

Position Paper on HOA HAO BUDDHISM IN VIETNAM

Compiled by independent Hoa Hao Buddhists

A. General Background

Hoa Hao Buddhism is a Buddhist branch founded by Prophet Huynh Phu So in 1939 at Hoa Hao Village, Tan Chau District, Chau Doc Province in Vietnam (currently belongs to An Giang Province). Hoa Hao Buddhism is mostly developed in the Mekong Delta and is currently one of the four most popular religions in Vietnam. Before 1975, the number of Hoa Hao Buddhists was around 7 million. Most of them were concentrated in the provinces of An Giang, Dong Thap, Vinh Long, and Kien Giang and in the city of Can Tho. Their actual number at the present time is unknown. According to the Vietnamese government's statistics, the number of Hoa Hao Buddhists at present is 1.5 million. This is an unreliable number as the Vietnamese population has doubled during the past 40 years. Furthermore, the independent Hoa Hao followers who are not registered in state-sanctioned churches have not been taken into account.

After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the Communist government of Vietnam dissolved the administrative structure and confiscated all properties of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. In 1999, the government established "Central Hoa Hao Buddhist Church," which is the same name as the pre-1975 Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, and gave this latter organization a monopoly role. Many Hoa Hao followers do not accept this new organization, believing its state-sponsored nature does not comply with the tradition of Hoa Hao Buddhism. Since then, independent Hoa Hao followers who do not register with this latter organization have been considered illegal and their activities suppressed without mercy.

Currently, the Vietnamese government commits serious violations of the right to freedom of religion of Hoa Hao followers, specifically:

1/ Violation of the right to have a religion of one's choice:

- Local authorities are forcing independent Hoa Hao followers to register with the state-run Central Hoa Hao Buddhist Church and submit to its control.
- Independent Hoa Hao followers are monitored and assaulted by security officers, making them economically and socially isolated.

2/ Violation of the right to manifest the religion through worship:

- After 1975, worshipping facilities of the original Hoa Hao Buddhist Church were expropriated by the Vietnamese Communist Party and were either transformed into government offices or sold to individuals or business organizations. In 1999, a few facilities of the original Hoa Hao Buddhist Church that were confiscated or sold, such as the Master Temple An Hoa Tu (Chua Thay), were given either to the state-run Hoa Hao Buddhist Church or to governmental agencies, which were then misused or left abandoned.
- Independent Hoa Hao followers are forbidden to gather to commemorate the Day of Prophet Huynh's Victimization. This was the day when the Prophet was attacked by communist forces and disappeared; it has been one of the three major days of remembrance in the tradition of Hoa Hao Buddhism. The government also prohibits Hoa Hao followers from independently celebrating

Prophet Huynh's Sacred Birthday and the Hoa Hao Day of Initiation; they may participate only in celebrations organized by the state-run Hoa Hao Buddhist Church.

3/ Violation of the right to manifest the religion through observance and practice:

- Independent Hoa Hao followers are not permitted to gather to pray or worship at private homes, independent pagodas, or ashrams (places used for religious activities and retreats) that conform to Prophet Huynh's teaching. These activities of independent Hoa Hao followers have been constantly disturbed or dissolved by the local authorities.
- Many social, health-related, charitable and educational activities of independent Hoa Hao followers have been impeded or forbidden by the government.
- Many independent Hoa Hao followers have been arrested and imprisoned for practicing their religion.

4/ Violation of the right to manifest the religion through teaching:

- The Vietnamese government hinders the teaching of Hoa Hao Buddhist doctrine at private homes of independent Hoa Hao followers on days of remembrance. Local security officers threaten and harass worshipers, overpower the preaching with high-capacity loudspeakers, or have thugs throw rocks into the houses of the Hoa Hao followers.
- The original Hoa Hao Buddhist religious scriptures and the "Teaching Literature" written by Prophet Huynh have been confiscated and are not allowed to be circulated. Anyone who tries to disseminate these materials will be arrested. The government instead published two censored versions of the books, eliminating many original writings of Prophet Huynh in the period from 1942 to 1947 or replacing a great number of important words that the government considers "sensitive." Independent Hoa Hao followers who re-produced the original version of the religious teaching materials by means of CDs and DVDs have been arrested, and the circulation of these CDs and DVDs has also been prohibited. Other independent Hoa Hao followers, who are determined to protect the authenticity of Hoa Hao Buddhism and who have tried to print the original materials, have been put in jail and the teaching materials seized.

