

briefing

Vietnam

Analysis:

Internal Training Manual 'Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region'

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I. Executive Summary

CSW has obtained from sources in Vietnam an internal religious affairs manual promulgated by the Vietnamese government's Central Bureau of Religious Affairs, entitled, 'Training Document: Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region', and dated 2006. The origin of the document shows that it concerns the core management of religion, and it is therefore a key indicator of the respect for religious freedom in central government policy.

The document develops a new 'plan' for dealing with the ethnic minority Protestant population across the given geographical region. Its content is somewhat ambiguous, containing both promising and deeply concerning signs, and it reflects a duality in the attitude towards both Protestantism and religious freedom. However, it ultimately aims to manage, limit and reverse the growth of Protestantism in the north-western highland region, within the context of ostensibly offering religious freedom. Central among its objectives is the aim to 'resolutely subdue the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant religion in the region' (p. 44).

While containing some promising language about the need for religious freedom, the document also provides an unequivocal mandate to local authorities to impose serious restrictions on religious freedom (see p. 7 below for an explanation of the major concerns). It explicitly empowers individual officials to decide about the legitimacy of Protestant congregations, with no apparent accountability. Of particularly grave concern is the specific legitimacy given to the policy of forcing Protestant adherents to renounce their faith and return to their traditional beliefs, in a clear breach of international standards on religious freedom. This represents an extreme shortcoming in Vietnam's avowed commitment to religious freedom, and should stimulate widespread international concern.

2. Recommendations

The emergence of this document is highly incriminating, especially at a time when Vietnam is seeking a higher profile on the world stage. While partially couched in promising language, it provides for a continuation of the older, repressive mode of dealing with religious freedom.

In light of the emergence of this document at this time immediately preceding the APEC Summit in Hanoi, CSW requests that the Vietnamese government be immediately and urgently engaged and called upon to withdraw its provisions for forcing renunciations of Protestant religion, to unequivocally denounce such a policy and to safeguard full religious freedom for all its citizens.

CSW further requests that the international community calls upon the Vietnamese government to develop a viable legal framework for religious freedom which is in accord with Vietnam's obligations under international law; and to offer to share experience and to carefully monitor developments in this area.

3. Background: Repression of Religious Freedom in the North-West Highlands

Many ethnic minority adherents to Protestantism in the north-west highlands have experienced discrimination, harassment and severe persecution at the hands of local officials. Consistent reports have emerged from Protestant leaders during recent years about attempts to force Protestants to abandon their faith, the imprisonment of Christians, threats, beatings and the restrictions imposed on meeting places and Bibles. A number of deaths at the hands of local authorities have also been reported, most recently that of Sung Chong Chu in Dien Bien Province in December 2005.

These occurrences, which have been reported from across the north-west highlands, form the context for this document which sets out a plan for the management of Protestantism in the region.

4. Summary of Content

The **rationale** for the document arises from a recognition of the number of religious adherents in the country; according to government statistics on the third page, 25% of Vietnam's citizens belong to one of six religions. The document also recognises that 'religion and belief is a spiritual need for a portion of our people' (p. 6) and that 'the need for religious activities of some of these religious believers has become undeniable' (p. 40). A core part of the given 'religious task' is 'motivating [religious believers] to patriotism'. However, at the heart of the document and central to its objectives, is a specific concern about the 'abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant religion' in the northern mountainous region, which is to be 'resolutely subdued' (p. 44).

The document is divided into **three sections**, or 'lessons'. The first of these outlines the policy and legislative framework of the Party and State towards religion in general in Vietnam. The second is a descriptive chapter, providing an overview of the origins and tenets of Protestantism, its history within Vietnam, and the current 'situation of the Protestant religion in Vietnam'. It concludes with a short résumé of specific current policies dealing with Protestantism.

The main interest in the document lies in the **third 'lesson'**, which sets out a new policy for dealing with the Protestant religion in the 'northern mountainous region'. It begins by describing the 'general characteristics' of northern mountainous region and 'the process of penetration of the Protestant faith' into this area, noting that 'since 1993 the number of followers of the Protestant faith ... increased dramatically'. It analyses the reasons for growth of Protestantism in terms of economic, social, cultural and political factors, and resolves to provide a 'comprehensive' response to this.

A critical appraisal of previous methods of dealing with the Protestant religion in the region is then given. This admits to earlier efforts to force renunciations of faith and reaffirms the need to distinguish between the following and the propagating of religion, and between the 'legitimate need for religious activities of some people' and 'the abuse of religion by hostile forces' (p. 44).

It then develops a policy for 'managing the Protestant religion in the northern mountainous region in the future', based on several key objectives, primarily to bring the activities of the Protestant religion under the administration of the law. Among the objectives is a threefold goal: 'solving the need for religious belief and religion', guaranteeing religious freedom, and 'resolutely subdu[ing] the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant

religion in the region' (p. 44). A separate objective, 'to stop and defeat the scheme exploiting the Protestant religion by all the internal and foreign enemy forces', is also given (p. 45).

