

From Reform in Directions to Reform in Religious Policies in Vietnam from 1990 up to Present

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ABSTRACT: Religion is one of important issues that the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam have been especially interested in during process of National and Democratic Revolution and Socialist revolution. By being consistent in implementing policies on religions and beliefs upon each revolutionary period, the Party and the State have reinforced the great national unity, the union between the religious and non-religious and among different religions. The renovation of the policy regarding religion by the Party began with the Resolution No. 24, then Resolution No. 25 (March 2003) and the Decree No. 37 (July 1998). The policies of the Party have been concretized into legal documents such as Decree No. 69 by the Council of ministers (March 1991), Decree No. 26 (April 1999) by the Government and the highest is the Ordinance on Religion and Belief which came into effect since November 2005. All these policies and legal documents have been really realized in practice and brought about a new face of religious life in Vietnam.

Religion is an important issue to which the Vietnamese Communist Party and Government have paid much attention during the national democratic revolution and the socialist revolution. Right after the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, leaders of the newly-founded government had rightly determined on directions of religions and beliefs¹. Having implemented a consistent policy of religious freedom that fit each revolutionary period, the Vietnamese Communist Party and Government have strengthened the whole population unification, solidarity among religious people and non-religious people, and among different religions.

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This paper aims at understanding the process of the reform of religious policies and directions that the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Government have applied from 1990 up to present.

1. Religious Reform by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)

On October 16th, 1990, the Politburo of the Communist Party Central Committee of Vietnam term VI passed the *Resolution No. 24/NQ-TW on Strengthening religious practices in the new era* under direction on reforming on the Resolution adopted by the sixth Party Congress (1986), employing Marxist- Leninist viewpoints and Hồ Chí Minh's thoughts in the revolution in Vietnam, determining reform and overcoming drawback in the thinking. The Resolution affirms that "religion is a long everlasting issue. Faith, belief, and religion are spiritual need of a part of the population. Religious morality has many similar points to the building of a new society". This was considered as the starting and breaking point in the religious awareness process of the Party. The most reformed viewpoint of the Party in the *Resolution No. 24* is the changes on looking at religious followers as enemies to considering them as public relations. It was the first time in a documentation of the Party religion is considered as a long lasting social phenomenon; faith, belief, and religion are spiritual need of a part of the population and that religious morality has many similar points to the progress of building a new society. *Resolution No. 24* has consisted fairly enough religious conditions, i.e. religious practice, viewpoint, function, and policies in the new era, resulting in the basic turning point to people on both awareness and practices towards religion.

After the *Resolution No. 24*, in June 1991, *the seventh Party Congress* integrated all reformed viewpoints of the *Resolution No. 24* in the Party Congress' documentation: "Faith, belief, and religion are spiritual need of a part of the population, the Party and the Government respect the freedom right to follow or not to follow a religion, carry out equality and solidarity among religious and non-religious people, and among people of different religions. It is necessary to overcome narrow-minded attitude, prejudice, and discrimination towards religious people; to oppose any violation to religious freedom; as well as prohibit and stop any religious exploitation aimed at breaking and destroying independence and national unity, communism, and prevent religious followers from doing their citizenship rights²".

The eighth Party Congress (1996) and *the ninth Party Congress* (2001) continued to affirm the reformed consistence and added some more important parts such as implementing right on religious practices of religions and of people based on the legislative compliances and the Government not only respect but also create environment for religious and belief freedom in the reality.

The Party has not only accepted cultural and moral values of religions but also encouraged and upheld the values in the progress of building a new society. *Instruction No. 37* of the Politburo dated 2 July 1998 on *Religious practice in the new era* affirmed that “religious practices that are helpful to the nation and the people, to the legal and necessary need and benefit of religious followers shall be ensured. Cultural and moral values of religions shall be respected and encouraged”.

Having strictly respected the direction of religious and faith freedom, in its seventh Congress conference, the ninth Party Central Committee passed the *Resolution No. 25/NQ-TW* dated 12 March 2003 regarding *Religious Practices*. The resolution clearly indicated that religion and belief were spiritual need of a part of the population and had existed with the nation during the progress of building a socialist communist country; that the government shall implement a unified ethnic groups policy and solidify people of different religions; solidify religious and non-religious people; all religious or non religious citizens shall have the same right and duties to the country defense; any religious followers shall have right to practice their religion at their own home and worship places as stipulated by the law; any authorized religious organizations shall be legally practiced and protected by jurisdiction to practice, open religious schools to educate dignitaries, publish religious books and maintain, build new religious places as stipulated by the law³.

Based on the viewpoint of the Marxist-Leninism and the specific condition and characteristic of religions in Vietnam, the Party had looked at religion with a new viewpoint and proposed right directions, resulting in the new way of solving issues related to religion in Vietnam. The reform was a turning point in the history of thought of the Communist Party of Vietnam regarding religious issues. Đỗ Quang Hưng has reaffirmed this when he said that “the Party not only exploited firmly religious viewpoint of the Marxist–Leninism, but also based on religious needs as legitimate aspirations of the people in general, of the religious followers in particular, and overcame the currently different relationships between politics and religion, to

have a new religious viewpoint that religion was a historical event, a social event, and a cultural event”⁴.

