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VIETNAM: State interference in indigenous religions

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Along with state crackdowns on religious communities well-known outside of Vietnam, such as the Unified Buddhist Church, Catholics, Mennonites, Montagnard Christians, the Hmongs, and Pentecostals, the Vietnamese government also heavily interferes in the far less well-known Hoa Hao Buddhist and Caodaiism communities - especially in the way leaders are selected. Both these religions were founded within Vietnam by Vietnamese people and have received state recognition. Followers of both religions continue, along with the more well-known religious communities, to struggle for genuine freedom from state interference. However, the future for both Hoa Hao Buddhism and Caodaiism appears bleak, given Vietnam's lack of religious freedom.

Last month Thich Tri Luc, a monk affiliated with the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) who had recently been released after nearly two years in prison, was allowed to leave Vietnam for Sweden. In July 2002, he was abducted by Vietnamese agents in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, where he had been granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and forcibly returned to Vietnam. The Vietnamese government denied any knowledge of his whereabouts until the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau revealed his precise location. In March 2004, Thich Tri Luc was tried in Ho Chi Minh City for "fleeing the country with the intent to oppose the people's government".

On 12 June, imprisoned Catholic priest Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly had his sentence reduced by another five years for "good conduct", the second such reduction. Amnesty International reports that he is currently detained at Ba Sao prison camp in Ha Nam province. In May 2001, Vietnamese officials arrested Fr Ly after he had submitted written testimony to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, a religious freedom watchdog created by the US Congress. In October of that year, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison for "disturbing public security" and "violating the national unity policy". In July 2003, his sentence was reduced to 10 years' imprisonment. Three months later, in September, Fr Ly's niece and her two brothers were sentenced to prison terms for sending information about Fr Ly to the Vietnamese-American media.

Notwithstanding these "positive" steps, the Vietnamese state has made no significant moves toward ending abuses against religious communities. On 8 June, Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang of Ho Chi Minh City was arrested for "fighting against on-duty public officers". According to Compass Direct, the police forcibly arrested Quang while he was working on his property outside the city. Afterwards the police raided his home, which served as a church, detained his wife and children, and confiscated deeds to the house, money, computers, and files detailing human rights violations by government officials that Quang had been gathering.

Just two months earlier, in April, local officials cracked down on a large-scale demonstration by the ethnic minorities, known collectively as the Montagnards, in the Central Highlands. Eyewitnesses reported that at least 10 people were beaten to death by the police. According to Human Rights Watch, as many as 500,000 Montagnards are Christians. For years, the Vietnamese government has been trying, without much success, to force the Montagnards to renounce their religious belief.

Furthermore, despite what appeared to be government efforts in early 2003 to achieve reconciliation with UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and the second-highest ranking monk in the outlawed organisation Thich Quang Do, the two leaders were once again placed under effective house arrest by the end of the year.

As if these religious freedom violations were not enough, the government adopted a new ordinance on religion on 12 July that goes into force in November. Those who have seen the latest text liken the ordinance to "old wine in a new bottle". Despite government rhetoric that this new document would protect religious freedom, those who have seen it say it merely codifies existing restrictions, both written and unwritten.

When the world shifts its attention to the religious freedom conditions in Vietnam, it understandably focuses on the plight of the UBCV leadership, the Protestants in the Central Highlands, Hmongs in Vietnam's Northwest, and Pentecostals like Pastor Quang; and the state's control over the Catholic Church and the sufferings of outspoken dissidents like Fr Ly.

By comparison, much less is known about the way state restrictions have affected Hoa Hao Buddhism and Caodaiism, two religions indigenous to the country and which have received state recognition. According to government statistics, there are approximately 1.5 million Cao Daists and about 1.3 million Hoa Hao Buddhists. However, Hoa Haos claim a membership as large as 3 million, while

at least one Cao Dai representative outside Vietnam believes the government figure for his faith is too high as he reckons that Cao Dai membership is not as strong as it was in the pre-1975 period.

In addition to their common Vietnamese heritage and legal status as state-sanctioned religions, Hoa Hao Buddhism and Cao Daism share a similar place of origin. Both are based in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam, where the province of Chau Doc, near Vietnam's border with Cambodia, serves as the spiritual home of the Hoa Hao adherents and where Tay Ninh province is the headquarters of Cao Daism. Today, visitors to the Hoa Hao village and the Cao Dai Holy See will find impressive and, in the case of Cao Daism, highly-ornate physical structures that serve as the two religious communities' respective primary places of worship.

