

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

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Review of draft article by Thoi Nguyen, "Vietnam's Religious Policy: Navigating the Path to Religious Freedom".

While admitting that my in-depth knowledge of Vietnam's religious landscape is limited, the author's account of the historical evolution and significance of different faiths seems adequate. The watershed in the government's religious policy appears to be the adoption in 2004 of the *Law on Belief and Religion*. In this sense there is some evolution in religious policy, even legally speaking. This law purports to grant religious freedom to a range of faiths and denominations, subject to formal registration. However, such registration enables the government to monitor and, if deemed necessary, to control and restrict religious practice.

Significantly, the government have other legal instruments that enables its use of control measures, if certain religious practices are considered to be contrary to the interests of the State. These legal instruments have been used to sentence and silence religious groups. Importantly, it is the State that defines what is contrary to the interest of the State.

Even so, it seems that the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam wishes to polish its international reputation and appease domestic religious populations of significant proportions. As a result, it adopted the 2004 law. However, its repressive practices since then show that the law comes across as mere window dressing. The article does not mention whether Vietnam has adopted international human rights instruments that incorporate freedom of religion. That is a missing component in the article.

The Vietnam case is typical of authoritarian regimes worldwide. Religious practice is permitted as long as it does not challenge or criticise the government. Religious organisations are considered a threat, akin to a competing political party. With large numbers of congregants, such organisation might indeed become a threat, if not directly in toppling the incumbent government, then at least in weakening its authority and in implementing its policies.