

THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNISTS' INTOLERANCE TOWARDS INDEPENDENT BUDDHIST CHURCHES

OVERVIEW

The situation of independent religions in Vietnam is gloomy. On-going violations of human rights and the repression of religious freedom have restricted the people of Vietnam from practicing their faith fully and expressing themselves freely.

The Constitution of Vietnam stipulates that "Every one shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion; he can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law." (Article 24) However, the issuance of new regulations with many restrictions on religious activities and the considerable number of crackdowns by local authorities on religious believers in recent years have undermined any improvement that the government has gained in ensuring religious freedom.

The demolition Lien Tri Temple, a century-old pagoda in Thu Thiem, Saigon, illustrates this crackdown against the Buddhist faith. Despite many appeals by the Most Venerable Thich Khong Tanh, the temple's abbot, and international outcry, on September 8, 2016 the government sent in hundreds of security personnel to forcibly remove Venerable Thich Khong Tanh and other residing monks, shut down the temple and then bring in construction workers to demolish it. A very valuable piece of Vietnam history has been destroyed.

OUTLAWING RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

The State recognition of religious organizations is essential to ensure the development of religions in the statutory framework as well as to solve conflicts between (and within) religious organizations. Although the Constitution of Vietnam provides that "all religions are equal before the law", the destruction of the Lien Tri Pagoda proves otherwise. It belonged to the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, which is independent from the government-created Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and is not recognized by the government.

LAND GRAB AS INSTRUMENT FOR RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

The government, using economic development as pretext, has targeted Buddhist temples that do not submit themselves to the control of the government. Often times, these independent Buddhist temples serve as safe havens for people persecuted or disenfranchised by the regime. Before its destruction, Lien Tri Temple was a place for civil society organizations to hold meetings, hosted regular gift-giving sessions for disabled veterans and the disadvantaged, and served as shelter for land eviction victims. The government is similarly targeting An Cu Temple in Da Nang City, and Phuoc Buu Temple in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province.

DEFAMATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS BY STATE-OWNED MEDIA AND PROPAGANDISTS

Individuals who advocate for freedom of religion are subject to political repressions, including defamation by the state-owned media. Familiar examples include Most Venerable Thich Khong Tanh, Most Venerable Thich Thien Hanh, Most Venerable Thich Vien Dinh, and many other leaders of Buddhist communities. The Vietnam News Agency once labeled Most Venerable Thich Khong Tanh as “a stubborn guy who keeps inciting social disorder and acting against the country.” He had been sent to ten years in “re-education” camp for protesting the Government’s policy of conscripting Buddhist monks into the army.

As the government controls all media organizations, the independent Buddhist communities have no means to defend our image and reputation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Therefore, on the behalf of the Vietnamese American Buddhist Congregation in the USA, we respectfully urge you to call on the Vietnamese Government to put an end to all persecution and harassment, including criminalization, against religious leaders and human rights defenders. The Vietnamese Government has the obligation to respect the right of religious communities. Furthermore, the Vietnamese government needs to comply with the international human rights standards and see that the crimes committed against these fundamental rights cannot be let off lightly. It is important that:

1. The U.S. Government once again designates Vietnam as a country of particular concern under IRFA;
2. The U.S. embassy staff in Vietnam maintains direct and frequent communication with the persecuted Buddhist communities, and visits temples being targeted by the government;
3. The Vietnamese government must rebuild the Lien Tri Temple and pay compensation to its abbot, the Most Venerable Thích Khong Tanh;
4. The Vietnamese government stops threatening and harassing the abbots of An Cu Temple in Da Nang, and Phuoc Buu Temple, Phap Bien Temple and Dat Quang Temple in Ba Ria-Vung Tau; and
5. The Vietnamese government respects the human rights of all people in Vietnam, including the right to private property, to free enterprise, and to forming free trade unions.