

Vietnam's Religious Policy: Navigating the Path to Religious Freedom

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Abstract

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia, and the country has a large population. Vietnam's population would reach 100 million people ranking it 15th in the world^[1]. Vietnam has undergone significant changes throughout its history, reflecting the country's complex socio-political landscape.

The Vietnamese society is complex, and the region is no exception. Vietnam has a rich religious heritage, influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. However, the introduction of foreign religions, such as Catholicism and Protestantism, during the colonial era brought new dynamics to Vietnam's religious landscape.

The French colonization period saw tensions between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese government, which continued even after Vietnam gained independence. After the Vietnamese War finished, Vietnam also saw tensions between unregistered groups such as Hoa Hao Buddhist community and the Vietnamese authorities and its continuous crackdown on unregistered groups.

This paper aims to provide an overview of Vietnam's religion, and highlight key and recent developments, policies, and key challenges for some religions such as Pure Hoa Hao Buddhism, the Vietnamese government's restrictions has restricted on unregistered groups and the current state of religious freedom in the country.

Overview

Vietnam's religion is diverse with several recognised religions and organisations. Most of the Vietnamese people respect and honour their ancestors and religious spirits.

The latest statistics show that Vietnam has over 26.5 million religious followers, accounting for 27% of the total population, with over 54,000 religious dignitaries and 29,658 places of worship. The Vietnamese government has recognised 36 religious organisations, and issued registration certificates to four religious organisations and one religious' sect of 16 religions^[2].

While Vietnam also accepts foreigners who organise their religious activities according to current legal documents, the country has six major religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Hoahaoism, Protestantism, Caodaism and Islam along with

several fellow religions.

Buddhism

Buddhism means “Dao Phat” in Vietnamese and is one of the primary religions and philosophies the Vietnamese people follow most.

Vietnam adopted Buddhism from India back to the 3rd century BCE. Over time, it became deeply integrated into Vietnamese society, coexisting with indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices. Historically, Buddhism was popular during the Ly and Tran dynasties back to 10th to 14th centuries.

Buddhism is now the largest religious group with 14 million followers and 18,544 religious worship places nationwide since 2021, and more than 60 per cent of Vietnamese people practice some form of Buddhism^[3].

Vietnam is home to various branches of Buddhism, including Mahayana, Theravada, and Pure Land Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism with its emphasis on compassion and the pursuit of enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, is the most widely practised in Vietnam.

Pure Land Buddhism, which focuses on devotion to Amitabha Buddha and the aspiration to be reborn in his Pure Land, also holds a significant following. Temples, pagodas, and monasteries serve as important centres for worship, study, and community activities. Buddhist festivals, attract large gatherings of devotees who engage in prayer, chanting, and acts of merit-making.

Buddhism has deeply influenced Vietnamese culture, leaving an indelible mark on art, architecture, literature, and philosophy. Buddhist symbols can be found in ancient temples, pagodas, and imperial palaces, showcasing the fusion of Buddhist and indigenous artistic traditions. Buddhist teachings have also shaped Vietnamese ethical values, emphasizing compassion, mindfulness, and the pursuit of inner peace. During the Le Dynasty, Buddhism faced a difficult time, paving the way to the influence and comprehensive domination of Confucianism in the 15th century^[4].

In recent times, Buddhism in Vietnam has faced various challenges, including the impact of modernization, globalization, and political restrictions. The Vietnamese government has restricted unregistered groups such as Pure Hoa Hao Buddhism.

The Vietnamese government has taken charge of religious organizations seen as hostile to its policies, resulting in constraints on the actions and independence of Buddhist entities. However, Buddhist communities have adapted by embracing social engagement, promoting education, and participating in secret places.

Buddhism holds a significant place in the religious and cultural landscape of Vietnam. Its rich history, diverse practices, and profound influence on Vietnamese society have contributed to the spiritual well-being and moral development of the nation. Despite challenges, Buddhism continues to thrive, adapting to the changing times while preserving its core teachings of compassion, wisdom, and liberation.