B. Current Difficulties

1/ External threats:

- The Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions of 2004 and Decree 92 on 2012 on its implementation require that all religious groups in Vietnam register for government approval in order to conduct religious activities. Without approval from the government, religious activities of independent Hoa Hao Buddhist groups are deemed illegal.
- The Vietnamese government only permits the state-sanctioned Central Hoa Hao Buddhist Church to conduct religious activities and oppresses activities of independent Hoa Hao groups.
- Local governments have adopted unlawful measures such as defaming independent Hoa Hao followers, hiring thugs and using undercover security agents disguised as thugs to beat up Hoa Hao followers, employing "angry citizens" or so called "spontaneous mobs" to attack their private homes, ashrams and temples.
- The local governments are preventing independent Hoa Hao followers from earning their livings and their livelihood in their communities.

2/ Internal struggles:

- Independent Hoa Hao followers do not have places to meet and worship, as a result of government policy.

- Due to the ongoing repression and imprisonment of independent Hoa Hao followers, Hoa Hao groups are currently short on personnel to carry out their work.
- Due to the ongoing repression and social isolation of independent Hoa Hao followers, Hoa Hao groups are struggling to raise funds to support religious teachings and other humanitarian activities.
- Being an endogenous religion Hoa Hao Buddhism is not well known to the international community, and independent Hoa Hao followers do not get the attention from international human rights organizations. Thus, independent they are easily oppressed and isolated by the government.

C. Requests to the Vietnamese Government

- Respect and protect the right of all Hoa Hao followers in practicing their religion. Hoa Hao followers should be able to list their religion on personal documents without fear of being discriminated. All acts of forcing independent Hoa Hao followers to join the state-sanctioned Central Hoa Hao Buddhist Church should be prohibited. The Vietnamese government should also cease the social isolation of independent Hoa Hao followers and any action that triggers the discrimination against Hoa Hao followers who are not affiliated with the state-sanctioned Church.
- Respect and protect the right of freedom to manifest Hoa Hao Buddhism through worship, either individually or in the company of others in temples, ashrams and at the homes of independent Hoa Hao followers. The government should forbid their officials and agents from dissolving religious celebrations at private residences, and from assaulting, harassing, intimidating and arresting independent Hoa Hao followers when they try to participate in religious ceremonies.
- Respect and protect the right of independent Hoa Hao groups to manifest their religion through practice and to elect their own leaders. They should not be forced to register with the state-run Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. When they so desire, independent Hoa Hao groups shall be recognized as associations with legal entities.
- Respect and protect the right of all Hoa Hao followers to compose, produce and publish Hoa Hao Buddhist teaching materials in various forms. Specifically, independent Hoa Hao followers shall have the freedom to copy and circulate the original version of Prophet Huynh's teaching without being subjected to any censorship.
- Repeal all articles in the Ordinance, decrees and bylaws that violate the right to freedom of religion according to Article 24 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam of 2013 and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- Stop arresting independent Hoa Hao followers for any religious cause then sentencing them with criminal charges such as "Resisting officers in performing their duties" (Article 257 of the Criminal Code), "Causing public disorder" (Article 245 of the Criminal Code), or "Abusing democratic freedoms" (Article 258 of the Criminal code). The following imprisoned Hoa Hao followers must be released immediately and unconditionally:
 1. Ms. Mai Thị Dung, sentenced to 11 years in prison and currently jailed in Thanh Xuan Prison in Ha Noi
 2. Mr. Nguyễn Văn Lía, sentenced to 4 years and 6 months in prison and currently jailed in Xuan Loc Prison, Dong Nai Province
 3. Ms. Dương Thị Tròn, sentenced to 9 years in prison and currently jailed in Xuan Loc Prison, Dong Nai Province
 4. Mr. Bùi Văn Trung, sentenced to 4 years in prison and currently jailed in Xuan Loc Prison, Dong Nai Province
 5. Mr. Dương Văn Thả, sentenced to 3 years in prison and currently jailed in Xuyen Moc Prison, Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province
 6. Mr. Nguyễn Văn Minh, sentenced to 2 years and 6 months in prison and currently jailed in An Phuoc Prison, Binh Duong Province