The mechanism for implementing this policy is then described. This begins with training for local officials in the policy on religion, of which 'the most important issue' is the categorisation of religious locations (p. 45). This process is described, after a short instruction to 'upgrade the work of propagandising' to encourage ethnic minorities to develop their 'good traditional beliefs' (p. 45). The categorisation of locations with Protestant churches is threefold: those where Protestants are relatively well-established, 'where citizens have a genuine need to practise their religion' ('category one'); those where the Protestant religion is in place but the faith of the Christians 'is not yet firmly established' ('category two'); and those where people have only recently begun to follow the Protestant religion ('category three'). The provisions for each of these categories is different, with the expedition of registration a priority for 'category one'. However, those under 'category two' should be 'urgently and continuously mobilise[d] ... to return to their traditional beliefs', but if this is unsuccessful they should only be permitted 'to practise their religion in the context of their private homes'. No such compromise is permitted for those under 'category three', about whom an instruction is given to the competent officials to 'hold your ground and mobilise and persuade the people to return to their traditional beliefs' (pp. 46-47).

Religious leaders are to be categorised twofold: those who 'have the characteristics of a good citizen' should be supported, while 'those who are hostile and extremely resistant' should be treated 'severely' and 'publicly denounce[d]'.

The document concludes with a step-by-step guide to the implementation of the plan, and a number of subsidiary points, including an admission that 'the idea of acknowledging that there is a need for religious belief and religion of a portion of the ethnic minorities, principally the Protestant Hmong, and then, based on this to have a method and steps which agree that it is suitable to place [this phenomenon] under the administration of the law, is a very new policy and a very big deal for our Party and Government'.

5. Short Analysis: Conflicting Attitudes towards Religion

The document displays a continued tension between new and old attitudes to religion. On one hand, it insists on the novelty of the Party and government's policy on religion, in light of the relatively new legislative framework provided chiefly by the 'Ordinance on Religion and Belief' and 'Decree 22', and asserts the importance of religious freedom.

On the other hand, it continues to use the terminology of religion as a 'problem' to be 'solved', and displays an inherent distrust of religion. This tension leads to a lack of clarity about the official attitude towards Protestantism, which creates a very troubling degree of subjectivity and arbitrariness for local officials dealing with religion.

5.1. Novelty of religious freedom

The document strongly emphasises the novelty of the government's legislative framework for religious activities. The section highlighting 'matters requiring special attention in the process of implementing the plan' (pp. 49-50) states that the acknowledgement of a need for religious beliefs and the administration of this need within a legislative framework is 'a very new policy and a very big deal for our Party and Government'.

The document contains a specific mention that ordinary Protestant believers and their leaders may, simultaneously, be good citizens (pp. 4 and 46 respectively). The 'Ordinance on Religion and Belief' is portrayed as constituting a departure from a previous mode of 'managing' religion, with its new emphasis on 'reporting and registration' replacing the previous stress on 'asking permission' (p. 17). It is described as a 'progressive move in the process of perfecting legal regulations regarding religion and beliefs in our country' (p. 20). The admission of previous repressive policies (pp. 43-44) is also novel.

The novelty of this government policy on religion is repeated numerous times through the document, and the re-training of Party officials in this policy is the first stage in the 'State plan to manage the Protestant religion in the northern mountainous region' (pp. 45-46).

5.2. Continued antagonism towards religion & religious organisations

In tension with its partial focus on positive action to protect religious freedom, the document also displays a clear and strong antipathy towards religion. This informs both the tone of the document and the content of the plan itself. The phenomenon of the growth in the number of Protestants in the northern highland region is repeatedly described as a 'problem' to be addressed, and the religion is implicitly linked with counter-revolutionary activities (cf. pp. 30 and 34).

The tensions are most apparent in the list of objectives for the plan, which contain an inherent inconsistency: 'to guarantee the right to believe or not to believe in religion for the ethnic minorities, and to resolutely subdue the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant religion in the region' (p. 44).

Although the document is to some extent couched in terms of respecting religious freedom, the scope of the plan it outlines is to freeze the growth of Protestantism in the northern region. Members of churches (or 'localities that have followers of the [Protestant] religion', p. 46) are categorised threefold, with only the most well-established churches ('category one') to be encouraged to register officially. This category is described as: 'those locations which have had followers of the Protestant faith for a relatively long time, and where the citizens have a genuine need to practise their religion, clearly understand their doctrines and ceremonies and regularly practise the religion'.

However, the second and third categories, used of less well-established churches, are to be treated differently. 'Category two' is used for 'those locations which follow the Protestant religion but their faith is not yet firmly established, and their grasp of the doctrines is not clear, and their practice of the religion is irregular'. 'Category three' is used for 'those locations where people have only recently begun to follow the Protestant religion'. For both categories, officials are instructed to 'mobilise' and 'persuade' the Christians to 'return to their traditional beliefs'.

