



FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN VIETNAM

The alternative report

Be a voice for the voiceless
www.csw.org.uk



CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

**“I AM CONVINCED THAT
SERIOUS VIOLATIONS OF
FREEDOM OF RELIGION
OR BELIEF ARE A REALITY
IN VIETNAM.”**

**Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur
on freedom of religion or belief, 31 July 2014**

Cover photo: The rapid pace of Vietnam’s economic development has not been matched by improvements in human rights protection: CSW
Photos for Cao Daism and Hoa Hao Buddhism sections: BPSOS, used by permission

This report is for public use.

A PDF of this report and additional interviews can be downloaded from www.csw.org.uk/2014-vietnam-report

Copyright © Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) 2014
All rights reserved
Printed in the United Kingdom

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The report draws on research undertaken by CSW and its partners in Vietnam and around the world. CSW would like to thank all the individual experts and organisations which contributed to this report through advice, information and suggestions.

This report is dedicated to the religious leaders, human rights defenders, online activists and the many others who are standing up for freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR’S VISIT, JULY 2014	4
ABOUT THIS REPORT	5
A NOTE ON RELIGION AND BELIEF IN VIETNAM	6
DECREE 92	7
RECOMMENDATIONS	8
BUDDHISM	10
CAO DAISM	14
CATHOLICISM	18
HOA HAO BUDDHISM	22
PROTESTANTISM	26
OTHER RELIGIOUS MINORITIES	31
CONCLUSION	33
BIBLIOGRAPHY	34

INTRODUCTION

» “Vietnam recognises and upholds the moral and cultural values of belief and religion, and considers belief and religion a spiritual need of the people, and religious followers an integral part of the great national unity.”

Nguyen Thai Binh, head of the Vietnamese government’s Committee for Religious Affairs¹

Although there can be little doubt that there have been some improvements in the protection of freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam over the past ten years, the ongoing violations of this right cannot be overlooked, particularly in light of Vietnam’s increased engagement with international human rights mechanisms and election to the UN Human Rights Council in November 2013.

The improvements have mostly been at central government level. Additional Buddhist, Islamic and Protestant groups or denominations have been granted official recognition, bringing the total to 37 state-sanctioned religious associations and denominations and one devotional practice under six main religions: namely Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Cao Daim and Hoa Hao Buddhism.

At the highest levels of government, Vietnam has engaged in exchanges with the Holy See, including a number of first-time visits to the Pope. The government has also cooperated with an international organisation to provide training for officials and religious leaders on religion and the law in Vietnam.² In addition, in 2013 CSW received reports of a positive example of intervention by government officials in a case of severe harassment, intimidation and violence against a group of ethnic minority converts to Protestant Christianity; a case which suggests that at some levels, religious officials recognise the need for a change in their approach to conversion.³

However, these improvements are undermined by continued reports of violations against the right to freedom of religion or belief of adherents to every one of Vietnam’s recognised religions. Reported violations range from harassment, intimidation and intrusive monitoring, to arrest, imprisonment, torture and extra-judicial killing. The victims include both new converts and long-established religious communities, leaders and lay people, and both ethnic minorities and Vietnamese Kinh.⁴ The perpetrators include state agents such as police, local officials and the military, and non-state actors such as neighbours, community leaders and family members.⁵

THE UN SPECIAL RAPORTEUR’S VISIT, JULY 2014

In 2014 the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Professor Heiner Bielefeldt, visited Vietnam from 21 to 31 July. During his visit Professor Bielefeldt was able to meet with various government officials and local authorities, as well as representatives of religious or belief communities. However, scheduled visits to An Giang, Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces were cancelled when the Special Rapporteur received reports that some individuals he planned to meet had been “under heavy surveillance, warned, intimidated, harassed or prevented from travelling by the police”.⁶ All three provinces have witnessed religious freedom violations in recent years, including violent attacks against Catholics and Protestants in Kon Tum in 2012 and 2013.

1 Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘VN, Cambodia discuss role of religious affairs’, 16 December 2010 <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105001/ns101217091748/view>
2 Institute for Global Engagement, ‘Vietnam’ <http://globalengage.org/relational-diplomacy/countries/vietnam>
The Institute for Global Engagement has worked with the Vietnamese government and academic institutions on a number of initiatives aimed at improving the protection of freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam. See the link above for more information.
3 CSW, ‘Vietnam: The right to convert: state restrictions and social hostilities’, August 2013, p.12
4 Kinh is the name given to the ethnic majority in Vietnam. Informally, this group is sometimes referred to as Viet or Vietnamese. The term Vietnamese Kinh distinguishes the Kinh ethnic group from other Vietnamese.
5 Violations against the right to freedom of religion or belief are not only perpetrated by government agents but also by non-state actors. Although inter-religious conflict is not common in Vietnam, converts to Protestant Christianity, for example, are sometimes opposed by their family or community. However, as a starting point for looking at religious freedom violations, this report focuses on violations by state agents and in some cases non-state actors hired by officials.
6 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Press Statement on the visit to the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief’, 31 July 2014 <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14914&LangID=E>

Professor Bielefeldt will present a report containing his conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in 2015; however, he also used the opportunity of a press conference in Hanoi on the final day of his visit to give a 12-page statement outlining some of his main concerns. In the statement, Professor Bielefeldt made reference to the “generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practising religion outside of the established channels”, the lack of specificity around the terms ‘majority interests’ and ‘social order’ and broad limitation clauses concerning human rights, as well as “vague formulations within the Penal Code...concerning the ‘abuse of democratic freedoms’”, and the “absence of sufficiently efficient and accessible legal recourse”.

The concerns raised in the Special Rapporteur’s statement closely mirror those raised in this report. His remarks about restrictions on the operations of “independent religious communities” may be applied to Protestant, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao Buddhist groups. The Special Rapporteur’s observation that “the conditions under which individuals or groups can practise their religion or belief are unpredictable and often depend on good will of Government agencies, not least the local authorities” parallel CSW’s own conclusions that the treatment of Protestant Christians, for example, often depends on the attitude of local officials (p. 32).

The violations mentioned in the statement also follow the pattern of those covered in this report: heavy-handed police raids; repeated invitations to ‘work sessions’ with the police; close surveillance of religious activities; disruption of religious ceremonies and festivals; house arrests, at times for long periods; imprisonments, also sometimes for long periods; beatings and assaults; pressure exercised on family members; acts of vandalism; destruction of houses of worship, cemeteries and funeral sheds; confiscation of property; and systematic pressure to give up certain religious activities and instead to operate within the official channels provided for religious practice.

Other violations raised in the statement but not covered in this report also corroborate CSW’s research, for example the general prohibition on reception and possession of religious books or materials in prison.

The Special Rapporteur’s statement concludes that despite some positive developments at the central level, and an increased space for religious practices in recent years, “serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Vietnam”.

The fact that the Special Rapporteur and those he met with were closely monitored, in “clear violation of the terms of reference of any [UN] country visit”, is itself an indicator of the lengths the Vietnamese government will go to in order to prevent religious leaders and human rights defenders in Vietnam advocating for greater protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Ironically, it may be that by attempting to prevent a UN expert from exploring the true situation of religious communities in Vietnam, the government has drawn greater attention to the violations against these communities.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In Vietnam today, the issue of freedom of religion or belief, and the government’s approach to religious activities and organisations, are of critical importance for a number of reasons.

In the first place, the number of people identifying themselves as followers of a religion is increasing, as confirmed by the Vietnamese government.⁷ At the same time, respected religious leaders and organisations in Vietnam continue to play an increasingly important role in civil society, in particular in advocating for human rights and social justice. Furthermore, while several religious groups have a long history of social engagement in the country (most notably the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)⁸ and the Catholic Church), in recent years representatives from the main religious groups in Vietnam have begun to come together in creative and unprecedented ways to publicise information about religious freedom violations against not only their own co-religionists but also people of other religions or beliefs.

7 According to the National Report submitted by Vietnam for the 2014 UN Universal Periodic Review, the number of ‘followers of different religions’ increased from 20 million in 2009, to over 24 million in 2013.
8 Christian, Buddhist and other groups in Vietnam use the Vietnamese term giao hoi, which can be translated as ‘church’ or ‘congregation’. Therefore, although in English the term ‘church’ is usually used only in reference to Christian groups, in the Vietnamese context it is also used in the names of other religious groups.

In 2013 representatives from the Hoa Hao Buddhist, Catholic, Cao Dai, Protestant and Buddhist communities released a 'Statement of Vietnam's Clergies Concerning the Ordinance on Religion and Belief of 2004 and the 2012 Decree on Directives and Measures for Implementing the Ordinance on Religion and Belief', listing their concerns and recommendations to the government,⁹ and another statement protesting the mistreatment of young prisoners of conscience.¹⁰

Most recently, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Religion was formed for the purpose of "assisting citizens to practice their freedom of religion and to fight any attempt to restrain or obstruct freedom of religion". The Committee references Article 25 of the 2013 constitution, which guarantees citizens' freedom to form associations. Predecessors to the Committee included the Vietnamese Inter-Faith Association, which included Hoa Hao Buddhist, Catholic, Cao Dai, Protestant and Buddhist leaders.

Religious leaders and lay people are at the forefront of the struggle to promote human rights and rule of law, gathering information and disseminating it to the public, exposing corruption and abuses of power, rallying support for prisoners of conscience, calling for transparency and accountability, and becoming, even as the government clamps down on freedom of expression, the voice of dissent.

» **"In the absence of opposition parties, free trade unions or independent NGOs, the religious movements are essential voices of civil society, putting forth the people's grievances and pressing for reforms."**

UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do to the UN Human Rights Council at Vietnam's Universal Periodic Review, 4 February 2014

This report aims to provide a brief overview of the development and current situation of each of the main religions in Vietnam, including government restrictions and violations against religious communities. It is not possible, within the space of a few pages, to provide a thorough, accurate and complete history or description of any of the religions covered by this report. With this in mind, this report aims to provide the reader with enough information on each religious group to understand the significance of the restrictions placed upon it, without claiming to be a full account of any one religion's history or current situation.

Wherever possible, CSW has attempted to verify the information provided by the original source regarding each example. Where this has proved to be impossible, we have compared the details of the case with our own research and found them to be consistent with other reports of violations against the religious group in question. The majority of the cases are available online from the original source.