Catholicism

Catholicism is Đạo Công Giáo in Vietnamese, and some Vietnamese people call it “Đạo Thiên Chúa” or “Thiên Chúa Giáo”. According to a US report, Catholicism has approximately six million Roman Catholic followers, accounting for 45 per cent of the total number of believers nationwide and 6 per cent of the overall population^[5].

Catholicism has a long and complex history in Vietnam, spanning over four centuries. Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam by European missionaries during the year 1533, primarily by Portuguese and French missionaries. The early converts were mainly from the Vietnamese rich class, and the religion gradually spread among the local population.

However, Catholicism faced periods of persecution and suppression during various dynasties and political regimes. Despite the challenges, Catholicism grew steadily in Vietnam, particularly during the French colonial era. The Catholic Church established schools, hospitals, and orphanages, contributing significantly to education and healthcare in the country.

Catholicism also played a role in shaping Vietnamese society, influencing art, literature, and the development of a Catholic intellectual class. Catholicism in Vietnam faced significant challenges during the 20th century, particularly during the Vietnam War and the subsequent communist regime. The Catholic Church was caught in the crossfire between the North and South, with some Catholics supporting the communist cause and others aligning with the South Vietnamese government.

The Vietnamese communist regime put restrictions on religious activities, leading to the closure of churches, imprisonment of clergy, and limitations on the Church's influence.

If they become politically active, they can face problems and severe sentences from the Vietnamese government. Non-traditional Protestants often face intense pressure and violence for their faith, especially in the remote areas of central and northern Vietnam^[6].

In recent years, the Catholic Church in Vietnam has experienced some relaxation of restrictions, allowing for a gradual revival of religious activities. The Church has adapted to the changing times by engaging in social and charitable work, focusing on education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. The Catholic community continues to grow, and there is a renewed emphasis on interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

Catholicism has left a lasting impact on Vietnam, shaping its history, culture, and social fabric. Despite periods of persecution and challenges, the Catholic Church has persevered, adapting to the changing times while remaining committed to its core values of faith, love, and service.

The Catholic community in Vietnam continues to play an active role in the country's development, fostering education, healthcare, and social welfare initiatives while promoting dialogue and understanding among different religious communities.

Hoahaoism,

The Hoa Hao Buddhist community is a religious group that originated in Vietnam in the early 20th century. This overview aims to provide insight into the Hoa Hao Buddhist community, its beliefs, practices, and its significance in Vietnamese society.

Spiritual leader Huynh Phu So found Hoa Hao Buddhism in the An Giang province of Vietnam in 1939. Huynh Phu So claimed to have received divine revelations and sought to create a religious movement that emphasised simplicity, personal morality, and social engagement^[7].

The movement gained popularity among the rural population, particularly in the Mekong Delta region.

Hoa Hao Buddhism combines elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Its teachings emphasise the importance of leading a virtuous life, practicing compassion, and engaging in acts of charity and community service. The community places a strong emphasis on personal spiritual practice and the pursuit of enlightenment.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist community is organized around local congregations known as "Hoa Hao temples." Each temple is led by a layperson known as a "buu son ky hoi" who is elected by the local community.

The community does not have a centralised religious hierarchy and operates independently of the state-sanctioned Buddhist organization in Vietnam. The Hoa Hao Buddhist community has played a significant role in Vietnamese society. It has historically advocated for social justice, religious freedom, and independence. The community has been involved in charitable activities, providing education, healthcare, and social welfare services to the local population. Hoa Hao Buddhists have also participated in political movements, particularly during the Vietnam War era.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist community has faced periods of government crackdown and restrictions on its activities. The Vietnamese government has sought to control and monitor the community, viewing it as a potential challenge to its authority. The Vietnamese government also banned major celebrations, including the annual Founder's Day festival.

Senior Hoa Hao leaders and more than 100 of their followers, including members of the former South Vietnamese National Assembly, were reportedly sent for varying periods of "re-education" without trial, as were several hundreds of thousands of others associated with the former regime^[8].

