

## **Repression of Religious Freedom in Vietnam**

Briefing notes compiled by BPSOS

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The government of Vietnam continues to suppress religious freedom using a two-tiered policy: (1) all **religious activities**, including informal and home-based ones, must be registered and pre-approved by local authorities; (2) all religious organizations/associations must register for **religious operation** with a government committee that exercises close supervision over such organizations. This two-tiered policy is enabled by the 2004 Ordinance on Religions and Belief and implemented via Decree 92/2012/ND-CP on “Directives and measures for implementing the Ordinance on beliefs and religion.”

Using this two-tiered policy the government of Vietnam violently cracks down against independent religious communities under the pretext that their unregistered activities are illegal and therefore prohibited. The government has resorted to harassment, threat, beating, arrest, detention, torture, imprisonment, forced renunciation and an array of economic and administrative measures to stop all religious activities that are not conducted under the umbrella of registered religious organizations.

The government has selectively approved the registration of a small number of religious organizations for use as instruments to control religions. Many of these organizations were set up by the government and run by individuals appointed by the government, with some of them being members of the Vietnamese Communist Party, such as the Cao Dai Governance Council, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, and a number of Protestant denominations. Other religious organizations have been co-opted by the government as they become registered. For example, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam South has turned its back on the persecuted Montagnard house churches after being approved for registered operation.

As a result, religious practitioners may not practice their faith in any group setting unless they join an organization that is under government control.

### Recommendations:

- (1) The Vietnamese government should eliminate the present Ordinance on Belief and Religions and Decree 92, and pass the Law on Religions treating freedom of religion as a fundamental human right, which shall not be contingent on registration with or approval by the government.
- (2) The new law should facilitate the registration of religious organizations following a process no more complicated or time-consuming than incorporating a limited liability company.
- (3) In the meantime, the EU should closely monitor the situation in Vietnam and raise strong and timely objection to any reported incident of religious persecution.

Cases in point:

**Catholic Church:** The governments of Son La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien provinces, which is part of the Hung Hoa Diocese, have maintained that Catholicism is not a recognized religion in their provinces. No priest may be posted and no church built in these provinces. Since 2004 Father Giuse Nguyen Trung Thoai has been travelling 350-450 km every week to serve 6,100 Vietnamese and Hmong Catholics in Son La Province. Similarly, Father Pham Thanh Tinh travels 300-500 km from his base in Sapa to serve 4,000 followers in Lai Chau and Dien Bien provinces and only for a few times a year. Worse yet, no priest may enter Muong Te or Muong Nhe districts in Dien Bien Province. On December 5, 2014 the Bishop's House of the Hung Hoa Diocese requested permission to conduct Christmas prayer service for Catholics in Nam Po District in Dien Bien Province. The government rejected the request.

**Montagnard Protestant Church:** For years the government in Gia Lai Province has taken diverse actions to make it impossible for members of the De Ga Christian Church to practice their faith. On February 28, 2014, some 30 public security agents arrested five church members, all of Montagnard ethnicities, during their home-based group prayer in Kenh San Village. Two of them were released after having signed a statement to renounce their faith. The remaining three were detained until they were sentenced on September 30, 2014 to 8, 9 and 11 years in prison. A number of members of this Protestant church are in hiding to avoid arrest. Some of them have successfully fled to Thailand.

**Hmong Protestant Church:** The government of Dak Nong Province (Central Vietnam) has created multiple barriers to the Bui Tre Protestant Church, the members of which are all Hmong ethnics. In March 2013, the local public security arrested Hoang Van Ngai, the Church's deacon and his younger brother. On March 17, 2013 Ngai was tortured to death. His extended family members in Dak Nong Province and in Cao Bang Province (Northern Vietnam) filed a petition demanding investigation. In early April 2014, the authorities in Cao Bang Province detained Ngai's cousin, Hoang Van Sung, for having initiated a group complaint regarding the death of Ngai. After ten days of detention, on April 13 the police notified Sung's family of his death and delivered his remains in a sealed coffin. The police ordered his family not to open the coffin and stood watch until after the burial. The widows of Ngai and Sung, along with their young children and scores of relatives, have escaped to Thailand.

**Cao Dai Church:** On July 3, 2013, about twenty Caodai followers and independent clergy members gathered for a religious ceremony at the Long Binh Caodai Temple in Go Cong Tay District, Tien Giang Province. This temple was among the few still administered by independent Caodai followers. With the support of the Public Security Police and "thugs," members of the local office of the government-organized Caodai Governance Council used a truck to knock down the front gate of the temple. They then used batons, clubs and rocks to assault the faithful who defended their temple. The attackers took over the temple. Independent Caodai followers in the area now must join the Governance Council if they want to worship at a temple.