A NOTE ON RELIGION AND BELIEF IN VIETNAM

The matter of individual and collective religious identity in Vietnam is, in itself, an extremely complex one. Some Vietnamese may identify with one particular belief, but actually include practices from other religions in their religious life. At the same time, it is possible that some Vietnamese who hold beliefs rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and even participate in certain customs and rituals, would not identify themselves as belonging to any one of these religions. Many Vietnamese who identify themselves as following no religion still participate in ancestor worship and visit Buddhist temples for important events.

This report does not propose to undertake the difficult and lengthy task of defining or categorising religious beliefs in Vietnam. Rather, the report aims to describe abuses against people who believe they have been violated in connection with the religion or belief they identify with collectively or individually.

DECREE 92

Since Vietnam began to implement the policy of 'reform and renewal' (Doi Moi) in 1986, there has been a series of policy documents regarding religion. In 1990 the Politburo issued 'Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW: Strengthening Religious Affairs in the New Situation'. In 2003 this was followed by 'Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW: Religious Affairs', which emphasised "unity among followers of different religions within the context of great national unity" and the need for religious activities to "contribute to successful implementation of the country's industrialization and modernization" and to "build and defend the stability of the Homeland".¹¹

The following year the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam approved the Ordinance on Belief and Religion, which came into effect on 15 November 2004. On 1 March 2005 the government issued Decree No. 22/2005/ND-CP, which provides guidance on the implementation of the ordinance. According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, this ordinance will be the foundation for the issuance of the Law on Belief and Religion in the future.¹²

Decree 22 was superseded by Decree 92, which came into effect on 1 January 2013. Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant leaders, as well as lawyers and activists, have criticised the new decree for being harsher than its predecessor, for its use of vague and ambiguous terminology, and for introducing new bureaucratic obstacles to the peaceful and lawful activities of religious believers.

One positive aspect of the new decree is that it reduces the timeframe in which the authorities must respond to applications for registration, and requires them to issue a receipt of documentation. However, the Decree as a whole is aimed at the control or management of religious groups and activities rather than the protection of freedom of religion or belief. Many religious groups choose not to register because they believe that registration will enable the authorities to increase their control over their activities.

One potential consequence of the decree is that religious groups could be pressured to join organisations which are already registered. A second outcome, which is already a reality for many Protestant churches, is that organisations have no option but to operate illegally while they wait for official permission.¹³ This would not only be bad for the religious adherents, but also for Vietnamese society, because it would mean that this decree has turned law-abiding citizens into criminals simply because of their religious beliefs. For more information on Decree 92, please see CSW's 2013 briefing, 'Vietnam: Decree No. 92: Specific provisions and measures for the implementation of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion', available from CSW on request.

During his July 2014 visit to Vietnam, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief learned that a proposal to pass a law on religious affairs is likely to be submitted in 2015, to be adopted in 2016. This law, as mentioned above, will be based on the Ordinance on Belief and Religion. As the Special Rapporteur notes, the process of creating the law might offer an opportunity to introduce substantive revisions aimed at improving protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

However, in a 2013 statement on the Ordinance some religious leaders called on the government to "rescind all ordinances, decrees, orders, etc. aimed solely at religion and beliefs because these are intended to repress and discriminate", suggesting that the Ordinance itself is at the root of many obstacles to religious freedom. That being the case, a law based on this Ordinance runs the risk of further cementing the problems which already exist, rather than addressing them. Any new law must therefore take as its aim the protection of religion or belief activities and organisations, and the safeguarding of freedom of religion or belief, rather than the control and management of religious life in Vietnam.

9 Vietnamese Redemptorists' News, 'Statement of Vietnam's Clergies Concerning the Ordinance on Religion and Belief', 8 October 2013 <http://www.vrnews.org/#!/2013/10/statement-of-vietnams-clergies.html>

10 Chua Cuu The, 'The Vietnamese Communist rulers are utilizing prisons to maltreat patriotic youths', 2 September 2013 <http://www.chuacuuthe.com/2013/09/the-vietnamese-communist-rulers-are-utilizing-prisons-to-maltreat-patriotic-youths/>

11 Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam, 2006, pp.46-47

12 *ibid.*, p.64

13 The Vietnamese word *dang ky* is often translated as 'registration'; however, according to Vietnamese-speaking commentators, the use of *dang ky* in Decree 92 is more accurately translated as 'asking permission', and in practice, application for registration is in fact a request for permission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam:

- Ensure that any new law on religious affairs complies with international standards on the protection of freedom of religion or belief;
- Revise Decree 92 to comply with international standards on the protection of freedom of religion or belief: specifically, remove the lowest level of registration/permission required for basic religious meetings/activities such as prayer meetings (*sinh hoạt tôn giáo*); remove the requirement that religious groups have a fixed, legal venue and 20 years of stable operations; and remove vague terminology including 'infringements on national security', 'people's/national unity', and 'traditions and customs';
- Ensure that persons named in applications for registration of meetings, activities and organisations will not suffer ill treatment or be placed on any form of 'watch list' as a result of being named in the application: if no method or mechanism exists to implement this recommendation, create a 'watchdog' mechanism for this purpose. This mechanism could be responsible for overseeing the entire process of registration application, and for ensuring that where applications are rejected, there are legitimate grounds for this decision;
- Provide avenues for feedback with regards to Decree 92, and actively and carefully consider comments and criticism put forward by the international community and civil society;
- Ensure that officials at all levels, including village, district and provincial, are required to undergo thorough training on constitutional and legal provisions on religious activities and organisations;
- Support scholarships and research on religion and the rule of law;
- Assess claims that local authorities have encouraged or contributed to social pressure on new converts to renounce their faith, and issue guidelines to address this problem if the claims are found to be accurate;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience detained in connection with the peaceful practice and observance of their religion or belief;
- Investigate immediately allegations of deaths in police custody of religious detainees, and allegations of torture, and ensure that any persons found to be responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

To the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief:

- Continue to monitor cases of violations and restrictions against religious communities and individuals reported during the July 2014 visit;
- Where individuals are found to have been harassed, threatened or prevented from travelling in connection with the July 2014 visit, call on the government to guarantee their personal safety and to hold to account those responsible for their ill-treatment;
- Ensure that questions which did not receive a full and satisfactory answer during the July 2014 visit are raised again in future communications with the government;
- Offer assistance in the drafting of a new law on religion or belief and other relevant legislation;
- Consider meeting with representatives of religion or belief communities outside Vietnam to gather further information and updates on obstacles to freedom of religion or belief.

To the United Kingdom, United States, and other diplomatic missions in Vietnam, and regional organisations including the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations:

- Continue to monitor violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and developments in the treatment of religious minorities;
- Raise cases of human rights violations and restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief through all available means, including human rights dialogues, strategic partnerships and bilateral relationships;
- Include in reports and communications with Vietnam examples of positive developments and cases relating to freedom of religion or belief;
- Include in bilateral agreements goals for improving protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to convert;
- Advise embassies in Vietnam to develop relationships with key religious leaders, especially those who take on the role of human rights defenders;
- Arrange, in line with the advice of local contacts, visits to imprisoned religious leaders, and to communities of religious minorities who have suffered harassment from the authorities;
- Consider supporting projects which contribute to the protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief, such as training on freedom of religion or belief for lawyers and human rights defenders; also consider sponsoring or hosting workshops on this issue for religious communities;
- Encourage the Vietnamese government to support scholarships and research on religion and rule of law;
- Encourage the Vietnamese government to revise Decree 92, in consultation with religious leaders and legal experts, removing vague and ambiguous language and ensuring that administrative requirements in no way restrict freedom of religion or belief.



BUDDHISM

KEY DATES

300-100 BC	Buddhism is first brought to Vietnam from India
100-200 AD	Buddhism arrives in Vietnam from China
1887	Vietnam is incorporated into French Indo-China: Buddhist monks participate in anti-colonial uprisings
1950s	Formation of the Vietnamese Buddhists' regional associations
1963	Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc self-immolates in protest against the Diem government's religious policies
1964	Establishment of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam
1981	Conference for Representatives for Buddhist Unification, Hanoi; the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (or Vietnam Buddhist Church) is established. All independent groups are banned.
2007	Pure Land Buddhism is officially recognised as a religion

NUMBER OF BUDDHISTS IN VIETNAM*

6,802,318	Government census, 2009 ¹⁴
10,000,000	Goverment Bureau of Religious Affairs, 2010 ¹⁵
8,780,000	US Department of State, 2012 ¹⁶
14,380,000	Pew, 2010 ¹⁷

* These figures are contested and are not intended to reflect a definitive number: they are included here to indicate the range of estimates and the difficulty in coming to firm conclusions on the number of religious adherents in Vietnam.

14 Central Population and Housing, Census Steering Committee of Vietnam, 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census, Hanoi, 21 July 2010
15 Reg Reimer (2011), *Vietnam's Christians*, p.13
16 US Department of State, Vietnam 2012 International Religious Freedom Report. "10 percent [of the population of approximately 87.8 million] actively [practises] Mahayana Buddhism" <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208492.pdf>
17 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, Vietnam http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/vietnam#/?affiliations_religion_id=9&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2012

LEGAL STATUS

- Q: Is this religion/belief recognised by the Vietnamese government? ✓
- Q: Are all denominations or sub-groups claiming to follow this religion/belief recognised by the government? ✗
- Q: If some groups are banned, or if the religion/belief is not recognised, are there any obvious or stated reasons why?

After the formation of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS, also known as the Vietnam Buddhist Church) in 1981, all groups choosing to remain independent of the VBS were banned. Independent organisations such as the UBCV effectively became illegal organisations. The UBCV saw this as an attempt by the government to control Buddhist leaders and activities, by bringing all Buddhists under one government-controlled church. At the time of writing, the Vietnamese government recognises the religions of Buddhism, under the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, as well as Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, the Four Debts of Gratitude (Tu An Hieu Nghia; drawing on Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism), the Threefold Enlightened Truth Path, and the Threefold Southern Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Both official and academic sources generally agree that Buddhism¹⁸ was first brought to Vietnam from India by traders and monks between 300 and 100 BC, and two to five centuries later from China by monks from a variety of schools; the exact dates are disputed. Although Buddhism in Vietnam was predated by indigenous beliefs, including animism, Buddhism was not seen as being in contradiction or opposition to existing beliefs and practices. Later on, Vietnamese Buddhist and animist beliefs were further influenced by, and co-existed with, Confucianism and Taoism. Today, Mayahana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism peacefully co-exist in what is sometimes known as the 'triple religion' or Tam Giao.

