

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

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This paper presents an outline of the position of six main religious groups in Vietnam. The discussions have been structured with the six main religions in separate sections, probably, to help contain the points. The points raised do provide some sense of them, but there remains the need for work on them to demonstrate their relevance in relation to one another and more importantly, the government policies. Although helpful, the sections could be improved by further work for clarity and succinct substance. Briefly, the issues are highlighted as follows:

## **Buddhism**

Inconsistency – 14 million followers and in same sentence, it is stated that 60 percent of Vietnamese practice Buddhism. Does the 60 percent include the other forms of Buddhism?

Identifies various branches of Buddhism, but only Hoa Hao Buddhism has a brief indication of its guiding philosophy, as well as that of Pure Land Buddhism. Some further elaborations and explanations about their purpose would be helpful. It would be useful to have some kind of brief indication of what the others are about, to provide readers with a sense of how (and if) they are different. In doing so, it could serve to provide a sense of their significance or otherwise to the aim and/or purpose of the paper. Failing that, one is left wondering if, and/or, how they may contribute to influencing Vietnamese socio-cultural background.

The above comment is in the context of the following paragraph which indicates, albeit briefly, the influence of Buddhism on Vietnamese culture.

Some kind of discussion/elaboration on why and/or in what way(s), Confucianism posed a difficult time for Buddhism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Otherwise, this sentence serves no purpose in the context of this paper.

Given the major role of Buddhism in Vietnam, some kind of discussion/explanation would be helpful on the matter of challenges from modernisation and globalisation. Discussions are also required in relation to the point on restrictions on unregistered groups such as Pure Hoa Hao Buddhism.

If certain Buddhist groups are restricted do indicate some specific reasons rather than broad remarks about them being hostile to government policies. That would then enable the reader to decide their merits and so on.

## **Catholicism**

The first paragraph refers to “six million Roman Catholics, accounting for 45 percent of the total...” It is not clear as to what is meant by the 45 percent.

The suggestion of some Catholics being supportive of the north and some of the south during the Vietnam war is an interesting point. Some discussions on the reasons would be helpful to help the reader understand and get some sense of perspective/context. It was followed by an indication of the communist regime placing restrictions on religious activities. To help with understanding, what are the restrictions being referred to, and why?

### **Hoa Hao Buddhist**

In terms of “limitation on its activities”, it would be good to have a sense of what the restrictions are and the reasons. Are their differences to the type of restrictions imposed on them compared with the other religious groups?

### **Protestantism**

The indication of significant growth being attributed to factors such as increased religious freedom, seems at odds with the other religious groups, and also later statements of restrictions. Please explain.

### **Caodaism**

What is its significance on Vietnamese society, given the suggestion that it is a smaller following and has a reduction in new followers? Are there data on the numbers of followers? What are the reasons for greater tolerance by the government?

### **Islam**

The paper suggests this group to be recognised and supported by the government in contrast with the other religions. It would be useful for a clear sense of perspective to have included some discussions on the issues involved with some analytical perspectives.

### **Concluding Comments**

This is an interesting descriptive account that provides a general sense of the religious groups in Vietnam along with brief indications of some challenges they face. Some areas of improvement for consideration are:

1. The paper tends to present the issues based on news reports rather than crucial background based on critical analysis.
2. There appears to be inconsistencies and lack of clarity in a number of areas possibly due to lack of details in proper contexts with regard to the different religious groupings. For example, the paper suggests government restrictions on most of the religious groups, but on the other hand has been supportive of the Islamic religion. Is this consistent with the governmental policies? If so, discussions of some detail are needed in relation to the other religions.
3. In the section on “Vietnam’s religious policy” the recognition of numerous religious organisations is noted. However, this seems inconsistent with the account provided earlier in the various sections of the paper which suggests

restrictions on some of the Buddhist groups. Some kind of explanation to help place the matter in context would be helpful to provide a clearer sense and perspective. Indeed, there is indication of relaxation of policies on religious activities following reforms in the 1980s. Given such a picture of moves towards progressive policies, the paper could perhaps be structured to take that into account in a more integrative manner and therefore discuss the various religions perhaps during different eras that may have prevailed. The point here is that as it stands, the paper is somewhat disjointed, and therefore lacking coherence.

4. For perspective and/or context, some kind of discussion is needed with regard to the unregistered groups. There may well be good rationale for such a need for registration which the author has not presented, rendering the paper to be lacking in objectivity. In most instances, there is a lack of discussions and explanations on such aspects as why and when restrictions may have been put in place, and also what kind of restrictions are being referred to.
5. As a whole, the paper has presented the religious groups individually, but not necessarily with some kind of analytical thoughts in an integrative manner.

With revisions, this could be an interesting paper with clearer purpose.