

Religious GONGOs as instrument of repression against independent-minded religious communities

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Some registered churches in Vietnam may have reported improvements under the Law on Belief and Religion. While it is true that churches operating under the umbrella of the government have enjoyed greater latitude under the new law, it is a fallacy to reason that as long as the government lets enough churches under its umbrella, that means it is making progress toward religious freedom. Oftentimes, slight improvements reported by government-recognized churches come at the (unreported) heavy expense of non-recognized ones: Such reported improvements practically help the government assert greater state control over religions.

There are two categories of religious organizations operating under the umbrella of the government: (1) those created by the government for use as instruments to repress independent churches while avoiding condemnation by the international community; (2) those co-opted by the government in return for being registered or recognized.

Government-created churches

The Vietnamese government follows the model of China in outlawing genuine churches while creating impostors that it controls. For example, in 1981 the government created the Buddhist Church of Vietnam (BCV) and at the same time outlawed the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), which was founded in 1964. The government has since transferred most UBCV temples to the BCV, coerced UBCV clergy members and followers to join the BCV, and continued to destroy the few remaining UBCV temples such as the Lien Tri Pagoda (HCM City) in 2016, the An Cu Pagoda (Da Nang City) in 2018, the Son Linh Pagoda (Kon Tum Province) in 2019. Usually not too far from those demolished temples, the government allows the construction of large and lavish BCV temples.

Similarly, the government outlawed the Cao Dai Religion in 1978. Then, in 1997 it created a Cao Dai Sect by a directive of the Vietnamese Communist Party (see <https://dvov.org/the-real-cao-dai/>). The government has used this new sect to impersonate the Cao Dai Religion, transferred the Holy See (the central administrative seat) of the Cao Dai Religion in Tay Ninh Province to this Sect, and has sent the police to assist Sect members in taking over, oftentimes by force, some 300 Cao Dai temples. Under the new law, the 1997 Cao Dai Sect has been allowed to organize events attracting hundreds of followers. At the same time, the police disperse members of the original Cao Dai Religion when they gather in small groups to conduct prayer service in their private homes. In April of this year, the 1997 Cao Dai Sect even issued an order to excommunicate Mr. Tran Ngoc Suong, a Cao Dai lay leader, from his own religion. He sued the 1997 Cao Dai Sect for violating his right under the Law on Belief and Religion but the people's court summarily dismissed his case.

As for the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, the government first disbanded its Administrative Council, then appointed 5 communist members to run that council. The government has coerced Hoa Hao Buddhists to submit themselves to this Administrative Council. Those who resisted have been repressed, arrested, imprisoned, beaten and even killed.

In brief, the government of Vietnam treats religious organizations (with the exception of the Catholic Church) exactly the way it treats NGOs and other independent institutions: it makes the real ones illegal and then sets up its own impostor organizations in place of the real ones it has outlawed. So, even

when the government is relatively friendly to its own self-created religious institutions, this is no more a sign of progress than concluding that the government being friendly to the Fatherland Front (the popular arm of the Vietnamese Communist Party) means the government is making progress toward protecting and promoting civil society. In the context of the Law on Religion and Belief, “improvements” for government-created churches generally means worsening repression of the independent churches that they were created to repress.

Government-coopted churches

A number of religious organizations can be considered as “hybrid” organizations -- they were not created by the government but have agreed to compromise with the government. They consist of people who genuinely want to practice their religion and believe that operating within the strictly controlled government system is the best or only way to do this. Their compromises with the government are at the detriment of their fellow co-religionists in areas deemed politically sensitive by the Communist leadership (such as the Northwestern and Central Highlands).

The Evangelical Church of Vietnam – North (EVCN-North) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam – South (EVCN-South) are typical examples. The functional statelessness of thousands of Hmong Christians and the ongoing brutal crackdown of Montagnard house churches can be traced to concessions made by these two co-opted churches.

1. Evangelical Church of Vietnam -- North:

The ECVN-North has been recognized by the Vietnamese government since 1963. In exchange for legal recognition and greater latitude for religious activities in Ha Noi and other major cities, ECVN-North tacitly agrees not to speak up against the government’s mistreatment of its members in remote areas.