Vietnamese author Tai Thu Nguyen describes the way that, during the French colonial period from 1887, Buddhist pagodas became not only spiritual centres but also safe houses and secret meeting places for those seeking to resist the French.¹⁹ During this period monks participated in a number of uprisings, and pagodas became bases for anti-colonial resistance. However, other sources emphasise that Vietnamese Buddhism has always been an 'engaged' Buddhism, and that various forms of social engagement by Buddhist leaders pre-date the colonial period.

After Vietnam was divided as a result of the 1954 Geneva Accords, Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, became the first president of South Vietnam, with strong US backing. Restrictions against certain Buddhist activities and the alleged harassment of monks and lay people resulted in mass protests, and the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc in June 1963. Diem's government promised dialogue with Buddhist leaders, but failed to implement real policy changes. Diem was assassinated in November 1963.

Although official accounts now make much of Buddhism's contribution to Vietnamese culture and society, when communist forces took control of the south in 1975 Buddhists were not exempt from the nationwide move to control and suppress religious organisations. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV),²⁰ which had been formed in 1964 and brought together various Buddhist traditions, had its headquarters taken over by security police. UBCV schools, universities, pagodas, hospitals and humanitarian institutions were confiscated, and hundreds of nuns, monks and lay Buddhists were arrested, leading to a series of self-immolations.²¹

18 This section refers to the history and practice of Mahayana Buddhism, which is the dominant Buddhist tradition in Vietnam. Khmer-Krom Theravada Buddhism and Hoa Hao Buddhism are discussed in other sections. Modern Buddhist practice and belief in Vietnam often includes elements from Pure Land and Zen Buddhism, as well as other traditions.
19 Tai Thu Nguyen (ed.) (2008), *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, p.263
20 See footnote 8 on use of the term 'church' by Vietnamese Buddhist groups.
21 Vietnam Committee on Human Rights/International Buddhist Information Bureau, 'The Movement for Religious Freedom in Vietnam', 2014

RESTRICTIONS AND VIOLATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT

After the establishment of the VBS and the subsequent banning of all independent Buddhist groups, many prominent monks and lay Buddhists who did not join the VBS were arrested and imprisoned. UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and his then deputy Thich Quang Do were both sent to remote parts of the country and placed under house arrest in 1982. Some Buddhist academics were also arrested, including Thich Tue Sy and Le Manh That; they were condemned to death in 1988 but later had their sentences commuted to 20 years' hard labour due to international pressure, and were eventually released in 1998.²²

According to the government, the "achievements of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha...affirm the faith of Vietnamese Buddhists in socialism".²³ The dual role of the VBS as an organisation providing religious and spiritual guidance and an entity promoting a political and economic ideology is one which many monks, nuns and lay Buddhists find inappropriate or contradictory.

Within the UBCV, at least, many Buddhists believe the VBS is actually an attempt to bring Buddhist religious activities under government control. In contrast, the UBCV considers itself to be the legitimate heir to and vehicle for Vietnam's 'spiritual heritage', as well as being the nation's largest civil society movement.

In fact, the past 20 years of Vietnamese history have been marked by mass protests in which the UBCV has often played a prominent role, including the peaceful demonstrations which took place in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in July 2012 to protest against China's actions in the South China Sea dispute. Although the protest was initially allowed, demonstrators were blocked from certain areas, and the protest ended with several people being briefly detained.

Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do was one of those calling for the protests. Before the protests, police surrounded Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City, where Thich Quang Do is under de facto house arrest. Police also surrounded the residence of the UBCV deputy Thich Vien Dinh, and demanded that he call off the protests. On the day of the protests, other Buddhists were prevented from leaving their homes or were stopped en route to the protests.

In the first quarter of 2014 police and security forces launched what the UBCV says is one of the most intensive crackdowns in recent years against the UBCV. In January over 100 security police surrounded Long Quang Pagoda, the new secretariat of the UBCV's Executive Institute, and blocked the main air, road and rail routes to the pagoda. UBCV leaders were warned not to attend Memorial Day commemorations in Hue; some were stopped en route and were harassed and sent back.

Also in 2014, members of the UBCV's Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM), whose educational activities have hitherto been tolerated, were also subject to interference and harassment. The BYM national leader, Le Cong Cau, was arrested on 1 January 2014 and held under house arrest without charge for one month. Deputy Leader Nguyen Tat Truc was also arrested in early January and accused of being part of an 'illegal organization' and of 'violating the law'. The police ordered him to resign from the UBCV's Executive Institute and prohibited him from leaving the district.²⁴

Example 1: Police prevent participation in Buddhist group's Memorial Day celebrations

Police and security forces harassed and intimidated monks, nuns and lay followers of the UBCV to prevent them organising a Memorial Day commemoration at the Long Quang Pagoda in Hue on 10 January 2014. Over 100 security police surrounded Long Quang Pagoda, and the internet service at the pagoda was cut off.

On 7 January Thich Thanh Quang, the Deputy Head of the UBCV's Executive Institute, was summoned for interrogation by the security police in Danang, and forbidden to attend the commemorations in Hue. Another leader was subjected to 'working sessions' (interrogations). Monks and nuns from 18 UBCV Provincial

Committees all over southern and central Vietnam were also intercepted and placed under surveillance in their pagodas.

Many members of the Buddhist Youth Movement were also intercepted and prevented from attending the traditional memorial ceremony for founders of the BYM in Vietnam on 7 January at the Phuoc Thanh Pagoda in Hue. Whereas this annual event usually draws hundreds of participants, only 70 BYM leaders managed to circumvent police controls. Key members of the BYM were subjected to harassment, surveillance and police 'working sessions'.²⁵

Example 2: Senior Buddhist leader under long-term house arrest

UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do, 85, a 2014 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, remains under effective house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery without any justification or charge, after three decades in internal exile, prison and house arrest for his peaceful advocacy of religious freedom and human rights.

All his visits are monitored by uniformed and plain clothes security agents who keep round the clock surveillance on his monastery. Although the Vietnamese government allows occasional visits by foreign diplomats, unofficial visitors risk detention, interrogations and police assaults.

Thich Quang Do is deprived of his citizenship rights and unable to travel or communicate freely. His recent translation from the Chinese of a six-volume Great Dictionary of Buddhist Terms, printed by the International Buddhist Information Bureau, was completed while he was in prison. Although it has no political content, the dictionary is prohibited in Vietnam today simply because it bears the name of its author.²⁶

22 International Buddhist Information Bureau, 'Buddhist Monks Released in Amnesty', 2 September 1998 <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/soc.culture.vietnamese/jTQxcNME7gU>

23 Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (2011), Religious Studies Review, Volume 5, Number 4, p.10

24 International Buddhist Information Bureau, 'Police harass and intercept UBCV monks and lay-followers to prevent celebrations of Buddhism's Memorial Day in Hue', 8 January 2014 http://www.queme.net/eng/news_detail.php?numb=2207

25 ibid. Date of incident: January 2014

26 Queme, 'Profile on Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, Head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam' Date of incident: ongoing <http://www.queme.net/eng/thichquangdo.php>

CAO DAISM



KEY DATES

1926	The Cao Dai religion is founded in Tay Ninh, southern Vietnam
1975	North Vietnamese communist forces take control of south Vietnam
1976	The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is formed
1978	The Vietnamese government issues the Cao Dai Judgment
1979	Order No.1/HT-DL abolishes key sections of the Cao Dai organisational structure; the government establishes the Administrative Council ²⁷
1983	Reverend Ho Tan Khoa of the Tay Ninh Holy See is placed under house arrest for allegedly plotting to overthrow the Communist regime
1996	A new Cao Dai leadership and clergy is officially recognised by the government
2013	Decree 92/2012/ND-CP comes into effect; harassment of Cao Dai house gatherings reportedly increases

NUMBER OF CAO DAISTS IN VIETNAM*

807,915	Government census, 2009 ²⁸
2,312,500-3,700,000	US Department of State, 2013 ²⁹
2-3,000,000	BPSOS, 2013 ³⁰
6,000,000	Hoskins, 2012 ³¹

* These figures are contested and are not intended to reflect a definitive number: they are included here to indicate the range of estimates and the difficulty in coming to firm conclusions on the number of religious adherents in Vietnam.

²⁷ Also translated as the Governance Council or the Trustee Council (*Hoi Dong Chuong Quan*)
²⁸ 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census
²⁹ US Department of State, International religious freedom report 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
³⁰ BPSOS, 2013
³¹ Janet Hoskins cites 3.2 million as the official figure, and 6 million as the estimate given by Cao Dai leaders, in 'What Are Vietnam's Indigenous Religions?' CSEAS (Kyoto University), 2012 <http://www.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/edit/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/NL643-6.pdf>

LEGAL STATUS

- Q: Is this religion/belief recognised by the Vietnamese government? ✓
- Q: Are all denominations or sub-groups claiming to follow this religion/belief recognised by the government? ✗
- Q: If some groups are banned, or if the religion/belief is not recognised, are there any obvious or stated reasons why?

The government recognises only Cao Dai bodies and branches which operate under the authority of the government-approved Cao Dai Administrative Council. The religious activities of Cao Daists who do not recognise the legitimacy of this council, and who therefore do not request permission from the council, are seen as 'illegal religious activities'. Cao Dai groups which are not affiliated with the council, and which often predate the government-established council, often refer to themselves as the independent or 'original' Cao Dai Church.³²

INTRODUCTION

The Cao Dai religion was founded in the southern part of Vietnam in 1926.³³ It rapidly developed a large following, with some sources claiming more than 5 million adherents before North Vietnamese communist forces took control of the south in April 1975. In 1978 the Vietnamese government issued the Cao Dai Judgment, accusing the Cao Dai religion of being an anti-revolutionary tool of foreign powers.

Beginning in 1979, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam attempted to eradicate the 'anti-revolutionary' Cao Dai religion by dismantling the organisational hierarchy, replacing it with a government-led organisation.³⁴ This is discussed further in the sections below.