The government has attempted to establish a state-sanctioned Hoa Hao organization to exert influence over the community. However, many Hoa Hao Buddhists have resisted these efforts, choosing to maintain their independent religious practices.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist community continues to exist in Vietnam, albeit with some limitations on its activities. The community faces ongoing challenges, including surveillance, harassment, and occasional arrests of its leaders and followers. Despite these obstacles, the Hoa Hao Buddhist community remains resilient and continues to practice its beliefs, focusing on spiritual development, charitable works, and promoting social harmony.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist community has a rich history and plays a significant role in Vietnamese society. Its emphasis on personal morality, social engagement, and spiritual practice has resonated with many followers. Despite facing restrictions and government control, the Hoa Hao Buddhist community remains committed to its beliefs and continues to contribute to the well-being of its members and the wider society.

Protestantism,

Protestantism is a relatively new religious movement in Vietnam, with its roots dating back to the 19th century.

Protestantism was introduced to Vietnam by Christian missionaries during the French colonial period in the late 19th century. The early converts were primarily from the ethnic minority groups in the central and northern regions of Vietnam. The Protestant community has followers from various backgrounds, including the Kinh majority.

Protestantism is one of the fastest-growing religions in Vietnam. In 2014, it was estimated that there were 770,000 Protestant followers in Vietnam

The core beliefs of Protestantism emphasize salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the importance of personal relationships with God. Worship often include prayers, hymns, sermons, and communal activities.

The Protestant community in Vietnam has experienced significant growth in recent decades. This growth can be attributed to factors such as increased religious freedom, the influence of international missionary organizations, and the appeal of Protestantism's emphasis on personal faith and community support. However, the community has also faced challenges and restrictions from the government.

The Vietnamese government has historically been cautious about the growth of Protestantism, viewing it as a potential challenge to its authority. The government has imposed restrictions on the registration and activities of Protestant churches, particularly those deemed to be operating outside of state-sanctioned organizations. This has led to occasional harassment, surveillance, and limitations on religious gatherings.

Protestantism has had a significant social and community impact in Vietnam. Many Protestant churches are actively involved in charitable activities, providing education, healthcare, and social welfare services to their members and the wider community. The community also plays a role in promoting social justice, advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, and addressing social issues such as poverty and inequality.

The Protestant community in Vietnam continues to grow, albeit with ongoing challenges. While some churches have been able to register and operate within the government-sanctioned framework, there are still unregistered or "house churches" that face restrictions and limitations on their activities. The community remains resilient, adapting to the changing religious landscape and finding ways to practice their faith within the confines of the law. The Vietnamese government continues to monitor the Protestant community, particularly for those who actively engaged in politics^[9].

Protestantism in Vietnam has experienced significant growth and has made a notable impact on the social and religious

landscape of the country. Despite facing restrictions and challenges from the government, the Protestant community remains committed to their beliefs and actively contributes to the well-being of their members and the wider society. The community's emphasis on personal faith, community support, and social engagement continues to attract followers and shape the religious landscape of Vietnam.

Caodaism

Caodaism is a relatively young religious movement that originated in Vietnam in the early 20th century. The religion has spread widely including the United States, France, Australia, and Canada.

Ngo Van Chieu founded Caodaism was founded in 1926. Chieu was a Vietnamese civil servant who claimed to have received spiritual revelations, and he sought to create a syncretic religion that combined elements of various world religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam. The movement gained popularity and was officially recognized by the French colonial government in 1926.

Caodaism believes in a supreme deity known as Cao Dai, which is seen as the ultimate source of all creation. The religion also recognizes a pantheon of saints and spiritual beings, including figures from different religious traditions. Caodaists believe in the principles of karma, reincarnation, and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. They emphasise moral conduct, compassion, and the practice of rituals and prayers.

