

# Review of: "Vietnam's Religious Policy: Navigating the Path to Religious Freedom"

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**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

This article provides a snapshot of the state of the art of (supposedly) religious freedom in Vietnam by looking at how the state deals with different established and marginal religions through the years. In its current form, the article can be a springboard of a more focused and fine-grained exposition on how religious freedom means to members of a particular religious group vis a vis the official dictum of the state.

In my own field, I became interested in the role of religion to the lives of people in a more grounded sense through ethnographic interviews and observation. In the case of Filipino seafarers, and Filipinos in general, the state does not intervene at all (at least that's the official government mantra) in how Filipinos practise their faith. As a keen observant of Philippine politics, I have seen how religion shaped and still shapes the contours of Philippine political life even though the separation of church and state is enshrined in our country's constitution. It can be argued, in fact, that religion plays a formidable force in Philippine society as politicians are publicly known to court the support of religious leaders in their bid to win elections, both in the national and local levels. More established religious groups are known to endorse political candidates which could make or break one's political career. It is therefore an imperative amongst Filipino political leaders to support religious organisations, from mainstream ones to the more upstart and marginalised. In a way, instead a decoupling of the state and religion, there is a quiet coupling, they come together, each paying homage to one another through various means. Religion and politics make convenient bedfellows in the Philippines, performing unimaginable acrobats to advance their own needs and interests.

This is not the case in Vietnam as shown by the author. Religious organisations are perceived to be a threat to the hegemony and the very existence of the state. Government edicts are promulgated to curtail the perceived influence of religion, and in a number of cases, religious leaders have been both persecuted and prosecuted. In a way, the supposed religious freedom that the Vietnamese government professes in paper is but a ruse to advance its own interest. It is in this context that the article has a lot of promise in relation to contributing to the discursive state of religious freedom as it is perceived, enacted and experienced in Vietnam.

I make the following suggestions if the author wants to develop the article further into a publishable research article:

The author should try to focus on the specificities of religious freedom in Vietnam. A snapshot recounting the history and current state of religious organisations in the country does not help in strengthening the overall contours and argument of the article. If I was the author, I would most probably focus on one single religious organisation and writes about how it

thrives, and deals with Vietnamese laws pertaining to religious freedom.

As the author mainly draws their insight from reports, and government edicts, if my suggestion is followed, they might need to interview members of their selected religious organisation. This would need utmost care specially if the author is based in Vietnam since the paper could be construed as a critique of the prevailing state of religious freedom in Vietnam. This could have unintended ramifications for the religious organisation itself and the author themselves. I am not familiar with how research ethical approvals are obtained in Vietnamese educational institutions, but the author should take note of this if and when they want to proceed.

It would also be instructive if a SEA (Southeast Asian) context of religious freedom is included in the article as this provides a zoom out perspective on how religious freedom plays out in the region at large. It has to be noted that in recent years, there is a resurgence of religious fire power in many SEA countries (say Indonesia) so much so that implementation of government policies is oftentimes delayed or scrapped due to the opposition of established religious groups in certain SEA countries. In countries such as Vietnam, this has not been the case obviously as the nation-state still dominates and dictates the state of national affairs. A short overview of this landscape would be helpful in contextualising the state of the art of religious freedom in Vietnam in relation to its neighbouring countries.

This is a good start and I enjoyed reading the article. I learned a lot from it and I wish the author well.