The Cao Dai religion is based on the belief that all religions are simply different manifestations of one universal truth, the 'Great Way'. Cao Daists believe that, through spiritual mediums, God has revealed a plan to unite all religions into one. As such, participation in interfaith activities is an important aspect of Cao Dai practice. Cao Daists recognise the significance and teachings of religious and culture figures from various countries and periods, including Buddha (Dipankara Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha), Moses, Confucius, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Lao Tse, and the French writer Victor Hugo, who reportedly foresaw the rise of a new faith bringing together Asian and Western spirituality.³⁵

Cao Daists believe that God is in every person, plant and animal, and in all objects: all things were created by God and everyone and everything is part of the life and body of the universe. The religion teaches that all human beings are equal, and regards humanity as one family.

Spiritualism is of great importance to Cao Daists: God imparts his messages and wisdom through spiritual mediums. These mediums are specially selected and trained, and operate under the supervision of the Cao Dai High Council.

Cao Dai adherents belong to different sects according to geographical location. Temples are built in order to facilitate collective communion with God. Cao Daists also erect altars in their homes, usually on a high wall near the middle of the house, for personal worship and prayer. The ceremony to erect an altar in the home must be presided over by Cao Dai clergy.

³² See footnote 8 on use of the term 'church' by other religious groups.
³³ Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, 'History of Caodai' <http://www.caodai.org/web/content.aspx?pageID=1>
³⁴ BPSOS, 'Caodaiism: An Endogenous Religion, a Distinct Culture: The Vietnamese Government's Violations of Their Cultural Rights', 2013
³⁵ LA Times, 'Cao Dai Fuses Great Faiths of the World', 7 January 2006 <http://www.caodai.org/forum/viewmessage.aspx?ForumDetailID=80>

RESTRICTIONS AND VIOLATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT

In 1978 the Vietnamese government issued the 'Cao Dai Judgment', which labelled the Cao Dai religion as 'anti-revolutionary' and a tool of foreign powers such as France, Japan and the US. Soon after this judgment was issued, in March 1979, the government began attempts to eradicate the existing Cao Dao organisation through Order No.1/HT-DL, abolishing and dismantling key sections of the organisational structure, including the Legislative, Executive and Charitable Bodies and the Popular, Sacerdotal and High Councils. The government also outlawed spiritism, effectively making the full practice of the original Cao Dai religion illegal.

In 1979 the government established a replacement Cao Dai Administrative Council (sometimes referred to as the Trustee Council or Governance Council). The council's members were chosen by the government: since they had not gone through the nomination and approval process required in Cao Daism, most Cao Daists did not recognise them as legitimate leaders.

The government also took steps to remove key leaders from the Cao Dai organisation. In 1983, for example, the highest-ranking dignitary of the Tay Ninh Holy See, Reverend Ho Tan Khoa, was accused of being involved in a plot to overthrow the Communist Party, and put under lifelong house arrest. In 1984 his son was executed on a similar charge.

An order issued in May 1996 resulted in the formation of a new Cao Dai leadership and clergy. Those selected for posts in the new Cao Dai organisation consistently followed Communist Party policies. The government announced its recognition of the new organisation in September 1996.

Cao Dai adherents who do not recognise the legitimacy of the new, government-approved Cao Dai organisation face considerable pressure to practise their religion only within the new structure. Without permission from the official Cao Dai organisation, their religious practices are labelled illegal. In clashes with local Cao Dai clergy and the police, original Cao Daists have been beaten, robbed and prevented from carrying out peaceful religious activities. In addition, Cao Dai representatives have been prevented from engaging in interfaith meetings with other religious organisations in Vietnam.

Example 1: Police and hired thugs disrupt ceremony in Cao Daist's home

On 12 September 2013 Cao Dai followers and clergy members gathered for a ceremony to erect an altar at the home of Ms Nga. Ms Nga had written to the People's Committee and the Fatherland Front village branch to ask permission, but they had told her she had to ask the Ceremony Unit of the local office of the state-sanctioned Cao Dai Administrative Council to officiate, or she would not be allowed to erect the altar. Ms Nga viewed this as government interference, forcing her to follow the Cao Dai Administrative Council instead of independent clergy.

She proceeded with the ceremony. At 11.30am, police, local government officials in plain clothes, and members of the Administrative Council surrounded her home. A number of them wore face masks. Hired thugs and government agents blocked Cao Dai practitioners from entering Ms Nga's home to start the ceremony, and snatched clergy members' camcorders, phones and money. Those already in the house locked the door and proceeded with the ceremony.

After the ceremony, as they exited the house, they found themselves surrounded by the police and hired thugs. Some of those leaving the house were assaulted by the thugs in full view of the police. People still in the house made phone calls to the Committee for Religious Affairs, the Office of Interior Affairs of Tay Ninh Province, and the police, but nobody came to the scene until 8pm when the local police arrived and photographed the victims, and took video statements about the incident.³⁶

³⁶ Report by Mrs. Ta Thi Thu Nga (victim) and members of the Cao Dai Church 'Cao Dai Church, 88th Year, Tay Ninh Temple, Report' Date of incident: 12 September 2013 <http://democraticvoicevn.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/cao-dai-incident-report-with-signatures-english.pdf>

Example 2: Officials, police and hired thugs attack temple and Cao Daists

On 3 July 2013 about 20 original Cao Dai followers and independent clergy members gathered for a religious ceremony at the Long Binh Cao Dai Temple, Go Cong Tay District, Tien Giang Province. The group had previously refused to transfer ownership of the temple to the local office of the Administrative Council.

With the support of the security police and hired thugs, members of the local office of the Administrative Council used a truck to knock down the front gate of the temple. They then used batons, clubs and rocks to assault those who tried to defend it.

Sub-dignitary Le Van Ngoc Diep, in charge of Long Binh Cao Dai Temple, was tied up and arrested at 9.45am on 3 July 2013 by members of the local office of the Administrative Council, with the support of local security forces. He was taken to Vinh Binh Cao Dai Temple, which was under the management of the Administrative Council, about two kilometres from Long Binh Temple. Later he was called for questioning, but not detained.³⁷

³⁷ Submission to UN Special Procedures 'Assault on Long Binh Temple, Tien Giang Province' Date of incident: 3 July 2013 <http://democraticvoicevn.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/long-binh-temple-report-01-14-14.pdf>

CATHOLICISM



KEY DATES

1615	First Roman Catholic mission established in Vietnam
1627	Alexandre/Alessandro de Rhodes establishes second mission in Tonkin, northern Vietnam
1630	Prohibition of Christianity; de Rhodes is expelled
1660s	Persecution begins; waves of persecution against Catholic Christians continue throughout 17th and 18th centuries
1976	The new Vietnamese government closes Catholic seminaries and schools; some high-ranking clergy are imprisoned
1988	Pope John Paul II canonises 117 Catholic martyrs, known as the Vietnam Martyrs
1990s	Dialogue begins between the Holy See and the government of Vietnam with specific regard to the appointment of bishops
2007	Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visits Pope Benedict XVI
2008	Candlelight vigils in Hanoi seeking the return of confiscated church property
2009	President Nguyen Minh Triet visits the Pope

NUMBER OF CATHOLICS IN VIETNAM*

5,677,086	Government census, 2009 ³⁸
6,000,000+	US Department of State, 2013 ³⁹
5,700,000	Pew, 2010 ⁴⁰
8,000,000	Reimer, 2011 ⁴¹
6,456,947	UCANews, 2011 ⁴²

* These figures are contested and are not intended to reflect a definitive number: they are included here to indicate the range of estimates and the difficulty in coming to firm conclusions on the number of religious adherents in Vietnam.

³⁸ 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census
³⁹ US Department of State, International religious freedom report 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
⁴⁰ Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, 2012
⁴¹ Reimer, 2011
⁴² UCAN Directory, 'Church in Vietnam' <http://directory.ucanews.com/country/vietnam/34>

LEGAL STATUS

- Q: Is this religion/belief recognised by the Vietnamese government? ✓
- Q: Are all denominations or sub-groups claiming to follow this religion/belief recognised by the government? ✓
- Q: If some groups are banned, or if the religion/belief is not recognised, are there any obvious or stated reasons why?

Catholicism is recognised by the Vietnamese government. In recent years, Vietnam and the Vatican have made steps towards re-establishing diplomatic relations. However, Catholics who are inspired by their faith to engage in social welfare activities have been charged with political crimes; and in certain parts of the country, local officials oppose the peaceful religious activities of Catholics with impunity, even though Catholicism is recognised by the government. In addition, permission must be granted by the government for the nomination and consecration of bishops and curates. Some Catholic lay sources report that a few churches in remote areas in the far north and the Central Highlands are not recognised by local officials, despite the Catholic Church being recognised by the government.

INTRODUCTION

The first Catholic missionaries arrived in Vietnam in the 16th century; the first permanent mission was established by the Jesuits in present-day Danang in 1615. With the arrival of the French Jesuit priest Alexandre de Rhodes (also known as Alessandro de Rhodes) in the 1620s, and a number of Franciscan and Dominican missionaries soon after, the Catholic missions' influence on Vietnam began to grow. Building on earlier work by foreign missionaries, Alexandre de Rhodes created *quoc ngu*, an alphabet and writing system for the Vietnamese language using Latin characters, which was to become a key tool for modernisation.

The spread of Catholicism was met with successive waves of persecution by the authorities throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, during which at least 130,000 Vietnamese and foreign Catholics were killed.⁴³ Some died after prolonged and cruel torture; others were executed outright for converting to a 'foreign religion'. In 1988 Pope John Paul II canonised 117 'Vietnam martyrs', including 96 Vietnamese.

Catholicism was seen as a revolutionary religion which challenged Vietnamese culture and hierarchy. In addition, during the 19th century Catholicism was seen by some as linked to French colonialism.⁴⁴ However, when the regions of Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina were brought under French rule in 1887, a significant number of Vietnamese Catholics opposed colonial rule; many Catholics later joined the struggle for independence when the French tried to reassert their control after World War II.

When Vietnam was divided in 1954, 75-80% of the refugees who fled to the south were Catholic. The southern Catholics' relationship with the government became complicated. South Vietnam's first president, Ngo Dinh Diem, was a Catholic, and many accounts argue that he gave preferential treatment to the Church. Even after Diem's assassination in 1963, and the unification of the country under Communism in 1975, the Communist North remained suspicious of Catholics as a potentially subversive group. After 1975 a small number of priests agreed to work with the government. Some Catholics viewed these priests as pro-government or even 'fake'. Other clergy tried to take a pragmatic approach and work within government restrictions, in the hope that the 'space' for religious freedom would eventually increase.