Caodaism is organized around a hierarchical structure with a central authority known as the Cao Dai Holy See. The Holy See is based in the Tay Ninh province of Vietnam and is led by a spiritual leader known as the Pope. The religion is divided into various branches, each with its own administrative structure and regional leadership.

Caodaism has a rich tradition of rituals and ceremonies. Worship services are held in temples known as "Cao Dai temples" and include elaborate rituals, prayers, and hymns. The religion has a complex calendar of festivals and commemorations, which are marked by processions, music, and colourful ceremonies.

Caodaism has played a significant role in Vietnamese society. The religion has been involved in charitable activities, providing education, healthcare, and social welfare services to the local population. Caodaists have also participated in political movements, advocating for social justice, religious freedom, and national independence.

Caodaism has faced periods of government restrictions and persecution. After the Vietnamese war ended in 1975, the Caodaist community experienced a decline in its influence and faced limitations on its activities. However, in recent years, the government has shown more tolerance towards Caodaism, allowing the religion to practice and operate within certain boundaries.

Caodaism continues to exist in Vietnam, albeit with a smaller following compared to other major religions. The religion faces challenges in attracting new followers and maintaining its traditions in a rapidly changing society. However, Caodaism remains an important spiritual and cultural force, particularly in the Tay Ninh province, where its central

authority is located.

Caodaism is a unique religious movement that combines elements of different world religions. Its syncretic beliefs, rich rituals, and social engagement have made it a significant presence in Vietnamese society. Despite facing challenges and restrictions, Caodaism continues to practice its beliefs, contribute to the well-being of its followers, and play a role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of Vietnam^[10].

Islam

Islam is one of the minor religions in Vietnam back to the 7th century through Arab and Persian traders who established trade routes in Southeast Asia. Over time, Islam spread among the Cham and Khmer ethnic minority groups in the southern and central regions of Vietnam. The Cham people, in particular, have a long-standing Islamic tradition that dates back to the 10th century.

Islam in Vietnam is primarily practised by the Cham and Khmer ethnic minority groups. The Cham Muslims, who are concentrated in the central coastal areas, have a distinct cultural and religious identity. They have preserved their Islamic traditions, including unique architectural styles, religious rituals, and cultural practices. In addition to the Cham and Khmer, there are also smaller Muslim communities among the Vietnamese ethnic majority and other minority groups.

Muslims in Vietnam have the right to practice their faith, establish mosques, and engage in religious activities. The government has also supported the preservation of Islamic cultural heritage, including the restoration of historic mosques and the promotion of Islamic education.

It is estimated Vietnam has 80,000 Muslim followers and most of them are the Cham people with 89 places of worship. In Vietnam, there are 7 recognized Islamic organizations. Islam in Vietnam continues to thrive, with a growing number of followers and an increasing presence in urban centres. The religion has experienced a revival in recent years, with more young people embracing Islam and actively participating in religious activities. The Cham Muslims, in particular, have been successful in preserving their cultural and religious identity^[11].

With the government's recognition and support, Islam in Vietnam continues to flourish, attracting new followers and playing a vital role in the religious and cultural landscape of the nation.

Vietnam's religious policy

According to [an article](#), Vietnam recognised 43 religious organizations with 26.7 million followers, over 55 thousand dignitaries, about 135 thousand ranks; over 29,000 places of worship. This was a good and welcome statistic showing that Vietnam began to diversify the religious groups in the country.

The article, written by minister Vu Chien Thang, also criticized foreign organizations for giving false accusations that Vietnam does not have religious freedom, blatantly distorting the situation and religious life, and destroying religious

solidarity in Vietnam^[12].

However, most observers realise that Vietnam adopted China to accept state-authorized temples and churches, and the Vietnamese authorities put strict control over formal religious hierarchies and related activities.

Following the Vietnam War, the country adopted a socialist regime which sought to suppress religious activities. The government viewed religion as a potential threat to its authority and promoted atheism as the official ideology. Religious institutions were tightly controlled, and many religious practitioners faced persecution, leading to the decline of religious activities during this period^[13].