In 2005 – 2009, BPSOS helped 671 of ECVN North-affiliated house churches in the Northwest Highlands to register their activities according to Vietnam’s 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion. Only 34 registration applications were approved and only for one year – the approvals were not renewed afterwards. The Law of Belief and Religion has practically not changed this situation. See list of these house churches: <https://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/ecvn-hmong-affiliates-in-northwest-highlands.pdf>

The government in many provinces has systematically purged local areas or entire provinces of newly converted Hmong Christians. Evicted from their home villages, they are denied household registration and citizenship ID cards, and forced to live on the margin of society. ECVN-North has done little in the defense of their affected members.

In May 2011, some 5,000 Hmong Christians, mainly from the above 671 house churches, gathered in Muong Nhe Village, Dien Bien Province, for a mass prayer, praying the government to allow them freedom to practice their Christian faith. The military and police mounted a bloody crackdown. We documented many demonstrators, including women, the elderly and children, suffering injuries and at least a dozen deaths. Scores of demonstrators were sent to prison. Earlier this year, two of those who stayed in hiding in the jungle were caught and sentenced to life. See: <https://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/bpsos-the-muong-nhe-incident-02-12-12.pdf>

Many of these “stateless” Hmong Christians have fled or migrated to the Central Highlands and formed new communities. They founded new house churches and, living in the jungle, have encountered less government interference. Subdivision 179 in Lam Dong Province is one such community.

2. Evangelical Church of Vietnam – South:

The ECVN-South, founded in 1921 in South Vietnam, was recognized by the government in 2001. In exchange for legal recognition, it has stopped advocating for its Montagnard co-religionists. In 2001, the government proceeded to crack down on all Montagnard house churches in the Central Highlands. By 2004, practically all Montagnard house churches had been destroyed, burned or closed. Between 2001 and 2004, tens of thousands of Montagnard Christians held peaceful demonstrations to demand religious freedom. They were crushed by the police; reportedly numerous demonstrators were injured or died, and hundreds arrested; some are still serving prison sentences. This led Vietnam to be designated a country of particular concern (CPC) in 2005 and 2006. Starting in 2005 an increasing number of Montagnard Christians left ECVN-South and formed new house churches independent of ECVN-South, such as the Dega Protestant Church.

To this day, the police continue to coerce members of independent Montagnard house churches to join ECVN-South or other government-recognized churches. Many Montagnard Christians would rather face repression than joining or re-joining ECVN-South because they don't want to submit themselves to government control.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is the only independent religion that has been legally recognized by the Vietnamese Government. As such, the Catholic Church may theoretically benefit from some provisions in the Law on Belief and Religion, but not in reality. For example, the Bishop's Court of Ha Tinh Diocese, which was established in 2018, has applied for a grant of land to build its administrative seat but to no avail. It continues to operate from a makeshift office.

Being recognized by the central Government does not spare the Catholic Church from attacks by the local and provincial governments. The Red Flag Association still actively targets Catholic parishioners and their priests with hate speech, apparently with the support or even encouragement of the local and provincial government authorities. Local and provincial governments continue to target the property of the Catholic Church for expropriation -- notorious examples include the Con Dau Parish in Da Nang City, the Dong Yen Parish in Ha Tinh Province, the Thien An Monastery in Hue City, the Thai Ha Parish in Ha Noi, the Saint Vincent de Paul Convent in Ha Noi, the Thi Nghe Parish in HCM City, etc. In many instances, beatings and torture are used by the police as part of their expropriation operations, resulting in injuries, deaths, arrests and imprisonment.

We have produced a video of the violence employed by the government against the monks and priests at Thien An Monastery of the Vatican-based Benedictine Order:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3eYV5dh48k&t=9s>

Conclusion

In summary, the Law on Belief and Religion increases the dominance of the government-created churches, giving them more leeway and also empowering them further to repress independent churches

that the government has outlawed. As for the government-coopted churches, improved treatment by the government usually comes with a heavy price for many of their co-religionists. As analogy, one would not claim that, under the secret China-Vatican agreement, recognition of and more leeway for government-appointed bishops means improved religious freedom for Chinese Catholics.