Today Vietnam has 23 dioceses and three archdioceses in Thua Thien-Hue Province, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The relationships between the Vietnamese Catholic Church, the government and the Vatican are complex.

Some aspects of these relationships are described below.

⁴³ Reimer, 2011
⁴⁴ French colonial rule is sometimes incorrectly assumed to be the main cause of the growth of Catholicism in Vietnam; in fact, the Church had experienced significant growth for over 200 years before Vietnam became a colony of France in 1887.

RESTRICTIONS AND VIOLATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT

The early months of 2013 saw an improvement in relations between the Vatican and the Vietnamese government: in January the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, met with the Pope at the time, Emeritus Benedict XVI, in Rome: the meeting was described as "very serene and very constructive".⁴⁵ Then in March, the Vatican envoy to Vietnam, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, was able to visit two provinces in the far north of the country, Ha Giang and Tuyen Quang, "without restriction or interference from government officials".⁴⁶

Nevertheless, while there are some signs that the Vatican and the government are taking steps to improve their relationship, the situation at ground level has yet to reflect these developments. In 2012 and 2013 both clergy and lay Catholics reported a range of violations and restrictions, including discrimination in the distribution of services and utilities, destruction of church property, disruption of meetings, intimidation, harassment and violent physical attacks.

Several of these incidents have occurred in and around Vinh in Nghe An Province, the homeland of national hero and former leader Ho Chi Minh. In 2011, 17 Catholics from the diocese of Vinh and Thanh Hoa were arrested without formal documentation and charged under Article 88 with crimes of 'conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam' and under Article 79 with 'attempting to overthrow the administration'. Fellow Catholics believe they were 'abducted' because they had travelled to the Philippines and Thailand to participate in democracy workshops. The detainees were also involved in faith-based social welfare activities. The leader, Dang Xuan Dieu, was sentenced to 13 years. In October 2013 CSW learned that no one had been allowed to visit him since his incarceration.

On 11 June 2012 officials attacked Catholics in Quy Chau District, Nghe An, in an attempt to confiscate land owned by the church. A large group violently attacked parishioners, leaving several with serious injuries. Elsewhere in Nghe An, police and soldiers disrupted a Mass in Con Cuong on 3 June by making noise and cutting off the amplifier. Then on 1 July Reverend Nguyen Dinh Thuc was stopped by a group of thugs on his way to Mass. Parishioners rushed to help but were violently beaten by the thugs, who also smashed a statue of the Virgin Mary. Many people were seriously injured.

As well as physical attacks such as those described above, Catholics face administrative obstacles to the peaceful practice of their faith. According to priests interviewed by CSW in 2013, opposing the sale of land to the Church is one way in which local officials limit its growth. After a church leader purchases land to build a church, the landowner must send a letter to the government saying they do not need the land and want to give it to the government. Then the landowner must send a second letter, proposing to offer the land to the church. The government can give the land to the church, give the church land in another location, or decide the church does not need the land and must give it back to the government, in which case the church loses the money it paid to the landowner.

Many of the better known detained or persecuted Catholics have been inspired by their beliefs to actively pursue human rights and social justice. Catholic priest Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly has been a prominent human rights defender since the 1970s, campaigning for freedom of religion or belief, democracy and free media reporting. Since 2007 he has been serving an eight-year sentence for 'disseminating slanderous and libellous information harmful to the state'. In September 2010 the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called for Father Ly's immediate and unconditional release, saying he had been arbitrarily and illegally detained and denied access to legal counsel by the Vietnamese authorities.

Any account of Catholicism in Vietnam would be incomplete if it did not mention the Redemptorists.⁴⁷ The Redemptorist mission in Vietnam was established in 1925 and today has a strong focus on peace and justice, social media reporting, and care for the most vulnerable in society. Although small in number, the Redemptorist

community has been extremely active in the struggle against corruption and social injustice, in particular by using social media to raise awareness of these issues both domestically and internationally, led by dynamic leaders such as the late priest and human rights defender Stephen Chan Tin. As a result of their outspoken advocacy, several Redemptorist bloggers have been arrested and imprisoned.

Example 1: Police beat Catholic petitioners outside cathedral

On the morning of 31 July 2013 a number of Catholics praying outside Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City for the resolution of land disputes, were forcibly removed and beaten by police and security agents. They were dragged onto buses by police, and those who resisted were brutally beaten and had their mobile phones taken away. Following the assault, several people were treated in hospital. In photographs of one young woman beaten by police, her face is swollen and bruised and her mouth filled with dried blood.

The petitioners had reportedly come to the church from their homes in the south-eastern and south-western provinces to pray for the resolution of land disputes after their land and property was seized by the local authorities.⁴⁸

Example 2: Police, military and hired thugs beat Catholic protesters, damage religious property

On 4 September 2013 Catholics from My Yen gathered to peacefully protest the arrest of Nguyen Van Hai, 43, and Ngo Van Khoi, 53, also from My Yen parish, who were detained after being involved in a previous incident on 22 May 2013. On that date the two men were part of a crowd of Catholics visiting a shrine and attending Mass at a church in Nghi Phuong Commune. Three men later revealed to be plainclothes police officers were stopping and searching people on the road to the church. The men did not show any identification, and there was confusion among the crowd as to their identity. Arguments broke out as a result of the tension and confusion. Nguyen Van Hai and Ngo Van Khoi were formally arrested on 27 June and accused of coordinating the gathering of Catholics at the home of the District Police Officer on 22 May. Some sources believe that the two men were selected as 'scapegoats' because they are 'easy-going' and police believed they could easily extract a confession. The two men's families were later informed that they had been charged with 'disturbing public order'.

Members of the Catholic community in Nghe An appealed for their release, hoping the two men would be set free under the annual national amnesty on 2 September. When this did not happen, a large number of Catholics demonstrated peacefully in front of the Peoples' Committee District Office in Nghi Phuong the following day (3 September). In response, the local district chief issued a paper promising that the two men would be released on the afternoon of 4 September. However, the families were later told that there had been no such promise of a release.

Several hundred members of the community arrived to protest the continued detention of the two men. As the crowds surrounded the district office, the situation became tense. Sources agree that it was at this point that the military arrived to dispel the crowd, armed with guns, batons, tear gas and guard dogs. Some sources say hired thugs were also present. At one point, undercover police officers threw rocks at the uniformed police and military, giving them an excuse to attack. In response the military fired their guns into the air for five to seven minutes, and severely beat the petitioners. This continued until 8pm. During this period the military also smashed religious icons in the neighbouring area. This was reported by eyewitnesses and later confirmed in an investigation by Vinh Diocese church authorities. Between 21 and 40 people were injured. About 15 people arrested during the protest were released the following day. Following the incident on 4 September, the government launched a media campaign which blamed Bishop Paul Nguyen Thai Hop and the Catholic petitioners for all the unrest.

Ngo Van Khoi and Nguyen Van Hai were released on 22 December 2013 after completing sentences of seven and six months respectively.⁴⁹

45 Catholic Herald, 'Pope meets Communist leader from Vietnam for first time', 23 January 2013 <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2013/01/23/pope-meets-communist-leader-from-vietnam-for-first-time/>

46 UCANews, 'Vatican envoy allowed free access on visit', 21 March 2013 <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-envoy-allowed-free-access-on-visit/67803>

47 The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptorists) was founded in southern Italy in 1732 by St Alphonsus Liguori.

48 CSW press release, 1 August 2013 'Catholic petitioners beaten by police outside cathedral' Date of incident: 31 July 2013 <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1557>

49 CSW briefing, October 2013 'My Yen incident, September 2013' Date of incident: September 2013 <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=177>

HOA HAO BUDDHISM



KEY DATES

1930s	Hoa Hao Buddhism is founded in Chau Doc Province by Huynh Phu So
1975	The new Vietnamese government closes and/or confiscates Hoa Hao administrative offices, places of worship and other property
1999	The state-sanctioned Hoa Hao Buddhist Administrative Council is formed
2005	The Hoa Hao Administrative Council is expanded and renamed the Executive Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism
2005	The unregistered, independent Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church holds a region-wide meeting attended by 126 delegates from the southern provinces

NUMBER OF HOA HAO BUDDHISTS IN VIETNAM*

1,433,252	Government census, 2009 ⁵⁰
1,387,500-2,775,000	US Department of State, 2013 ⁵¹
6,000,000	BPSOS, 2013 ⁵²
1.5-3,000,000	Hoskins, 2012 ⁵³
2,000,000	Hoa Hao sources ⁵⁴

* These figures are contested and are not intended to reflect a definitive number: they are included here to indicate the range of estimates and the difficulty in coming to firm conclusions on the number of religious adherents in Vietnam.

50 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census
51 US Department of State, International religious freedom report 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
52 BPSOS, 'Hoa Hao Buddhism: A Religion Deeply Rooted in the Culture of the Peasantry of Mekong Delta', 31 October 2013 <http://democraticvoicevn.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/hoa-hao-buddhism-cultural-aspects-for-public-release.pdf>
53 Janet Hoskins cites 1.5 million as the official figure, and 3 million as the estimate given by Hoa Hao leaders, in 'What Are Vietnam's Indigenous Religions?' CSEAS (Kyoto University), 2012 <http://www.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/edit/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/NL643-6.pdf>
54 Phat Giao Hoa Hao (Hoa Hao Buddhism) http://hoahao.org/D_1-5/

LEGAL STATUS

- Q: Is this religion/belief recognised by the Vietnamese government? ✓
- Q: Are all denominations or sub-groups claiming to follow this religion/belief recognised by the government? ✗
- Q: If some groups are banned, or if the religion/belief is not recognised, are there any obvious or stated reasons why?

The government recognises only the state-sanctioned Hoa Hao Buddhist Administrative Council. 'Dissenting' Hoa Hao Buddhist groups are not legally recognised and their activities are very often suppressed. Groups who choose not to be affiliated with or register with the Administrative Council, including the Pure Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect and the Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect, face intimidation, harassment, threats and violence.

INTRODUCTION

Hoa Hao Buddhism was founded in the late 1930s⁵⁵ in Chau Doc in An Giang Province, southern Vietnam. The religion's founder, Huynh Phu So, is considered to be a prophet. Huynh Phu So's teachings emphasised simplicity, frugality, and gratitude to parents and ancestors, the country, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and to one's fellow countrymen and humanity.