In the late 1980s, Vietnam initiated economic reforms known as Đổi Mới, which also had an impact on the religious landscape. The Đổi Mới Reform allowed the government to recognise the need to accommodate religious diversity to improve international relations and attract foreign investment^[14]. Consequently, religious policies were relaxed, allowing for a gradual resurgence of religious practices.

Significantly, Vietnam passed the Law on Belief and Religion, which aimed to protect religious freedom and regulate religious activities in 2004. This law recognized the right to freedom of belief and permitted religious organisations to register with the government.

While this legal framework represented a positive step, some critics argue that it still imposes restrictions on religious activities and fails to guarantee religious freedom fully.

The Vietnam Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) outlines a comprehensive multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups within the country. However, it was reported that Vietnamese authorities have occasionally engaged in harassment of unregistered religious groups in particular areas, such as the Central and Northwest Highlands, as well as specific regions in the Mekong Delta^{[15]a}.

The LBR is designed to regulate and manage religious activities in Vietnam and all religious organizations must register with the state. Despite these regulatory measures, concerns have been raised about instances where unregistered religious groups face harassment from authorities. This phenomenon appears to be more prevalent in certain geographic areas, notably the Central and Northwest Highlands, indicating a potential regional variation in the enforcement of religious regulations.

Generally, Vietnam has made some progress, but religious practices still face challenges as legal religious activities are required to register with the authorities.

Although Vietnam's constitution affirms all individuals have the right to freedom of belief and religion, unregistered religions are restricted, and their followers face severe consequences and punishments. The government maintains tight control over religious institutions, requiring them to register and operate under state supervision. This control has led to concerns about limited autonomy and interference in religious affairs.

Minority religious groups, such as the Pure Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, have faced discrimination and restrictions on their

religious practices. This has raised concerns about unequal treatment and paying the way for the Vietnamese authorities to put unregistered followers into prison^[15].

Some religious groups choose not to register with the government due to concerns about state control. As a result, they operate secretly, making them vulnerable to harassment and persecution.

On 09 March 2023, Vietnam published a White Paper book with 132 pages and three chapters, providing information about religions policies as well as achievements, challenges and advantages in Vietnam. It ensures the country has the right to freedom of belief and religion stipulated in the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The book outlines popular religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Caodaism, and Hoa Hao Buddhism, among others in Vietnam. It also presents the Communist Party of Vietnam's view on beliefs and religions during the renewal period^[16].

Vietnam's religious policy continues to evolve, with ongoing efforts to strike a balance between state control and religious freedom. The government has taken steps to address some challenges, such as engaging in dialogue with religious leaders and allowing greater participation in social activities. However, there is still room for improvement to ensure full religious freedom and equal treatment for all religious groups.

Vietnam suppresses religious activities

Vietnam is an authoritarian one-party state controlled by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPT). As the leading force of state and society, the CPV has a monopoly on political power and does not permit any parties, organizations, religions or individuals to challenge this monopoly^[17]. Vietnam tightly restrict freedom of expression, religious freedom and civil society activism.

In 1975, when the Vietnam War ended, the Vietnamese communist regime restricted religious freedom. Priests, nuns and monks were sent to re-education camps. Some of those who resisted efforts to indoctrinate them spent many years in the camps, sometimes under terrible conditions^[18]. The leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh, has become a cult figure to some, similar to traditional heroes worshiped as powerful spirits after his death.

There is a big question of whether Vietnam has increasingly cracked down on religious freedom in recent years as the Vietnamese authorities have used various vague articles to arrest and sentence religious groups which deemed to undermine national securities and plot to overthrow the Vietnamese government.

In order to carry out their religious activities, religious groups must be registered with the Vietnamese authorities. In doing so, Vietnam will prevent illegal religious activities, promoting activities of strange religion in remote areas and increasing superstitious activities and religious beliefs. Vietnam's penal articles such as 258 "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the State" or 117 "distributing propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" or article 331 "abuses the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of faith and religion, freedom of meeting, association and other freedom of democracy that violate the interests of the State, rights, legal interests of organizations and individuals." repeatedly used in court to sentence and silence unauthorised religious groups and sects that have not been

recognised by the state^[19].