They also share mystical beginnings that led their respective founders to introduce new religious teachings that, according to representatives of the two communities, within a few years attracted hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of Vietnamese to the newly-established religions. Underlying the new teachings of Hoa Hao Buddhism and Cao Daism is the basic premise that the existing religions, and their teachings and practices, are no longer applicable to current realities.

For Prophet Huynh Phu So, the Hoa Hao founder, the solution lay in reform of the Buddhist community. The enlightenment he received from a pilgrimage to a sacred mountain in 1939 led him to establish new teachings that included accusations that Buddhist monks were deviating from orthodox Buddhist doctrines through their licentious behaviour and ostentatious temple displays. He also encouraged his followers to practice their religious beliefs at home.

Despite criticising the monks and advocating religious practices at home, Prophet So was not prepared to break completely with Buddhism. A core component of Hoa Hao teachings is the "Four Debts of Gratitude", which stated that a key path to salvation lies in expressing gratitude to ancestors and parents; the country; the "Three Treasures" of Buddhism - Buddha, Buddhist doctrines, and the "sangha", or Buddhist priesthood; and to fellow human beings. The emphasis on demonstrating piety to one's parents reflects Confucian influence, further reflecting the influences of Chinese cultures and Hoa Hao's somewhat syncretistic orientation.

Compared with Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Daism is truly syncretistic. Although Cao Daism was officially founded in 1926, Cao Dai adherents claim that its founder, a low-ranking French colonial official named Ngo Van Chieu, first received a vision of the "Divine Eye" from the "Lord Cao Dai" in 1919. The Eye is now the symbol of Cao Daism. Like their Hoa Hao counterpart, the early Cao Dai leaders found the existing religions wanting. However, instead of seeking to reform a particular religion, they sought to combine the teachings of major world religions and philosophies in forming their own doctrines. Reflecting its syncretism, included in the pantheon of Cao Dai deities are the French writer Victor Hugo, the founder of China's modern republic Sun Yat-sen, founder of Buddhism Sakyamuni, and a 16th century Vietnamese military strategist and prophet Nguyen Binh Khiem.

As implied by Cao Daism's official name, The Third Great Universal Religious Amnesty, there were two previous "religious amnesties" that saw the rise of major world religions like Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. However, Cao Dai teachings claim that the inability of human beings to convey properly God's messages to mankind has left these revelations incomplete. In this sense, Cao Daism represents God's final and complete revelations to the human race by speaking directly to the people.

Another characteristic shared by Cao Daism and Hoa Hao Buddhism is their well-structured organisation. Both religious communities have internal charters that detail the requirements for membership and the obligations of adherents. These charters also provide for the selection of leaders to manage their respective internal affairs. Until the Communist takeover in South Vietnam in 1975, Hoa Hao Buddhism was governed by the Central Council of Administrators and the Council of Religious Protectors, with networks that extended down to the level of hamlets. As an illustration of the size of the network, according to a US-based Hoa Hao group, before 1975, Hoa Hao Buddhism had 28 provincial and metropolitan offices, 82 district offices, 476 village offices, 3,100 hamlet offices, and over 800 "Recital Minarets" throughout the Mekong Delta.

For the Cao Dais, the leadership structure resembles that of the Roman Catholic Church, with a pope at the top of the hierarchy, followed by cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests. Although the pope must be male, female adherents also participate in management and religious work. Unlike the Catholics, the Cao Dais do not require their "priests" to remain celibate. In fact, as the "Cao Dai Overseas Missionary" organisation indicates on its brochure, "Cao Daism does not encourage its adepts [priests] to renounce the world, rather it suggests that, in parallel with their religious obligations, they discharge their familial and social duties before they dedicate themselves completely to the faith." Like its Hoa Hao counterpart, Cao Daism has an extensive administrative network that extends down to the level of the hamlets.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Hoa Hao Buddhism and Cao Daism is their political history. Both religions were founded during the twilight years of French colonialism. In addition to their religious missions, the early leaders of both communities were also ardent supporters of the movement for independence from French rule. For example, Prophet Huynh Phu So of Hoa Hao Buddhism founded the Vietnamese Social Democratic Party and created independent militia forces that helped fight, along with the Communists, for independence from the French. Similarly, the Cao Dais had effective political and military control over Tay Ninh and its surrounding area until the 1970s, when the Communists united the country. During the rule of the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam in the south, both communities signed non-interference agreements with the Saigon regime that also amounted to non-aggression pacts.

However, their relationships with the Vietnamese Communists are much worse despite their initial collaboration in the independence campaign. The Cao Dais claim that when the war against the French ended, the Communists began the systematic elimination of Cao Daism through killings and other violent acts. Similarly, Hoa Hao adherents accuse the Communists of abducting and murdering Prophet So. The tensions between these religious communities and the Communist Party resulted in severe state repression after 1975. Although the state did eventually recognise both religions in the late 1990s, the relationship between it and these two former adversaries of the Communist Party remain tense.