The emphasis on simple forms of religious observance is well suited to the lifestyle of the farmers of the Mekong Delta, where Hoa Hao Buddhism is most widely practised. In some parts of the Mekong Delta region, up to 90% of the population are Hoa Hao. For this reason, Hoa Hao Buddhism is sometimes referred to as 'peasant Buddhism'.

In Hoa Hao Buddhism great emphasis is put on helping the poor. Elaborate and expensive ceremonies are avoided, and only water, flowers and incense can be given as offerings. Emphasis is also placed on the home as a place of prayer. There is no central hierarchy of leaders, and only a few temples. Hoa Hao followers gather in their homes for simple ceremonies. Religious practices reflect a strong focus on universality and simplicity.

After North Vietnamese communist forces took control of the south in April 1975, the new government confiscated almost all Hoa Hao property, including places of worship and education, and set out to dismantle the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church (see below).

According to the official history, Hoa Hao Buddhism was an "indigenous religion born from the movement for national independence"; however, "unfortunately, it was exploited by the colonial and imperialist forces".⁵⁶ The government line accuses some Hoa Hao followers active in the 1960s and 70s of being linked to the United States, and claims these groups were really a political force masquerading as a religious organisation. This claim is most likely based on the fact that the Hoa Hao took an openly anti-communist stance during this period.

RESTRICTIONS AND VIOLATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT

As mentioned above, after the North Vietnamese communist forces took control of the south in 1975, the new government set out to dismantle the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church and confiscated almost all Hoa Hao property,

55 Some sources claim the exact date was 1937, others 1939.
56 Nguyen Minh Quang (2005), *Religious Issues and Government Policies in Viet Nam*, p.104

including offices, temples, shrines, minarets, and the Hoa Hao central library and university. The confiscation of almost all places of worship and administrative buildings was extremely disruptive to the Hoa Hao Buddhist community; however, believers continued to worship in their homes.

In 1999 the state-sanctioned Hoa Hao Buddhist Administrative Council was formed; independent Hoa Hao claim that the government established the council to bring the religion under state control after failing to eradicate the practice of Hoa Hao Buddhism in Vietnam. At the same time, the government could point to the existence of an official Hoa Hao body as 'proof' that Hoa Hao Buddhists enjoy religious freedom in Vietnam. While the Hoa Hao Buddhist Administrative Council was promoted as representing all Hoa Hao religious adherents, independent Hoa Hao Buddhists who refused to join the council were harassed, intimidated and arrested. More recently, those who have spoken out about these incidents have been subject to further violations.

Hoa Hao leader Vo Van Thanh Liem was apprehended by security police in front of his temple shortly after submitting a written testimony for a US congressional hearing on human rights in Vietnam, chaired by Congressman Christopher Smith, in June 2005. His nephew Vo Van Thanh Long, an assistant monk at the temple, was also arrested and imprisoned. Other prominent Hoa Hao Buddhists who have advocated for religious freedom have been placed under house arrest and are closely monitored by the authorities. Members of the unregistered, independent Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church⁵⁷ also face significant repression from the government. Although publishing houses approved by the government have printed 250,000 copies of sacred Hoa Hao texts as well as other teachings and prophecies, the scriptures have yet to be printed in full. In 2012 no new books were authorised for publication. Officials cited lack of funds as the reason.

As with many religious minorities in Vietnam, some of the harshest sentences have been received by those who have peacefully advocated for their rights or the rights of others. Hoa Hao Buddhists who have engaged in peaceful forms of protests such as hunger strikes, to protest police violence against their religious community, have been given sentences as long as six years in closed trials. Hoa Hao Buddhists claim that even now the government uses threats, intimidation, arrests and physical attacks to force Hoa Hao Buddhists to submit to the state-sanctioned Executive Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism. Those who engage in independent, unregistered religious activities such as gathering to pray at an 'illegal' minaret have been beaten by security agents and hired thugs. In addition, Hoa Hao Buddhists have not been allowed to hold ceremonies to commemorate the disappearance of their founder.

Between 2001 and 2005, at least three Hoa Hao Buddhists self-immolated or attempted to self-immolate in protest against these violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Example 1: Police and hired thugs disrupt Hoa Hao memorial ceremony, injuring participants

The Hoa Hao Buddhist Association planned a memorial service on the anniversary of the assassination of the Hoa Hao Prophet Huynh Phu So. The ceremony was scheduled to be held at the home of Nguyen Van Vinh in Long Hoa hamlet, Long Giang Commune, Cho Moi District, An Giang Province on 25 March 2014. On 18 March the government sent a group of officials to this location to prohibit people from conducting the ceremony, threatening them with 'severe punishment' if they disobeyed. The government gave a similar order to all the Hoa Hao Buddhist leaders. The Hoa Hao Buddhists refused to comply with the order. In response, over 300 police, accompanied by hired thugs, entered Mr Vinh's home and forced everyone in the house, around 30 people, to kneel down, after which they beat them. In protest, Mrs Nguyen Thi Xinh, 80 years old, grabbed a container of about ten litres of gasoline with which to set herself on fire. The thugs beat her until she collapsed, then stripped off all her clothes, tied her up, and left her unconscious on the ground.

After the beating the police searched the premises for any materials which could be used for the ceremony, including banners, video recorders, cameras, microphones and amplifiers. They severely damaged Mr Vinh's home, confiscated the phones of all those present, and arrested a total of 14 people. The attack left many people with serious injuries. The most seriously injured person was the wife of Mr Ha Hai, who had died in the year 2000 while detained in Xuan Loc: she was later treated at Chau Thanh District Hospital in An Giang Province.⁵⁸

Example 2: Hoa Hao lay leader arrested and imprisoned after distributing religious materials

On 24 April 2011 Hoa Hao lay leader Nguyen Van Lia and his wife Tran Thi Bac Lon were arrested in connection with a traffic violation, believed to be spurious, on their way to a remembrance ceremony for a Hoa Hao Buddhist friend. Prior to his arrest, Mr Lia was known to have distributed non-sanctioned books, CDs and DVDs of the teachings of Huynh Phu So to other Hoa Hao Buddhists. After his arrest, the authorities went to Mr Lia's home and confiscated all the books, CDs and DVDs. Tran Thi Bac Lon was released later than day, but Mr Lia was detained for a further eight months: during the first five months, authorities prevented his family from visiting him.

In December 2011 Mr Lia was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of distributing 'anti-government' materials.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See footnote 8 on use of the term 'church' by Vietnamese Buddhist groups.

⁵⁸ Source: Vietnamese Inter-faith Association, 29 March 2014 'Testament from Vietnamese Inter-faith Association on recent violations of religious freedom by the government of Vietnam: Prohibiting Memorial Service for Hoa Hao Buddhism's Prophet Huynh Phu So' Date of incident: 18 March 2014 <http://www.vrnews.org/2014/03/recent-violations-of-religious-freedom.html#/2014/03/recent-violations-of-religious-freedom.html>

⁵⁹ Source: BPSOS report, 31 October 2013 'Hoa Hao Buddhism: A Religion Deeply Rooted in the Culture of the Peasantry of Mekong Delta'. Date of incident: April 2011 <http://democraticvoicevn.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/hoa-hao-buddhism-cultural-aspects-for-public-release.pdf> [extract]



KEY DATES

1890s	First Protestant missionaries arrive in Vietnam
1911	Missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) establish a permanent mission in Danang
1929	The Vietnamese-founded ('indigenous') Evangelical Church of Vietnam is established
1954	As the country is divided, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam is also split into North and South
1958	The Evangelical Church of Vietnam, North is the first Protestant denomination to gain official recognition
1975	The new Vietnamese government comes into power; the beginning of the 'Dark Decade'
1988	The Vietnamese house church movement begins
2001	Evangelical Church of Vietnam, South gains official recognition
2005	Prime Minister's Special Directive No. 1, Concerning the Protestant Religion

NUMBER OF PROTESTANTS IN VIETNAM*

734,168	Government census, 2009 ⁶⁰
925,000-1,850,000	US Department of State, 2013 ⁶¹
1,440,000	Pew, 2010 ⁶²
1,400,000	Reimer, 2011 ⁶³
almost 1,500,000	UPR Stakeholder Submission, 2013 ⁶⁴

* These figures are contested and are not intended to reflect a definitive number: they are included here to indicate the range of estimates and the difficulty in coming to firm conclusions on the number of religious adherents in Vietnam.

60 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census
61 US Department of State, International religious freedom report 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
62 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, 2012
63 Reimer, 2011
64 World Evangelical Alliance, Aktion für verfolgte Christen, Groupe de travail pour la liberté religieuse du Réseau évangélique Suisse, The International Institute for Religious Freedom, UN UPR Joint stakeholders' report submitted 17 June 2013

LEGAL STATUS

- Q: Is this religion/belief recognised by the Vietnamese government? ✓
- Q: Are all denominations or sub-groups claiming to follow this religion/belief recognised by the government? ✗
- Q: If some groups are banned, or if the religion/belief is not recognised, are there any obvious or stated reasons why?

The government recognises only a limited number of Protestant groups or denominations. The first two to be recognised were the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, North, and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, South. In the past decade, seven more have gained official recognition: the Vietnam Christian Mission, the Vietnam Baptist Church, the Vietnam Mennonite Church, Southern Baptists in Vietnam, the Christian Fellowship Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church; the Assemblies of God registration permit has not yet been granted. However, many more groups, representing around half of all Protestants, remain unregistered. In addition, hundreds of ethnic minority churches which have tried to attain legal recognition and which are already affiliated with the ECVN, N and ECVN, S have been told they must register as individual churches.

INTRODUCTION

The first Protestant missionaries arrived in Vietnam in the 1890s; the first permanent mission was established in 1911 by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA). By 1926 the Protestant Bible had been translated into Vietnamese, and three years later the Vietnamese-founded ('indigenous') Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) was established. From then on, early Protestant missionaries encouraged Vietnamese churches to be self-supporting, rather than depending on foreign funds.

The Protestant Church grew slowly but steadily in the first half of the 20th century. This growth occurred in spite of some early missionaries' failure to recognise the importance of respect for one's ancestors in Vietnamese culture. As a result of this failure, Protestantism came to be known in some parts of the country as "the religion that discards the ancestors".⁶⁵ Nevertheless, despite these early problems, the number of Christians increased steadily. According to Reg Reimer, a religious freedom advocate and leading expert on Christianity in Vietnam, the growth was greatest in the southern part of the country, where it spread through traders and people travelling to meet with relatives.