Church leaders are subject to similar categorisation. Those who may be classified as 'hostile and extremely resistant' are instructed to be treated 'severely' and publicly denounced.

Despite the relatively negative appraisal given to the policy of forcing renunciations of faith, on account of its ineffectiveness (p. 43), and a prohibition of this policy in the second lesson (p. 36), precisely such a policy is envisaged with respect to Protestants belonging to the second or third categories. The apparent goal of this policy is to prevent the further growth of the Protestant religion, permitting only the congregations which are considered to be well-established.

5.3. Arbitration of legitimate and illegitimate modes of religious belief

The document makes a distinction between those modes of the Protestant religion which it considers legitimate, and others which are illegitimate. The plan displays an apparently genuine willingness to expedite the registration of established congregations and those which are perceived to have a legitimate need for religion, but also presupposes that Protestantism may be used as a tool for 'hostile forces'. This is clarified in its appraisal of current management of Protestantism in the northern region: 'the current problem in the religion task is the perception on the part of the cadres that the preaching of the Protestant faith is a plot of the hostile forces. They are unable to distinguish between the activities of preaching and of following the faith, and between the legitimate need for religious activities of some people, and the abuse of religion by hostile forces' (pp. 43-44).

The notion of 'abuse of religion by the hostile forces' remains largely undefined throughout the document, leaving it open to subjective interpretation. The level of rhetoric on this issue remains polemical; for example, stating baldly that 'imperialism and bad forces continually seek ways to exploit Protestantism in Vietnam' (p. 30). However, there is a specific antipathy towards religious propagation, as one of the means for 'abusing' religion. Among the 'matters requiring special attention in the process of implementing the plan' is a deliberate distinction between 'propagating the religion (evangelism) and just following the religion', the former of which is equated with 'the scheme of taking advantage of religion of the enemy forces' (p. 49).

The vilification of religious propagation may reflect the agenda of attempting to freeze the growth of Protestantism.

6. Major Concerns

The document, while containing some promising language about religion, also provides an unmistakable mandate to local officials for restricting religious freedom. In general terms, it provides for arbitrary decisions to be made by individual officials about the legitimacy of Protestant congregations; officials are empowered to decide whether adherents of Protestantism should be supported or forced to abandon their religious beliefs. Particularly concerning is the fact that it provides legitimacy for the policy of forcing Protestants to surrender their faith, in a clear breach of international standards on religious freedom.

6.1. Provision for arbitrary treatment of Protestants

The process for categorising Protestant congregations, prior to implementing one of three different policies towards them, is left to the subjective discretion of local officials. This creates a vast loophole whereby a wide variety of treatments meted out to Protestant churches may be justified, and generates a system with no perceptible accountability. It effectively empowers local officials to arbitrate on the legitimacy of religious groups. This level of subjectivity is deeply concerning, regardless of the extent to which local officials may receive training on government policy towards religion.

The process whereby the categorisation of churches takes place is likely to be extremely intimidating for ethnic minority Christians whose legitimacy and social status and possibly livelihood would depend on a satisfactory outcome. Given the previous severe harassment of Protestants in the north-west highlands, which is admitted in the document itself (p. 44)

and the consequent and severe difficulties in the relationship between officials and Christians, a hierarchical and arbitrary process of this nature is likely to be highly intimidating for Protestant adherents.

6.2. Provisions for forcible renunciations of faith

The most serious concern is the specific instruction given to local officials to 'mobilise and persuade' the second and third categories of Protestant congregations, namely those which are less well-established, to 'return to their traditional beliefs'. No compromise is permitted for the third category. This instruction provides sanction for officials to force Protestants to renounce their faith, which is a flagrant denial of their basic religious freedom. It also provides a legitimisation and justification for such forcible renunciations, which are subject to superficial censure elsewhere in the document.

Furthermore, a recent report by the legally-registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) about eighteen ethnic minority congregations which were recently permitted to register, describes extensive monitoring and control of the church services by the local officials. This suggests that even the treatment of 'category one' congregations falls far short of full religious freedom.

7. Inconsistencies with International Law

Vietnam is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18, which closely mirrors the same article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provides that, 'Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching'.

Article 21 protects the right of 'peaceful assembly', while discrimination based on religion is proscribed and effective protection against discrimination guaranteed in Article 26. Article 27 protects the freedom of ethnic minorities to practise their own religion.

Additionally, Vietnam has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 30 provides for a child belonging to an ethnic minority to profess and practise a religion.

The provision given for officials to force Protestants to abandon their faith is a clear violation of Article 18 of the ICCPR. The express focus on the 'problem' of religion among the ethnic minorities is in breach of ICCPR Article 27 and Article 30 of the CRC, and the restriction of religious gatherings contravenes Article 21 of the ICCPR.