Ethnic minority communities in Vietnam, such as the Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, Catholics, and Falun Gong practitioners, have unfortunately been subjected to severe persecution by Vietnamese authorities.

Their peaceful practice of religious beliefs has faced crackdown, including physical assault, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and the coerced renunciation of faith. This systematic suppression extends across various religious groups, showing the problem of the fundamental right to religious freedom in Vietnam. The use of physical force, detention, imprisonment, and forced renunciation of faith not only infringes upon individual liberties but also contributes to a climate of fear and intimidation within these communities^[20].

The international community, like the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), has consistently criticized Vietnam for its restrictions on religious freedom. USCIRF designated Vietnam as a "country of particular concern" in 2012. It said "The government continues a policy of control, suppressing independent religious activity and arresting and detaining individuals for publicly advocating for greater religious freedoms or engaging in independent religious activity. Religious freedom conditions often depend on geographic area, ethnicity, relationships between religious leaders and provincial officials, or perceived "political" activity" ^[21]. There are ongoing challenges for individuals and communities to practice their faith without fear of persecution.

In addition, Vietnam is increasingly cracking down on religious freedom, and the recent death of a religious prisoner is an example. It was reported Mr Phan Van Thu, a Vietnamese religious prisoner and founder of An Dan Dai Dao religious group has died in Gia Trung prison, Gia Lai province. His family members have confirmed the death to a news reporter. The independent Buddhist organisation recognized by the South Vietnamese government before 1975, but it has not been permitted to carry on its religious activities ever since^[22].

In 2003, the Buddhist group was established in Phu Yen, a province in central Vietnam, to practice their religion and Mr Phan Van Thu was a founder of An Dan Dai Dao. In February 2012, the Vietnamese police arrested him and 21 other members, persecuted Buddhists and confiscated its temple. The arrest of An Dan Dai Dao leader severely undermined the group's ability to operate at the time.

The Vietnamese authorities accused them of overthrowing the Vietnamese government under the revised article 88 of Vietnam's penal code. Under this penal code, offenders will receive between a 10 years and life prison sentence in Vietnam. Mr Phan Van Thu has received a life prison sentence. It was saddening that he died in Vietnam's prison.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) considered that he died due to diabetes, arthritis, hypertension, and heart failure and did not receive enough medical treatment during his prison sentence in Vietnam^[23].

In my opinion, the restrictions on religious freedom in Vietnam, as highlighted by the USCIRF and other international organisations, are deeply concerning. The fundamental right to practice one's religion peacefully should be upheld and protected, and any form of persecution based on religious beliefs is a violation of basic human rights.

It is not acceptable for religious groups to be contrary to Vietnam's traditional customs, or the law and the society, not causing people's anger with their conspiracy to oppose the government.

In 2009, Vietnam dealt with Catholic protests over land ownership. The Vietnamese authorities beat priests and harassed Catholics enroute to join prayer vigils or other non-violent forms of protest and these protesters were beaten by gangs of thugs.

"The regime has also used the state media to vilify individual Catholic leaders and censor alternate reporting. And state has not conceded any ground on the matter of legal ownership of land confiscated years ago. The state has refrained, however, from repressing freedom of religious expression by the Catholic community^[24]".

These penal articles also aim at a number of religious leaders who are dissatisfied with the regime, and prejudice against the Vietnamese Communist Party and State. Vietnam alleged that those people to take advantage of social networks such as Facebook, Blogs, Youtube etc., to distort and provided false news that are inconsistent with the religious situation in Vietnam.

The recent case of independent Buddhist temple Tinh That Bong Lai is a typical example showing Vietnam was widening its religious crackdown. In January 2022, The Vietnamese authorities has arrested its leader Le Tung Van, 90 years old, and other Buddhists at their practice location.