When the Japanese occupied Vietnam from 1941 to 1945, foreign missionaries were either freed in prisoner exchanges or interned in camps. Vietnamese churches in the south remained open, but several in the north were forced to close. During the struggle for independence from the French, the ECVN as an institution remained 'neutral',⁶⁶ although individual Christians did join the struggle and side with Ho Chi Minh. Nevertheless, because the ECVN, the main representative Protestant church, did not side with either the French or the pro-independence movement, Christians were sometimes mistreated by both sides. As the independence movement began to take on a stronger communist identity, some Christians within the movement were pressured to recant their faith.

The division of Vietnam in 1954 was reflected in the Protestant Church: the ECVN split into two distinct churches, the ECVN South (ECVN, S) and the ECVN North (ECVN, N). The next phase in Vietnam's 35-year period of almost ceaseless wartime brought with it massive destruction and chaos, during which Protestant Christian relief charities such as World Vision were active in establishing schools and clinics. At the same time, however, some missionaries caught by communist guerrillas were brutally murdered. Many missionaries moved to safer parts of the country or left the country altogether. Virtually all foreign missionaries and some Vietnamese leaders left after the communist forces took over the south.

65 Reimer, 2011, p.32
66 ibid., p.37

During the first year after the war, the religious policy of the Viet Cong in the south was fairly open. Most churches were allowed to come together for worship, and were protected, at least in policy, from discrimination and persecution. However, after 1976 the Viet Cong were sidelined and Hanoi took the reins. The next ten years are often referred to by Christians and other Vietnamese as the 'Dark Decade'. Church property was confiscated, and many church leaders were pressured to align themselves with the government. A few did, while others resisted and went 'underground', and still others left Vietnam.

One of the groups which suffered the most was the Montagnard church movement. Hundreds of ethnic minority churches in the Central Highlands were forced to close and their pastors were imprisoned.⁶⁷ The government's suspicion of the Montagnards largely stemmed from the cooperation between many ethnic minority Central Highland tribes and the US forces during the America-Vietnam War. In addition, the somewhat ambiguous relationship between the Christian movement and the armed resistance group FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed People) meant that the government came to see Protestant Christianity as a tool of anti-government Montagnard forces. In the 2000s a new movement calling for greater religious and political freedom emerged with a strongly Christian identity: the government called this *Tin Lanh Dega*, referring to all Protestant ethnic minority Highlanders. Thousands of Montagnards were forced to flee or go into hiding after mass protests calling for land rights and freedom of religion or belief were crushed by the government.

RESTRICTIONS AND VIOLATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT

As mentioned above, there is still a huge backlog of churches waiting to be registered. The Prime Minister's Special Directive No. 1 Concerning the Protestant Religion, which came into effect in 2005, temporarily fast-tracked the registration process for churches. Later, however, the rate of registration slowed once more. The introduction of Decree 92 (see above) lengthened the registration process and the time taken to attain full recognition as a religious organisation.

However, even official registration does not guarantee full freedom of religion or belief. Decree 92 makes it clear that the aim of the registration requirement is the control and management of religious activities, rather than the protection of religious freedom. The tragic death in police custody of Hmong Protestant church elder Hoang Van Ngai is illustrative of this point: Mr Ngai's church belongs to the legally registered ECVN, S, but reportedly came under pressure from local officials to close, and was forbidden to meet (see Example 2 below).

As previously mentioned, ethnic minority Christians continue to suffer some of the greatest opposition to the peaceful practice of their religion. Montagnard leader Nglol Rahlan organised demonstrations for freedom of religion or belief in Pleiku and Dak Lak in February 2001. Days later, pastors and Bible school teachers from each participating village were detained. After another demonstration in 2004, many Montagnard Christians went into hiding in the jungle; others were imprisoned or fled the country. According to the Montagnard Refugee Organization, from 2001 to the present the Christians of the Central Highlands have continued to suffer intense pressure to abandon their religious beliefs, as well as discrimination, harassment, and intrusive monitoring of social and religious activities.

Alongside the Central Highlands, the north-western provinces⁶⁸ of Vietnam are some of the worst areas for religious freedom violations against Protestants. A series of government-issued documents leaked in 2000 and 2007 indicate that the government has for some time paid special attention to the growth of Protestant Christianity among the ethnic minorities of the north-west. The 2000 documents instruct local officials, overseen by Guidance Committee 184 (later changed to Guidance Committee 160), to stop the spread of Protestantism in the north-west. The 2007 documents confirmed that these aims were still in place.

Research by CSW in 2013 confirmed that new Protestant Christians in the north-west still come under intense pressure to recant. The 2013 report included information on the detention of several young Hmong Protestants from Dien Bien who were severely beaten in police custody in an attempt to force them to recant. In other north-west provinces, Protestant converts have been shown 'village rules' which state that conversion to another religion is punishable by forced eviction. Another case involves followers of a Hmong quasi-Christian sect led by Duong Van Minh.⁶⁹

CSW's 2013 research found that, across the country, new converts to Protestant Christianity are often more likely to encounter harassment, intimidation and human rights violations than more established religious communities; although this is not exclusively the case, as much depends on the attitude of local officials.⁷⁰ Violations against new converts included arbitrary detention, beatings and torture, harassment, discrimination and intrusive monitoring. However, sources inside the country increasingly report the participation of non-state actors, such as neighbours and family members, often in collaboration with police, officials and retired officials. Other times hired thugs are the main perpetrators of violence against converts to Protestantism.

Example 1: Police detain and beat Mennonite Christians

On the night of 9 June 2014, 76 Christians from a Mennonite⁷¹ church in Binh Duong Province, just north of Ho Chi Minh City, were kicked, punched and detained by 300 to 500 police, plainclothes officers and security forces.

The attackers, led by the local police chief, broke into the church centre on the pretext of an 'administrative search'. The 76 people present included young Bible school students, teachers and church leaders. After being beaten by the attackers, they were taken away for interrogation by the police and released the next day. Unknown assailants also vandalised the church centre building using bricks and stones. Female detainees, including some teenagers, were detained in a separate room at the police station. When they started to sing together, the lights were turned out and some were beaten by men who entered the room.

Upon their release from the police station the Christians returned to the centre. Twenty of the detainees sought medical care for injuries sustained during the attack, but police prevented them from leaving the centre, according to the report.

The church centre belongs to an unregistered Mennonite church. Several unregistered Mennonite congregations have been oppressed and their leaders detained in connection with their religious activities and their advocacy on social justice issues. Some families belonging to these churches have had their homes burnt down by unknown assailants, and church leaders have received sentences as long as eight years in connection with proselytising and teaching.⁷²

Example 2: Protestant church leader dies in police custody after severe beating

Hoang Van Ngai was a Hmong from Bac Kan Province in the north-east part of the country. He became a Christian in 1999 and migrated to Dak Nong Province in the Central Highlands. He was an elder of Bui Tre Church, which belongs to the legally recognised denomination, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South). According to his relatives, some government officials took a dislike to Mr Ngai because he struggled to preserve the church when the authorities had forbidden them to meet.

On the morning of 14 March 2013 Mr Ngai, together with his brother, his wife and his sister-in-law, went to work in their fields. About six police and officials from Nghia Tin Village came and tried to arrest them. The men escaped but the two women were handcuffed, tied with rope and dragged to the police vehicle.

67 Human Rights Watch, 'Montagnard Christians in Vietnam', 2011, p.3

68 Also referred to as the Northwest Mountainous Region.

69 This sect is sometimes described as a Christian group, and sometimes as a quasi-Christian cult. Mainstream evangelical Vietnamese object to it being categorised as a Christian denomination because of the prominent role of Duong Van Minh. For more information please see the 2014 report by VETO!: *Vietnam: Suppression of religious freedom among ethnic minorities* https://democraticvoicevn.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/140430_vn_suppressionduongvanminhreligion-veto_report_to_srrfen.pdf

70 CSW, 'Vietnam: The right to convert: state restrictions and social hostilities', August 2013

71 The Mennonites are a Christian group with Swiss and German roots, named after the Dutch priest Menno Simons. In Vietnam, several branches of the Mennonite church have been involved in advocating for and visiting religious prisoners of conscience, and working with the poor and marginalised.

72 CSW press release 25 June 2014 'Vietnam: Christian students and teachers beaten and temporarily detained' Date of incident: 9 June 2014 <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1726>

On 15 March police arrested Mr Ngai and his brother. No clear reason was given for the arrests, although some reports claim that the police accused the two brothers of 'destroying the forest'. At about 3pm on 17 March, Mr Ngai's brother heard the sound of violent beating coming from his brother's cell. When the police took Mr Ngai out of his cell, his brother saw that he was "completely limp as if he was dead, gone, purple marks on his throat". The following day, the police announced that he was dead.

The police first claimed Mr Ngai had put his hand into an electric socket. Later, the Chairman of the People's Committee of Dak Nong suggested that Mr Ngai may have committed suicide. His family have rejected this suggestion. The Christians sent several petitions to the authorities during the period of the attacks but received no response.⁷³

73 CSW, 'Death in custody of Hmong Christian, Central Highlands', April 2013, available on request. Date of incident: 17 March 2013

OTHER RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Due to restrictions on time and resources, and the difficulty of gathering and verifying information about this sensitive topic, the scope of this report cannot cover all religious minorities in Vietnam. The religious groups described above are the largest. Two other significant religious groups are described below.

Islam

The 2009 government census puts the number of Muslims in Vietnam at 75,268;⁷⁴ however, another government source⁷⁵ from 2003 claims there are over 100,000, while the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project puts this figure at 160,000. Followers of Islam in Vietnam are mostly concentrated in the south, in areas home to the Cham ethnic minority group. The Cham people group, whose history in Vietnam dates back to the second century, were initially predominantly Hindu but converted to Islam after contact with Muslim traders. Today, more than 80% of the 160,000-strong Cham population is Muslim. Nevertheless, ancient Cham Hindu temples such as My Son, a UNESCO World Heritage site, are a source of pride to all Cham people, including Muslims.

There are two distinct interpretations of Islamic culture practices by the Cham. The Cham people of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan, sometimes referred to as Cham Ba Ni, practise a form of Islam interwoven with elements of Brahmanism and folk customs. The Cham people of An Giang, Ho Chi Minh City, Tay Ninh and Dong Nai practise a more orthodox interpretation of Islam.

