

A Number of Complicated Aspects of Religious Life in Vietnam Today and Suggested Regulation Policies

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ABSTRACT: *Religion, at any time, is a sensitive issue that attracts the attention of domestic and international public opinion. Taking advantage of this reality, hostile foreign forces have sabotaged Vietnam in recent years by publishing false reports about religious freedom in Vietnam through a one-sided, unilateral, and inconsiderate approach to information. The article makes contribution in analyzing the actual situation of some tricks that have been and are being exploited by hostile forces and extremist elements in religious issues to sabotage the Party and State of Vietnam such as: taking advantage of religious evangelism among ethnic minorities to form separatist ideology and extreme nationalism; distorting religious policy to interfere in internal politics and bargaining in Vietnam's foreign relations; religiousization of political, economic, and social issues; taking advantage of limitations in implementing ethnic and religious policies of the Party and State of Vietnam; taking advantage of land issues related to religious facilities; taking advantage of social networks and international forums; taking advantage of social charity activities, etc. The article further mentions several possible policy solutions to make adjustment to the above religious complications in the coming time.*

KEYWORDS: security, policy, religion, believers, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

As a multi-religious country, Vietnam currently has 16 religions and 36 religious organizations recognized by the State with about 26 million believers, 55 thousand dignitaries, more than 130 thousand sub-dignitaries and nearly 28 thousand facilities of worship (General Statistics Office, 2019). Of which, the Buddhism consists of nearly 14 million believers, with nearly 18 thousand facilities of worship; the Catholicism consists of more than 7 million believers, with more than 5.5 thousand churches and chapels; the Caodaiism consists of about 2.5 million believers; the Hoa Hao Buddhism consists of nearly 1.5 million believers and 100 temples; the Protestantism consists of nearly 1.2 million believers; the Pure Land Buddhist Association consists of about 600 thousand believers and 210 facilities of worship; the Islam consists of about 80 thousand believers; the Hieu

Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism consists of about 65 thousand believers with 8 facilities of worship; the Tu An Hieu Nghia religion consists of about 62 thousand believers, 476 dignitaries and 76 facilities of worship; the Brahmanism consists of about 54 thousand believers, over 400 dignitaries and sub-dignitaries, and 42 facilities of worship; the Buu Son Ky Huong religion consists of more than 10 thousand believers, 90 dignitaries and 18 facilities of worship; the Seventh-day Adventists consists of more than 16 thousand adherents; the Master religion consists of about 10 thousand believers, more than 500 dignitaries, more than 1.2 thousand sub-dignitaries, and 53 facilities of worship; the Baha'I religion consists of about 7 thousand believers; the Minh Ly religion - Tam Tong temple consists of more than 1 thousand believers; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints consists of about 1,000 believers. In addition to the religions that have been recognized by the state, there are still some organizations, associations, and religious groups that have not been recognized such as: Interfaith Council of Vietnam; Vietnam Catholic Democratic Federation; Vietnam Domestic and Overseas Association Council; Pure Hoa Hao Buddhist Church; Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist Church; Cao Dai People's Representative Committee; Union of Executive Board of Cao Dai Sub-Church; the Orthodox conservative group of Cao Dai; Group of believers following the Cao Dai Primitive Church; Sub-Church of Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do; Dega Protestantism; the Tao of Emptiness Luu Van Ty; Truong Ngoai Cacm To Duong; Mau Hoi Thai Binh, Dao Cung Tien; Can Tan Dac Sung; the Tao of Duong Van Minh; the Tao of Pha Toc; Phap Ly Vo Vi Khoa Hoc Huyen Bi (Do Lan Hien, 2020),...The above-stated religious organizations always seek to sabotage the Party and State, works against the trend of other religions in Vietnam as accompanying the nation. Eventhough the system of Vietnamese policies and laws on religion is continuously supplemented and perfected, basically satisfying the reality of belief and religious life and being consistent with international treaties to which Vietnam is a member. Religious organizations in Vietnam are facilitated in their operations and increasingly developing in every aspect; Religious believers increasingly trust the Party's leadership and the State's management, strictly comply with the law, actively participate in socio-economic development, and accompany with the nation. Some important holidays of major religions such as: Anniversary of Buddha's Birthday, Christmas, etc. have become common festivals of a large number of people, making contribution to develop and strengthen the whole-people solidarity. However, hostile forces fail to accept the above reality and hectically seek any way to take advantage of religious issues and sabotage the Party and State of Vietnam. In particular, taking advantage of Vietnam's foreign and religious policies which have been more and more open in recent years, the subjects have increasingly exploited religious issues to produce external pressure, seek ways to destabilize the internal politics and security, aiming to eliminate the leadership role of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

SEVERAL COMPLICATED ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN VIETNAM TODAY

Taking advantage of religious activities

The life of religious people often attach much trust in the blessing and salvation of the gods to their economic activities, political careers, and important holidays in life. Clearly undersanding such spiritual demand, a group of priests in different religions have performed superstitious worship activities such as worshipping for the unjust death of bondholders, offering for relief from funerals, and offering for relief from drought. Three disasters, enchantment (VOV, 2018),... Religious activities of foreigners entering Vietnam follow the path of tourism, sermons, and

evangelism at believers' private homes in the form of health care clubs, charity clubs, ashrams, etc., such activities have not been registered with state authorities, more and more increasing and even out of control. These religious phenomena are seeking the support from crowds of parishioners and believers, putting pressure on the competent authorities to acknowledge their existence and permit their operations. Dark forces have made corrupt use of religion in various forms: religiousization of civil issues; politicization of religious issues; exploitation of diplomatic channels and international press interviews to falsely express the religious situation and policies of the Vietnamese State; establishing opposition political organizations to incite protests, riots, subversion, self-governing, etc.

In addition to 16 religions with 41 organizations and sects that have been acknowledged or registered by the State for their religious activities, there are still various new religions entered from abroad to Vietnam at present (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2019). The common characteristics of such new religions are as follows: (1) Their beliefs and religious practice methods are different from old religions. Their beliefs are even "rebellious" in terms of morality and ethics; (2) Exploiting burning issues of political and social life such as pluralism, multi-party, civil society, democracy, human rights, and corruption to discredit the Communist Party (The Act of Gratitude and Humanity, Supreme Master Ching Hai, Falun Gong, Ha Mon), inciting hatred, dividing the whole-people solidarity, demanding the establishment of an autonomous separatist country (Vang Chu religion, Dega Protestantism, Ba Co Do religion, Je Sua religion). Propagating false information about the nation's history and leaders (Way of Ho Chi Minh Jade Buddha), criticizing the leaders for their failure to care about people's lives (the Act on Gratitude and Humanity, Thien Co Religion, Doan 18 Phu Tho), demanding the abolition of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's ideology, taking the religious principles and guidelines to develop the Constitution (Falun Gong); (3) Explaining unusual phenomena in the direction of superstition, cure without drugs, use recitation and incantations (Long Hoa Di Lac Religion, Uncle Ho's Spirituality, Falun Gong); (4) Emphasizing the individual freedom or group association, seeking to compete with, replace traditional religions, disrupt the religious harmony, insult faith in old religions (Trois Nuoc Viet Religion) (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2019). In general, the issue of exploiting religion mainly aims to satisfy the multilateral and multi-dimensional religious demands of the masses as well as democracy and freedom in religious choice. Furthermore, new religions with strange characteristics have stimulated the curiosity and discovery, making people follow them en masse.

Loopholes in the law on religion

By 2016, the Law on Belief and Religion was adopted by the National Assembly of Vietnam and effective from January 01, 2018. The law has developed a legal corridor to guarantee the right to represent and express religious beliefs in an undisguised way, the right to participate in social and professional activities on behalf of a religious organization; to respect the differences and everyone's freedom to choose new religious beliefs (Law on Belief and Religion, 2016). All of these changes in policies and laws have facilitated the religion's development. However, the course of developing religious laws and policies in Vietnam cannot avoid the existence of shortcomings, which is indicated in some points: (1) The Constitution and the law of Vietnam clearly define that all religions are equal to the law, and there is no discrimination based on religion. But in reality,

during the course of executing policies towards religion, some local governments and officials executing state management of religion have expressed their laxity in management of religious activities; (2) The Constitution and the law of Vietnam clearly provide that the State respects and protects the freedom of belief and of religion, shall not interfere in the internal affairs of religion. However, in many cases where the state improperly interferes in the internal affairs of religions, causing difficulties in some religious activities, making some religious dignitaries to worry and have negative reactions; The disagreement within religious dignitaries sometimes results into violations of the policy of religious equality and freedom; (3) Some "warps" in policies and laws on religion are still existed, specifically in contents of the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion and some other laws such as the Enterprise Law, the Civil Code, and the Education Law, Health law,...

For example: Clause 6, Article 7 of the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion provides that: religious organizations may receive legitimate assets that domestic and foreign organizations and individuals donate voluntarily. However, when religious organizations in Vietnam wish to receive aid from foreign individuals and organizations, they are required to comply with the Government's Decree No. 16/2016/ND-CP on receipt and management of aid and non-refundable aid, while Decree No. 16/2016/ND-CP (Article 1, Clause 4) fails to include religious organizations in the list of beneficiaries of non-refundable aid from foreign organizations and individuals. Accordingly, religious organizations wishing to receive money and assets from abroad have to circumvent the law by letting religious dignitaries receive such monies in a private capacity. Such circumvention results in the State's inability to manage the funds of religious organizations; easily generates property disputes between individuals, religious dignitaries and religious organizations that cannot be intervened and resolved by the law. An example of inadequacies among laws is the regulations on non-commercial legal entities of religious organizations stipulated in Article 30, Law on Belief and Religion. When developing this Article, the State wishes to enhance the legal status and legal awareness for religious organizations after they are granted a Certificate of registration for stable religious operations during 5 years (Law on Belief and Religion, 2016). However, the Law has not fully taken into account the rights of a "religious legal entity", only in case of a "non-commercial legal entity". The State grants legal entity registration to religious organizations, that is, they have the right to represent their legal entities in registering the establishment of associations and professions not prohibited by law. However, at present, religious organizations in Vietnam who have legal entities (non-commercial) are not permitted to represent their legal entities in establishing social-professional organizations (charity, humanitarian, poverty reduction, legal consulting, lawyers, trade unions, etc.), in establishing economic organizations to provide public services (education, healthcare, finance, banking, credit, notarization,..) to conduct non-commercial operations like other legal entities. Thus, the religious legal entity status has no legal value for non-religious operations. Religious organizations wishes that legal entity status will give them the right to be present in society, in addition to religious reasons, to be equal in rights like other civil legal entities, and have the right to represent their legal entities to attend social activities. The inability to attend social and professional activities (after a legal entity is available) can make some people feel suspicious of unfair policies and guidelines, thereby reducing the public's trust in the Party and State.

Inadequacies in religious policies

In the course of developing and executing policies and laws on religion in Vietnam, some problems are still existed and may be one of the factors affecting the religious security situation in Vietnam: (1) Once religious organizations in the world have legal entities (recognized and protected by law for the freedom to create religion), their rights and obligations will be guaranteed like other civil legal entities. In particular, they may attend any economic, political, social, cultural, educational, medical, charity, and social security activity for which such religious organizations can demonstrate their capacities or strengths and satisfy the conditions prescribed by law. For example, in the USA, religious organizations can be the owner of economic development projects who provide social services in a very effective manner in various cities of states, such as Chicago (Illinois), Baltimore (Maryland), Harlem (New York), Cleveland (Ohio), Los Angeles (California), Austin (Texas), and Atlanta (Georgia). The system of Colleges and Universities founded and instructed by religious (Catholic, Protestant) organizations is present on all continents. The number of students studying at colleges/universities organized by the church is more and more increasing. Before the World War II (1945), many hospitals of religious organizations were permitted to be established to provide medical examination and treatment for people. In 1937, 254 hospitals of religious organizations were established in China. After 1945, most of these hospitals were partially renovated or transferred to the Government. Socio-political associations and religious legal entities have been operating very effectively in many countries, for example, the Christian Trade Union Federation (Germany) is a national trade union organization in Germany with 280,000 participants and affiliated with the European Union (EU) and the Free Trade Union. Social Funds and Charitable Funds of religious organizations with legal entities are working very effectively and actively in various countries such as the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging; Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB); Dutch Lenten Campaign Foundation; Missionaries of Charity; Missionaries of the Poor, Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund; Society of St. Vincent De Paul - Pakistan (Do Lan Hien, 2018)....