Vietnam's court has sentenced all offenders to a total of 23 and a half years in prison; Le Tung Van, Tinh That Bong Lai Temple leader, received the highest sentence of five years in jail, along with other Buddhists at the temple, including Le Thanh Nhat Nguyen, Le Thanh Hoan Nguyen, and Le Thanh Trung Duong, each received four years in jail. All were charged under the article 331 "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on State and individuals' legitimate rights and interests" by a court in Long An province, southern Vietnam^[25].

Southern Vietnam is also a location where a previous prominent religious group pure Hoa Hao was established. The religion clashed with the Vietnamese authority before. In 2018, four unofficial Hoa Hao Buddhists were sentenced by a court in southern Vietnam. They were accused of disrupting public order with the Vietnamese authorities and also accused of spreading anti-government videos on social media, and calling on people to protest against the Vietnamese communist government.

Vietnamese's court system was below the international standard. In those cases in relation to unauthorised religious leaders and political activists, prison sentences are always predetermined. "At the trial, both the defendants and our lawyers said there was not enough evidence to convict them, but the judge would not listen to the lawyers' arguments, and witnesses for the prosecution would not answer our lawyers' questions" one of family members told RFA. Family members and friends of unauthorised Hoa Hao group face harassment by unidentified men in civilian clothes confiscating motorbikes and registration papers^[26].

In the case of Trinh That Bong Lai Temple, the Vietnamese local media said that these people abused democratic

freedoms to infringe on State and individuals' legitimate rights and interests but also with an allegation posted articles and clips on its social networks Facebook and Youtube which containing false, fabricated distorted information, offending the reputation of local Police and Vietnam's traditional Buddhism. They have denied all of the allegations and appealed against the decision^[27].

The US always monitor the status of freedom of religion in every country around the world, and its interest is to promote religious freedom and advance human rights around the globe. The US government recommend a list of countries for having engaged and violating religious freedom. On 02 December 2022, the US government put Vietnam as one of 4 countries on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom^[28].

However, Vietnam has rejected the decision despite Vietnam continuing to demolish Buddhist pagodas and crack down on various groups, including Christian churches. While Vietnam's constitution technically guarantees freedom of religion, it also grants the country the authority to prioritize national security, social order, morality and community well being over individual rights including religious freedom. "Vietnam is ready to talk with the U.S. side about issues of mutual concern in the spirit of straightforwardness, openness, mutual respect, and contributions to the promotion of bilateral comprehensive partner relations," deputy spokesperson Pham Thu Hang of Vietnam's foreign ministry said^[29].

The persecution of Vietnamese activists and dissidents was increasing. The government suppresses virtually all kinds of political activism. Land grab is one of the most controversial and explosive issues between the government and Catholics, Christians and political activists in Vietnam. For example, in 2018 "Activists and Catholics have asked the Vietnamese government to return properties to religious organizations and residents who were evicted from their homes in a highly controversial development project^[30]."

It is not allowable to have demonstrations against land confiscation. The Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs estimated that the ruling Communist Party has confiscated 2250 properties since 1945. Furthermore, the authorities and the Church were unable to reach an agreement on a land site for a new church^[31].

My Thoughts

Vietnam's religious prisoners have increased during the past decade. It is acceptable for everyone to carry on their religious freedom practice and not be afraid to criticize the government policies openly in Vietnam, so long as they expressed the nonviolent expression of their beliefs. People have the right to practice their religion to meet international human rights standards, so Vietnam should respect for religious freedom and related rights.

Vietnam's religious policy has undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting the country's complex history and socio-political context. While progress has been made in recognizing religious freedom and accommodating religious diversity, challenges remain. It is crucial for Vietnam to continue working towards a more inclusive and tolerant society, where all religious groups can freely practice their faith without fear of discrimination or persecution.

It is important for governments and international bodies to continue advocating for the protection of religious freedom and

to work towards ensuring that individuals of all faiths can practice their beliefs without fear of reprisal.

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