The Cham people claim they are victims of a government campaign against their religious practices. They have not been granted permission to build any new mosques, and the government has tried to remove one of their cemetery sites in Binh Thuan Province in order to build a road. In addition, many Cham people do not accept the legitimacy of the Administrative Council established as the official representative body of the Cham people.

Cham Muslims in Ho Chi Minh City report discrimination on the grounds of religion and ethnicity from members of the community. Some Muslims avoid wearing religious dress, such as head coverings for women, to avoid such discrimination. It is unclear what form this discrimination takes.

The Cham Muslims of southern Vietnam are generally very poor. Some report not being able to afford to hold religious ceremonies, or even acquire cloth for funeral garments.

Theravada Buddhism

As previously mentioned, the majority of Buddhists in Vietnam follow the Mahayana tradition. However, Theravada Buddhism is still practiced by 98% of the Khmer-Krom ethnic group residing in the Mekong Delta.⁷⁶

An official document published in 2006 states that there are 452 Khmer Theravada Buddhist pagodas, more than one million believers, and almost 9,000 monks. The document notes, "In addition, there are about 500 Theravada Buddhist monks among Kinh people in a number of provinces" in the central and south-east parts of Vietnam.⁷⁷

Khmer religious practices and beliefs often incorporate elements of animism, folk religions and sometimes Hinduism. Religion is an important aspect of Khmer-Krom culture and daily life, and is closely connected to the Khmer-Krom collective identity.

74 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census
75 Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the United States, 'The Facts about Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Vietnam', 2003 <http://vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/2003/04/facts-about-human-rights-and-religious-freedom-viet-nam>
76 Council of Indigenous Peoples in Today's Vietnam, 'Khmer Krom Nation' <http://www.cip-tvn.org/khmer-krom-nation/>
77 Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam, 2006, p.11

According to a submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights by the Council of Indigenous Peoples in November 2013,⁷⁸ many Khmer Theravada Buddhist pagodas have been ordered to use only Vietnamese scripts on their signs, and some have been forced to change their names from Khmer to Vietnamese. Pagoda seals in the Khmer script have been confiscated and replaced with Vietnamese ones.

In September 2013 a language school was set up by Khmer Buddhists at a pagoda in Soc Trang Province. The local government intervened, at which point those in favour of the school organised a demonstration. The local government labelled the demonstration a threat to national security, and nine organisers were arrested and sentenced to between ten months and six years in prison.

78 Council of Indigenous Peoples in Today's Vietnam, Report to the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, 6 November 2013

CONCLUSION

This report began with the following quotation from Nguyen Thai Binh, head of the Vietnamese Government's Committee for Religious Affairs:

"Vietnam recognises and upholds the moral and cultural values of belief and religion, and considers belief and religion a spiritual need of the people, and religious followers an integral part of the great national unity."

While it is good that the Vietnamese government recognises the spiritual needs of the people, the government must also acknowledge that freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right, not a gift or privilege bestowed by benevolent leaders. Furthermore, freedom of religion or belief includes the right to choose to practise one's religion or belief outside state-controlled bodies. Vietnam's long history of a thriving multi-religious society is evidence that religious believers have in the past, and will continue to, come together independently and peacefully without becoming a threat to social harmony or national security.

Religious communities and individuals can and do contribute to 'national unity'. However, freedom of religion or belief includes the right to change one's religion, regardless of one's ethnic or cultural identity. Where a person or group of people convert to a religion not practised by their local community, the government should not see this as a threat to unity. Social harmony depends on people of different faiths respecting one another: the government should lead by example and respect all religions and beliefs equally, not only in word but also in its approach to religious organisations and activities. Dividing religions into 'foreign' and 'traditional' implies that followers of certain religions are 'less Vietnamese', or that some religions carry an inherent threat because of their 'otherness'.

This report also claims that violations against religious communities and individuals are committed by both State and non-State actors. The government of Vietnam has a responsibility to protect all citizens not only from abuses of power by police, government officials and the military, but also by ordinary citizens. Claiming that abuses of freedom of religion or belief are 'local problems' is no justification for inaction.

Finally, this report claims that religious representatives are coming together to call for the protection of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. CSW welcomes and praises those religious leaders in Vietnam who are speaking out for victims of injustice. We also acknowledge the efforts of those officials who see the need to go beyond outward signals to the international community that Vietnam respects religious freedom. These leaders recognise that criminalising religious activities will not contribute to the building of a stable society and that a change in policy is needed.

Religious leaders and human rights defenders in Vietnam are deliberately and courageously speaking out against human rights violations against people of all faiths and none; they are taking personal risks, in the knowledge that they may face arrest, imprisonment, violence, and even death. The international community must do everything possible to support them, protect them, and stand alongside them in their struggle for human rights and freedom of religion or belief.

"The government tells the people that the outside view Vietnam as having religious freedom. But our stories are an alternative to the government report." - Vietnamese Protestant asylum seeker, Bangkok, interviewed 2013

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BPSOS (2013), 'Caodaiism: An Endogenous Religion, a Distinct Culture: The Vietnamese Government's Violations of Their Cultural Rights'

BPSOS (2013), 'Hoa Hao Buddhism: A Religion Deeply Rooted in the Culture of the Peasantry of Mekong Delta'

Catholic Herald, 'Pope meets Communist leader from Vietnam for first time', 23 January 2013

Central Population and Housing, Census Steering Committee of Vietnam, The 1/4/2009 Population and Housing Census, Hanoi, 21 July 2010

Chua Cuu The, 'The Vietnamese Communist rulers are utilizing prisons to maltreat patriotic youths', 2 September 2013

Council of Indigenous Peoples in Today's Vietnam, 'Khmer Krom Nation'

CSW (2013), 'Vietnam: Decree No. 92: Specific provisions and measures for the implementation of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion'

CSW, 'Vietnam: Father Nguyen Van Ly and The Most Venerable Thich Quang Do nominated for Nobel Peace Prize', 6 February 2013

CSW (2013), 'Vietnam: The right to convert: state restrictions and social hostilities'

Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, History of Caodai

Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the United States, 'The Facts about Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Vietnam', 2003

Freedom Now, 'Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly'

Gobron, Gabriel (1950), History and Philosophy of Caodaiism

Government Committee for Religious Affairs (2006), Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam

Hoskins, Janet Alison (2012), 'What Are Vietnam's Indigenous Religions?'

Human Rights Watch (2011), 'Montagnard Christians in Vietnam'

Institute for Global Engagement, 'Vietnam'

International Buddhist Information Bureau, 'Buddhist Monks Released in Amnesty', 2 September 1998

International Buddhist Information Bureau, 'Police harass and intercept UBCV monks and lay-followers to prevent celebrations of Buddhism's Memorial Day in Hue', 8 January 2014

LA Times, 'Cao Dai Fuses Great Faiths of the World', 7 January 2006

Nguyen Minh Quang (2005), Religious Issues and Government Policies in Viet Nam

Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2012)

Pham Phat Huon (2000), History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam (Volume 1)

Phat Giao Hoa Hao (Hoa Hao Buddhism)

Reimer, Reg (2011), Vietnam's Christians

Tai Thu Nguyen (ed.) (2008), The History of Buddhism in Vietnam

UCAN Directory, 'Church in Vietnam'

UCANews, 'Vatican envoy allowed free access on visit', 21 March 2013

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Press Statement on the visit to the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief', 31 July 2014

Vietcatholic Charity (2008), 'History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam'

Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (2011), Religious Studies Review, Volume 5, Number 4

Vietnam Committee on Human Rights/International Buddhist Information Bureau (2014), 'The Movement for Religious Freedom in Vietnam'

Vietnam National Report at the 2014 UN Universal Periodic Review

Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'VN, Cambodia discuss role of religious affairs', 16 December 2010

VRNs (English site) (2013), 'Statement of Vietnam's Clergies Concerning Ordinance on Religion and Belief'

World Evangelical Alliance, Aktion für verfolgte Christen, Groupe de travail pour la liberté religieuse du Réseau évangélique Suisse, The International Institute for Religious Freedom, UN UPR Joint stakeholders' report submitted 17 June 2013

ABOUT CSW

CSW works for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice. We work for freedom of religion or belief for all, and conduct regular fact-finding visits to our countries of focus. We have research and advocacy staff based in London, Brussels and Washington DC, and we work with partner organisations all around the world.

CSW has been working on issues of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights concerns in Indonesia since 1999. In the following years we played a particularly active role in advocacy and post-conflict reconciliation in the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi, and have subsequently made many fact-finding visits to different religious communities in Indonesia, including in Jakarta, West Java, East Java, South Sulawesi, North Sumatra, West Sumatra, Lombok and West Papua.

CSW regularly briefs senior policymakers and legislators around the world, and has testified at hearings in the UK Parliament, the European Parliament, the Japanese Diet, the United States Congress and the United Nations. We also regularly work with international media, and contribute comment and analysis to publications such as the Wall Street Journal, the International Herald Tribune and the New York Times, as well as to broadcasters such as the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and Sky.

For further information please visit www.csw.org.uk



VIETNAM



ABOUT STEFANUS ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL

Stefanus Alliance International is a Christian human rights organisation based in Norway, with a special focus on promoting freedom of thought, conscience or belief for all, including those who have no religion or belief. Stefanus Alliance advocates for the rights of people around the world to have a religion or belief of their choice, change their religion or belief and manifest their religion or belief freely and without fear.

Together with local partners in a number of countries in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and Asia we support practical initiatives to help strengthen the capacities of local actors whose right to freedom of religion or belief are severely limited. Among other things, we fund and provide technical assistance for human rights trainings and workshops as well as legal assistance to victims of religious freedom abuses. Our partners also document and report on human rights violations.

Our advocacy work targets Norwegian authorities, government officials in concerned countries as well as international policy makers. In addition to regularly writing advocacy letters on behalf of those persecuted for their faith, we also engage in various forms of campaigns and protests in order to highlight the plight of vulnerable believers and non-believers.

For further information please visit
www.stefanus.no/no/no/om_oss/english/Stefanus+Alliance+International.9UFRjYYc.ips



FOLD OUT FOR MAP OF VIETNAM

CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

PO Box 99, New Malden, Surrey, KT3 3YF, United Kingdom

T: +44 (0)845 456 5464 F: +44 (0)20 8942 8821

E: admin@csw.org.uk www.csw.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 281836



**CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE**
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS