

# Vietnam's GONGO Problem – An Overview

**# NOTAGONGO**

Throughout the ASEAN Civil Society Conference / ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF) there has been a lot of talk about GONGOs (Government Organized Non-Government Organizations). This document aims to further illuminate on a particular group of GONGOs—those that have formed and controlled Vietnam's national process for ACSC/APF since 2008.

## TIGHTLY CONTROLLED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

First, it is important to understand the structure of Vietnam's GONGO delegation. The **Vietnam Union of Friendship Organization (VUFO)** and **Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA)** are both controlling umbrella organizations. They are more than just GONGOs; they are part of the government and reports directly to the government. (See appendix on VUFO.) VUFO presides over all iNGOs in Vietnam and controls the distribution of foreign funds and aid to organizations. Other organizations, **Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation (VPDF)**, **Vietnam Committee for Asian-African-Latin American Solidarity**, and **Vietnam Peace Committee (VPC)** are all members of VUFO. All organizations are members of **the Fatherland Front**, a mass organization led by the Communist Party of Vietnam that operates at the grassroots level. Vietnam is a one-party state, where the Communist Party controls all branches of government, and outlaws all competing political parties.

## COMMUNIST PARTY DIRECTIVES

While the GONGO delegation organizations do ostensibly focus on “issues,” their chief objectives are to further the agenda of the Communist Party. The ties are undeniably close. VPDF's president is Mme Nguyen Thi Binh is the former Vice-President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. VPC's President, Mr. Uong Chu Luu is a member of the Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee and Vice Chairman of the National Assembly. VUFO holds periodic elections for key positions where only Party members are invited.<sup>1</sup>

However, the push of the Party agenda goes far beyond the overlaps in membership and presence of prominent Party figures. VUFO and VUSTA serve the political agenda of the Communist Party. This focus can be found quite plainly in the organizations' charters and regulations. In their own words, VUFO has described themselves as a “Socio-political” organization,<sup>2</sup> and was recently congratulated by a prominent Communist Party politburo member on its successes at “implementing the foreign policy of the Party”<sup>3</sup>, an honor similarly bestowed on VUFO member Vietnam Peace Committee in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, part of VUSTA's role, per its charter, includes national defense and to

<sup>1</sup> <http://thoidai.com.vn/Be-mac-Dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-Lien-hiep-lan-thu-V-15-4543.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tienphong.vn/Print.aspx?id=666338>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.vietnambreakingnews.com/2015/11/vufo-celebrates-its-65th-traditional-day-anniversary/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://comingo.gov.vn/itemdetail/operations-information/vietnam-peace-committee-holds-talks-with-lao-counterpart.aspx>

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“Disseminate and popularize the Party’s and State’s policies and law.”<sup>5</sup> A UNDP report points out that, “VUSTA has received funding of 300 million VND from the National Assembly to carry out its policy works”.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to understand that VUFO and VUSTA are instruments and extensions of the Communist Party strategically masked as and falsely proclaiming to represent civil society.

### **MARGINALIZING HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES AND EXCLUDING GENUINE CIVIL SOCIETY**

In their role as an appendage of the Party, VUFO, VUSTA, and their affiliates have repeatedly taken stances that contradict with shared civil society principles such as universal human rights. In 2015, delegation members fought hard to remove references to Vietnam’s Penal Code, Multi-Party democracy, and the persecution of the Montagnard and other ethnic minorities from the ACSC/APF Joint Statement.

VUFO and others, in presenting themselves as the singular voice of Vietnam’s civil society and tightly controlling Vietnam’s national process, committee nominations, and scholarship distribution, effectively drown out other voices. Independent groups are left isolated and weakened.

Working with the GONGOs and letting them control Vietnam’s national process results in the de facto exclusion and marginalization of independent civil society organizations inside Vietnam, especially when security issues are considered.

In attending ACSC/APF, VUFO, VUSTA, and their affiliates carry out a clear mission assigned by Vietnam’s Communist Party:

At the General Assembly meeting of VUFO on December 30, 2013, Pham Van Chuong, Chair of Vietnam Committee for Asian-African-Latin American Solidarity declared that VUFO’s affiliated organizations had actively participated in regional, inter-regional and international people’s forums in order to push back the activities of enemy forces that aim to oppose the government of Vietnam. Therefore, he was quoted, Vietnam’s people’s organizations should participate in those forums to rally support for Vietnam, fighting back in sensitive areas such as democracy, religions, human rights, territorial sovereignty over ocean and islands... Mr. Chuong has co-represented the Vietnam’s national delegation on the ACSC/APF Regional Steering Committee for years, including this year.

### **A PUBLIC SECURITY OPERATION**

Perhaps the most worrisome aspect of the presence of VUFO and other Vietnamese GONGOs is their close and well-documented collaboration with Ministry of Public Security. VUFO and other organizations act as extensions of the Party’s security apparatus, actively documenting and reporting back to the Ministry of Public

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.vusta.vn/en/news/VUSTA-Head-qu>

<sup>6</sup> VUSTA PDF ADD LINK

“Under the guise of promoting democracy and human rights, many forces are intensively taking advantage of the [social] movements, the national, regional and international levels people’s forum, to intervene into the internal affair(s) of the nations”- Mr. Pham Van Chuong

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Security. In their view, they keep close watch of organizations which, “Under the guise of promoting democracy and human rights...are intensively taking advantage of the [social] movements, the national, regional and international levels people’s forum, to intervene into the internal affair(s) of nations”<sup>7</sup> VUFO conducts annual reporting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security on the activities of foreign NGOs doing political work.<sup>8</sup>

At ACSC/APF 2016, a regular member of Vietnam’s national delegation was sent to infiltrate the Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Southeast Asia, held at Timor Plaza Hotel on August 1 and 2, and spy on Vietnamese participants. He was caught taking photo of participants coming from Vietnam. (See Appendix 2.)

On the one hand, the government of Vietnam sends to ACSC/APF GONGOs to carry out pre-assigned missions, it takes diverse measures to prevent members of genuine civil society from attending. At this year’s ACSC/APF, three such members were blocked from boarding the plane: a Mennonite Pastor (his passport was confiscated by public security agents), the representative of the Popular Council of Cao Dai Religion, and a human rights lawyer and former prisoner of conscience.

To avoid the government’s blockade, a number of participants had to travel by land to Cambodia or Thailand and then flew to Dili. Many of them were detained at Vietnam’s border control posts or at the airport for interrogation by the public security, including:

- (1) A professor who spoke on an ACSC/APF panel was detained and interrogated for 5 hours on August 8 and then summoned to the police station for 4 more hours of interrogation on August 10).
- (2) A representative of Vietnam’s Multi-faith Roundtable detained at the airport for two hours on August 8. His passport was initially confiscated by two public security officers; they had to return it due to public uproar caused by by-standers.
- (3) A land right activist detained for two hours for interrogation at the airport on August 4. He was told that more interrogation sessions would follow.
- (4) A member of Vietnamese Women for Human Rights was detained briefly at the airport but released because she had to attend her grandmother’s funeral.
- (5) A member of the Group of Independent Hoa Hao Buddhists was detained at the border custom for two hours on August 10. He was told that he had been placed under travel ban.
- (6) A female human rights defender and former prisoner of conscience was held at border custom for three hours for interrogation on August 10.
- (7) A Montagnard Pastor received “invitation” to come to the People’s Committee for a “working” session about his trip to East Timor. On August 16, two militia members came to his house and questioned him about whether he received payments to attend ACSC/APF.
- (8) A female member of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ was similarly invited to the People’s Committee of her hamlet. Two militia members has come

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tienphong.vn/Print.aspx?id=666338>

<sup>8</sup> <http://songoaivu.binhdingh.gov.vn/newsdetail.php?lang=vi&newsid=639&id=178>

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to her home twice since August 15 to question her and her father about her trip to Timor-Leste. The militia members also talked to her neighbors about her unapproved travel to Timor-Leste, creating peer pressure on her family.

### A NOTE ON RELIGION AND LABOR

The tactics used with civil society that aim at control, regulation, are also used with religion and organized labor. For religion, leadership and curriculum are tightly regulated by the Party. The state sets up its own religious entities and outlaw or restrict independent groups. With few exceptions, all independent religious organizations are outlawed. State-sanctioned or sponsored harassment and persecution of independent religious groups is widespread, especially among ethnic minority communities.

For labor, the **Vietnam General Confederation of Labor** (VGCL) is the only trade union. There are not independent labor unions in Vietnam. Every labor strike in Vietnam has been spontaneous and none have come from this mass organization, which serves the interests of the Party and not of workers. Two labor union organizers are serving long-term prison sentences.

### BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR ASEAN

We believe that the problems faced by civil society inside Vietnam are not isolated issues but are part of a growing and worrisome trend across ASEAN of government friendly organizations co-opting civic spaces to the detriment and marginalization of rights-based organization.

- **LAOS:** The GONGO issues from Laos are inseparable from those in Vietnam. The government's and their civil society proxys, work closely with one another, as Vietnam In a congratulatory article published in 2013, the Vietnam Peace Committee and its Laos equivalent vowed to continue to “support each other in order to effectively implement the two countries’ foreign policies as well as agreements between the two parties and states” and work together to continue to train “Young Cadres”<sup>9</sup>
- **AICHR:** Recently, in February 2016, **Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation (VPDF)**, an organization with little experience in human rights work, was granted **consultative status** with the **ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission of Human Rights (AICHR)**, while well-known and highly respected civil society organizations were denied consultative status.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://comingo.gov.vn/itemdetail/operations-information/vietnam-peace-committee-holds-talks-with-lao-counterpart.aspx>