Meanwhile, although religious organizations in Vietnam have legal status (acknowledged by law), their rights to social presence and to attend social and professional activities (charity, humanitarian, hunger eradication, poverty reduction, legal advice,...), to provide public services (education, healthcare, financial support,...) have not been expanded; (2) Vietnam's policies and laws on religion still favor "management" rather than "guidance and support" for people to exercise their freedom of religion in accordance with the law. The regulations of legal document for religious activities and operations still heavily focus on the obligations of individuals and religious organizations to competent state authorities, heavily carrying the nature of asking - giving. Various purely religious activities often have to be registered with the government, but the procedures have not been streamlined; (3) Although the process of making policies and laws on religion in Vietnam involves participation, exchange, criticism, and publicity in the mass media, it is sometimes formalistic, resulting in the fact that many people's criticism of the policy (including the scientific circles) is rarely consulted and adjusted. People accept policy institutions without any demand for criticism, but still do not agree totally. When a policy or legal document is issued and fails to receive much consent from the people (those regulated by the policy), it will not be voluntarily complied with, resulting in the circumvention or violation of law; (4) For a long time in history, Vietnamese people have been more stucked to traditional religions and beliefs such as

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, so the government in some places have attached more interest to these religious groups compared to others such as Catholicism, Protestantism,... In some circumstances, local authorities are too nervous about the security, order and social stability resulted from large gatherings of people when practicing religion, in combination with limited capacities to distinguish between positive and negative motivations related to religious practice, failure to fully consider the religious demands of the people, which lead to a rigid government that has not pay sufficient attention to the freedom of religion and of religious practice of believers (especially in ethnic minority areas); sometime, religious policies are not consistent or equal in certain places. Some local governments have created mechanisms, policies as well facilitated for individuals and religious organizations in building many facilities of worship with large scale and budget, while other religions in other localities still face difficulty obtaining a facility to worship and practice religion; (5) Current religious policies of Vietnam have not indicated much attention to economic, cultural, social security, environmental, international cooperation issues, etc. while the economic poverty, wealth gap, lack of jobs, social inequality, low intellectual level, crisis environment, low social security, low social protection, and complicated international politics are factors that make a part of the people frustrated, lose faith, blame the government, and oppose the authorities under religious grounds but actually for other rights and interests.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS REGULATION POLICIES IN VIETNAM IN THE COMING TIME

For the aim of limiting the complexity of religion in Vietnam in the coming time, it is required to research and analyze whether the religious security threats generate from which factors and find solutions to remove from such factors themselves. We can summarize some of necessary solution groups to deal with immediate and long-term tasks related to religion as follows:

Short-term policies

With phenomena of new religions, it is required to deploy several solutions, such as: (1) It is required to take into account the issue of legal status for the phenomena of new religions according to the roadmap of the Law and previous experience for endogenous religions. Develop a set of clear criteria to define righteous religion and heresy and support the granting of activity registration and legal entity registration certificates. In cases of being classified as heresy, it is required to provide a complete legal system and a strong judicial system to apply sanctions, and for religions that are not classified as heresy, their activities should be registered for management; (2) Using social media to orient the public faith when choosing a religion. Providing accurate information with reliable and convincing sources; (3) Taking advantage of voices from the religious community, especially religious dignitaries, in identifying and fighting religious phenomena that tend to be extremist and negative; (4) More widely engaging with ASEAN countries and the international communities (Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, USA, Australia, India, etc.) to seek strong support in resolving domestic religious issues and heresies entered from abroad into Vietnam; (5) Introducing the subject of Religious Studies into education for pupils, students, leaders and executives, so that pupils, students and their families can identify orthodox religions and heresies. Exploiting the moral values of religion in education, from which promoting and honoring the religion's tendency to develop more healthily and perfectly. People can choose