Today, as mentioned above, Cao Daism and Hoa Hao Buddhism are among the six state-sanctioned religions in Vietnam. Officially, the Communist state recognises eight smaller Cao Dai branches in addition to the main Tay Ninh branch. In 1999, the state extended recognition to Hoa Hao Buddhism after it established the Hoa Hao Administrative Committee.

One of the main complaints against the government voiced by the representatives of Cao Daism and Hoa Hao Buddhism is the extent of state control over their respective internal affairs, particularly over the way leaders are selected. This is not to suggest that the government-appointed leaders of the communities are not adherents of either religion. Rather, as one Cao Dai representative stated, those appointed by the state were simply more willing to compromise with the government.

For example, the Communist government has long banned the use of séances, the key method for selecting Cao Dai leaders. While some Cao Dai traditionalists have protested against the government's interference by refusing to participate in the government-appointed management committees, other Cao Dai leaders have demonstrated their willingness to compromise with the government. The result is that over the last few years, the government has approved two rounds of clerical appointments. The other result is division within the community, in which the traditionalists have accused the appointed leaders of betraying the religion's true teachings.

Another complaint related to government interference is the state's rejection of the charter drawn up by the Cao Dais before the 1950s. Moreover, Cao Dai representatives have expressed unhappiness over the government's unwillingness to allow the community to maintain its own independent source of income, thus making it difficult for the Cao Dais to manage their own affairs independent of government approval.

There is no indication that any Cao Dai adherents are currently imprisoned for religious reasons. Most Cao Dai leaders were immediately imprisoned after the Communist takeover of the south. Today, some of these former prisoners occupy the most senior positions within the organisational structure while others, as noted before, continue to resist by refusing to participate in any official duties or functions. Most Cao Dai properties confiscated by the Communist state remain in government hands.

Despite government interference and some internal disagreements, according to Cao Dai representatives outside Vietnam, Cao Dai leaders have now generally agreed that the best way to survive is to try to reach an agreement with the Communist state through dialogue, resembling the agreements reached with the French colonial administration and later with the Republic of Vietnam. However, to this day, the Communist government has not responded positively to this request.

Hoa Hao dissidents, unlike the Cao Dais, have maintained a confrontational approach toward the state. Hoa Hao adherents have accused the government of failing to return confiscated properties, including the former headquarters at Hoa Hao village. They also claim that there are 11 Hoa Hao Buddhist prisoners, including Nguyen Van Li, who was sentenced to three years in prison on 1 July 2003, three months after his arrest for attempting to hold a public ceremony to commemorate the death of Prophet Huynh Phu So. This was not the first time that Hoa Hao Buddhists had tried to commemorate the prophet's death publicly: when some Hoa Hao leaders tried to hold a similar event in March 2000, a clash between Hoa Hao dissidents and government officials resulted in the imprisonment of approximately a dozen believers.

Hoa Hao Buddhists contend that the government refuses to allow them to display publicly important religious symbols such as the Hoa Hao flag or to allow the publication of all the prophet's writings. The state-appointed management committee denies the second allegation, claiming that the prophet's works are not published in full because of a lack of funds, not government restrictions.

Finally, like the Cao Dais, there is considerable tension within the Hoa Hao leadership. Many Hoa Hao leaders dispute the authority of the government-appointed management board, although its members are Hoa Hao Buddhists. For this reason, since 1999, after the establishment of the state-sanctioned committee, some Hoa Hao leaders like Le Quang Liem have requested approval from the government to form their own organisation. As expected, the government has repeatedly rejected the request and Le Quang Liem was only recently released from a two-year house arrest, a sentence imposed after he and several other religious dissidents, including Fr. Ly and Rev. Chan Tin, issued an open letter calling on the government to grant genuine religious freedom.

Given the lack of religious freedom in Vietnam, Cao Daism and Hoa Hao Buddhism will continue their respective struggles to obtain genuine freedom and independence from state interference. However, the future seems bleak. Not only is the government showing no signs of willingness to change its policy, the younger generations of Hoa Hao Buddhists and Cao Daists - most of whom were born after 1975 - have no memories of their communities' respective histories and therefore seem to be more willing to reach compromises with the state. For the elders of the two religions, this is perhaps their greatest cause for dismay.

For more background, see Forum 18's survey/commentary at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=242

A printer-friendly map of Vietnam is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=vietna>

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