2019). Vietnam could amend its Law on Higher Education to grant universities real authority over academic matters, not just administrative functions. For change, the existing universities can evolve rather than be dismantled.

The Taiwanese scenarios address core WGAF principles, including academic autonomy, expression and access to information.

Scenario 2: Comprehensive system transformation (Czech Republic model) and institutional renewal (East Germany model)

In the Czech Republic curricula were completely overhauled, removing Marxist-Leninist doctrines. In the post-1989 era and the success of the so-called Velvet Revolution, the new government transformed Czech academia from a state-controlled, politically driven apparatus into a pluralistic, autonomous system integrated with European standards. Marxist-Leninist doctrine was eliminated from curricula across disciplines; academic content was no longer subject to political approval. Universities regained authority over governance, hiring and research priorities (Dobbins 2008).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, East Germany (GDR) underwent a rapid and fundamental transformation of its academic system, pivoting from a centralised, Marxist-Leninist structure to a decentralised system aligned with West German standards of academic freedom. This process, often referred to as a 'renewal' (Erneuerung) or a 'transfer' of structures, involved the dismantling of communist-era academic hierarchies, personnel purges and the adoption of autonomy in research and teaching. East German universities were reorganised to match the West German model, prioritising **research independence** and **university autonomy**. The evaluation and replacement of academic staff associated with ideological enforcement has

allowed the establishment of independent research institutions and thinktanks following the west, eg, Max Planck and Fraunhofer models in eastern regions (Mitter and Weiß 1993).

The Czech and East German experiences demonstrate that academic freedom cannot fully emerge without dismantling the structural foundations of ideological control. This scenario is more transformative but also more demanding than the Taiwan model. Unlike gradual reform models, this approach prioritises **systemic change** – legal, institutional and epistemic.

Vietnam's continued requirement for Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought in curricula parallels the pre-1989 systems. The Czech and East German experiences suggest that meaningful reform requires eliminating such compulsory ideological content, not merely reforming its delivery.

These two post-Soviet scenarios are highly instructive for Vietnam because it demonstrates how deeply embedded ideological control can be, and how it was dismantled and replaced with rights-based academic governance only after three decades.

Policy recommendations

To the Government of Vietnam:

- Align national legal protection with **state international human rights obligations** under the ICCPR, Article 18 (freedom of thought, conscience and religious belief) and Article 19 (freedoms of opinion and expression), as well as the ICESCR, Article 13 (right to education), Article 15(1) (right to participate in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications) and Article 15(3) (freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity).
- Make possible national legal **limitations** or restrictions on academic freedom consistent with international obligations, especially those under Article 19 of the ICCPR and Article 4 of the ICESCR.
- Introduce **higher education reform** in conformity to the state obligations under the ICCPR and ICESCR.
- Enact a standalone Academic Freedom Law or amend existing legislation to **define academic freedom** in line international human rights law and the 2024 Principles on the Implementation on the Right to Academic Freedom.
- Guarantee the **autonomy** of academic, research and teaching institutions as well as religious institutions, respecting the principle of **self-governance**, while refraining from surveillance and from threatening or imposing sanctions based on the content of academic research, teaching or discourse.

- Remove or limit the role of party-affiliated structures in **academic governance** and support university self-governance.
- End forced registration of religious groups and allow **unrestricted religious education**.

To universities in Vietnam:

- Strengthen **university self-governance** (eg, with elected councils, peer review systems).
- Support the victims of threats or attacks on education and academic freedom, including by providing **material and financial support** for education and training on academic freedom.
- Remain free from political or outside **interference**, including ideological or political motives.
- Set rules and practices for determining that academic, research and teaching content, curricula and materials remain **free from political or outside interference or discrimination**.
- Require that academic staff and students be free to engage in expression and discourse with persons and groups inside and outside the academic research and teaching sector, **without threat or retaliation**.

To foreign governments, UN and international human rights organisations:

- **Fund** research on censorship at the intersection of academic freedom and freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Vietnam.
- Strengthen the **monitoring** of state compliance with the ICCPR and ICESCR.
- Request a new **country visit** by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.
- Support **independent organisations** to operate in the area of academic freedom in Vietnam.

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this brief demonstrates that restrictions on academic freedom in Vietnam are not isolated incidents but part of a systemic framework in which academic and religious institutions are subordinated to political authority. As mentioned by the aforementioned Working Group on Academic Freedom, academic freedom is an enabling right that sustains a broader ecosystem of fundamental freedoms, including expression, thought, conscience and religion.

Meaningful reform requires a shift from viewing academic and religious institutions as instruments of state ideology to recognising them as autonomous spaces essential for intellectual discussion and freethinking.

For Vietnam, adopting a human rights-based approach means guaranteeing genuine autonomy for universities and religious institutions; allowing scholars and independent researchers to explore politically sensitive topics without fear of reprisal; enabling academic actors to contribute critically to public policy debates; and establishing clear, transparent limits on state intervention consistent with international law.

The comparative experiences examined in this brief underscore that alternative models are both viable and effective. Whether through gradual legal reform or comprehensive structural transformation, states have demonstrated that it is possible to move from ideologically controlled systems toward autonomous, pluralistic academic environments. For Vietnam, the challenge is not a lack of policy options but the need to align its governance model with its international human rights commitments.

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GC Headquarters

Monastery of San Nicolò,
Riviera San Nicolò, 26
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