secular ideology or religious ideology as the goal for their lives because after all, both religion and secular society have the same goal, which is for human happiness. Improving the understanding of religion for officials so that they can advise on policies, conduct, and resolve religious issues in an accurate and scientific manner; (6) In resolving religious disputes, claims, and lawsuits, it is required to thoroughly resolve people's frustrations related to religion, aiming to resolve arising problems to prevent trends resulting in conflicts. Designing intervention scenarios in case of occurring the worst situation of religious security. Use diplomatic measures and economic power first, then use armed forces for resolution in case of religious security instabilities or conflicts; (7)

All religions must undertake and be bound by a universal law of equal treatment and respect for differences in faith, even considering it as the theological and doctrinal foundation, as well as basic moral principles and standards that believers must comply with. In case of violation, it must be considered an act against the Holy Spirit to prevent acts against heresies and other beliefs in the name of protecting the faith; (8) It is strictly prohibited to circulate and propagate religious documents such as Holy books and commentaries to Holy books containing contents that incites extremism, violence, or containing inappropriate images and language or making statements related to the absolute superiority of religion. The state should promulgate measures to prohibit the circulation or to censor some religious documents, especially the release of imported document sources; it is required to establish a team of experts in consulting and appraising the legality and reasonableness of decisions to ban the circulation of religious documents containing improper contents; (9) It is required to issue various measures and ways to reconcile religious conflicts, the top priority is that the Government should promote the role of religious leaders to fight internal conflicts and reach out to disadvantaged groups in society and make dialogues with the authorities to prevent conflicts from occurrence; (10) Use diplomatic channels to rally allies and isolate threats, minimize transnational causes of religious insecurity within the country; (11) Establishing the National Religious Advisory Council (possibly be affiliated with the government or an independent non-governmental organization), with its members as follows: representatives of religious dignitaries (nominated by religions), religious experts, representative leaders from state religious management authorities. The Council can support governments to improve their understanding of the religious and cultural nuances at play, identify early threats to stability which may be caused by religious or ethnic religious minority conflicts. The Council may provide informative and politically sensitive advice on the religious and cultural implications of decisions that the government is about to take or required to take. The Council can work as a mediator to help resolve misunderstandings between faith-based authorities, and is responsible for consulting the Government on resolving religious issues, especially religious hot spots.

Long term policies

(1) In terms of awareness, the aggregate strength of all forces, organizations, individuals, and the entire people should be promoted to participate in ensuring religious security, especially religious organizations (of which religious dignitaries play a very important role) in the direction of "mobilizing, uniting, gathering religious organizations, dignitaries, and believers to live a "good life, nice religion" manner, making active contributions to the work of building and protecting the Fatherland" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). The government is responsible for understanding the people's religion to encourage them to consciously ensure their own internal

order. More particularly, training activities should be encouraged, when more religious leaders are methodically trained, that is, more clergies will clearly understand the faith, the possibility of faith being manipulated by bad entities will be less. Finding the importance of ensuring the freedom of religion for national security, our Party has clearly stated in the political discourse: "Ensuring religious organizations operate in accordance with regulations of the law and charters, regulations recognized by the State" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021) and "Facilitating religious organizations to operate in accordance with the law; taking initiative in supporting and addressing the demands for religious, belief and spiritual activities of the masses, and also taking initiative to prevent and resolutely fight against exploitations of beliefs and religion to divide, destroying the great national unity" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). In its religious dialogue policy, Vietnam should promote social consensus to weaken the extremist ideology; Make propaganda on various mass media, promote the tolerant and peace-loving role of religion to prevent extremist religious stereotypes. propagate, encourage, commend and reward activities to promptly and effectively resolve religious disagreements and conflicts. Develop and conclude a common commitment between religions to participate in protecting national and international peace.

(2) In terms of policies and laws, the State should not use dictatorial forces to address religion-related issues. In any conflict between the State and religion, any struggle for ethnic separatism associated with religious separatism, the partial cause stems from the State's ethnic and religious policies. Such policy has made believers feel abandoned, forgotten, and left behind because they did not much benefit from the government's socio-economic development program, and could not share their feelings and religious demands, felt lacking a spiritual fulcrum while their material life was too poor and backward for long time which could not be changed. The biased attitude and behavior towards Buddhism, in combination with the harsh and rigid attitude from the government when dealing with the people's religious demands make small religious groups believe that they are discriminated against, unintentionally awakening the source of separatism. At first, such source was just sporadic, silent groupings which were being waited by reactionary and opposition forces to explode into an ethnic separatist movement accompanied by religious separatism. The people participating in such movement do not need to know what they will benefit or lose, as long as it satisfies them, meaning that their long-pent-up frustrations have been addressed. After understanding the meaning and role of ethnic and religious policies, our Party has made directions: Focusing on successfully perfecting and deploying ethnic and religious policies (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). The State should consider "policies" as an effective tool to deal with religious security. The maintenance of harmony and "moderation" between religions is an important content of religious policies. The following principle must be adhered: The Vietnamese State is a secular state, religion is a civil religion, that is, no religions are established by the State, no churches or religious worship facilities are built by the State, religion is a private matter of civil society, everyone has the freedom to create and choose to enter or not enter a certain religion. The state shall not sponsor or interfere in the internal affairs of religions, shall give people and religious organizations confidence in a neutral secular state that respects the law so that they shall not worry that there will be a certain religion in the future that may be present in the new socio-political power order in Vietnam. If it is impossible to do so, religious security instability will be a near reality.

(3) In terms of social security, Vietnam should improve its social security and social protection system so that the poor can access to educational opportunities, medical care, and enjoy fair social benefits, thereby, making them not feel like they are in a vulnerable and excluded group, not feel dissatisfied, and avoiding being enticed or lured to join the army of hostile elements, causing religious insecurity. It is required to issue a common strategy and policy for key social security issues such as reducing poverty, creating jobs, and creating equality in economic opportunities. Of which, focusing on improvement and enhancement to the material and spiritual life of people as well as narrowing social gaps; ensuring human rights and social justice regardless of religion or ethnicity. Creating equal opportunities for all believers and religious organizations.

(4) In terms of international cooperation, Vietnam is required to closely cooperate with countries around the world (especially countries in the region) regarding religious security to coordinate and deploy long-term, comprehensive, unified, and effective solutions among countries. In the current context, religious security should expand to various aspects and related issues: equality, human rights, democracy, poverty, housing, epidemics, social prejudice, backwardness, environmental pollution, social moral degradation, crime, corruption, etc. Vietnam may issue different priorities in the above security issues, but overall, it should provide a general strategy and policy for key issues such as reducing poverty, creating jobs, creating equality in economic opportunities, ensuring social resources, human resources and natural resources for sustainable development. The issue of ensuring religious security depends on the awareness of each country, each community and each country's unique policies. However, the interdependence among countries is requiring increased approaches and solutions at the international level, because global solutions often make deeper and longer-lasting impacts.

CONCLUSION

The picture of religious diversity in Vietnam over the past few decades is continuing to be promoted in the process of domestic and international integration. At the same time, new and strange religious forms or phenomena also appear, they both bring the color of traditional beliefs and borrow, mix new philosophies and worship practices. The belief in something mysterious, something bearing supernatural power still exists, and is sometimes blown up into social phenomena. In fact, in recent times in Vietnam, some phenomena that exploit the freedom of religion have appeared to cause national division, produce political instability in this region. The creation of consensus in awareness and behavior with constructive communities based on religion and belief is extremely important and carries profound significance for the sustainable development of this strategic military, economic and cultural country. In order to successfully solve the problem of religious security in Vietnam, the cooperation from both sides is necessary. The State should limit the promulgation of legal documents with unclear and unscientific clauses to avoid the possibility that bad entities may arbitrarily abuse them when executing policies and laws on religion. For the part of the religious community, it is required to make active contributions to the security efforts of the Government and relevant agencies related to religious management by attending in open, constructive dialogue, and trusting the government. Leaders of religious communities should also strongly and promptly speak out against hatred for religious reasons, against incitement to hostility or violence for religious reasons.

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