2. The Reform of Religious Policy of the Government of Vietnam

The reformed policies of the Party in terms of religion and belief of the people were soon institutionalized into the existing laws in order to realize resolutions by the Party. A range of legislative documents were promulgated so as to adjust issues of religion and belief. Specific provisions in constitutions, decrees, resolutions, circulars, and instructions were passed.

The first documents needed to mention was *Decree No. 69/HĐBT* dated 21 March 1991 regarding to religious activities of the Minister Council that is now the Government. This was the first legislative documents mentioning fairly well all aspects of religious activities since *the Decree No. 234/SL* regarding to religious issues signed by the president Hồ Chí Minh dated 14 June 1955. *Decree No. 69* is a documented regulation reflecting the reformed progress in thoughts and implementation of religious activities in order to ensure rightful religious need of the people. That helped to uphold abilities and capacities of millions of religious people and contribute to the democratization society’s life basing on politic stability.

Based on the conclusion of the implementation the *Decree No. 69/HĐBT*, as regulated in the *Instruction No. 37*, on 19 April 1999, the Government passed the *Decree No. 26/1999/NĐ-CP* regarding religious activities.

Then, after a long time of preparation, on 18 June 2004, in the 19th meeting of the term XI, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly has passed the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* that have come in effect from 15 November 2005. For the Ordinance truly went in effect, on 1 March 2005, the Government passed *Decree No. 22/2005/NĐ-CP* guiding the implementation of the Ordinance on Belief and religion and *Circular No. 01/2005/CT-TTg* dated 4 September 2005 regarding *Some Tasks toward Protestantism* and many other legal documents related to religious practices and activities. All have created a legally secured corridor for religious freedom and rights for religious groups in Vietnam. Especially, the issue of the *Ordinance on Belief and religion* in 2004 has been considered as an important point of religious and belief adjustment in the country. The *Ordinance* not only creates legal framework to ensure citizenship basic rights on religion and belief, but

also contributes to the efficiency of state management in terms of religion, thus, determines position of Vietnam internationally. The issue of the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* has been evidence, a step-up, and a confirmation in the consistent policy of the Party and Government of Vietnam on religious freedom.

Reform of religious policy can be seen through three aspects: missionary works, religious practice, and regulation of religious organizations:

First, there are specific regulations to religious organization. The government shall acknowledge legal entity of any religious organizations if the organizations bear all necessities. One of the important necessities is to register its operation and practice regularly. As long as any organizations' legal entity were acknowledged, the organizations shall be protected by the law and shall be entirely legal to implement any religious activities such as appointing dignities, opening religious schools, organizing conferences and meetings, etc. In terms of organization, the government allows legally acknowledged religious organizations to establish, separate, merge, and disperse their subordinate organizations.

Religious organizations that have been recognized legal entity have rights to appoint any dignities and monks as regulated in their own charters, regulations, and practices. The Government only provides regulations to the appointed persons in terms of civic qualifications so that the religions could choose the best ones in terms of both citizenship and religious qualifications. In terms of personels transfer, religious dignities and religious organizations only need to inform authorities at the district levels and register their identities and responsibilities in the new transferring districts.

Secondly, religious rituals practice is necessary for each religion, religious follower, and monk to worship and show their belief in their religion and in their community.

+ Regarding religious practices of religious followers: The followers are entirely free to practice their religion at home and ritual places, to use religious books and equipments, to invite religious dignities and monks to their homes to guide them about their practices. Followers' religious practices in ritual places functioned by any dignities shall need to be registered annually with the local authorities.

+ Regarding religious practices of dignities and monks: Dignities and monks who are professionally practice their own religion are entirely free to practice within

their authorities and are lawfully responsible to religious activities within their authorities. They need to register with the local authorities about their religious schedules annually. As long as the religious schedules were registered, the activities when implemented shall not need to register any longer.

Thirdly, regarding regulation of a religious organization: For activities of a religious church and their dignities and monks to maintain the religion, the policy of the government regulates that:

+ Regarding ritual places: Ritual places of religions (i.e. temples, churches, pagodas, cathedrals, club-houses, contemplation rooms, etc.) are common properties owned by the religious communities protected by the government. It is prohibited to be violated. Religious organizations are allowed to maintain, build, and repair the places of worship. Regular maintenance needs no permission. Permission needs to be obtained only when large-scale construction or repair that changes in structure or architecture shall be done. Stable residences and new economics areas shall be allowed to build more ritual places if needed but it is necessary to be authorized by the local government.

+ All religions shall be entitled to open schools to train and educate monks, priests, and dignities, and to publish religious books, to produce and distribute religious tools and equipments as stipulated by the government.

Religious dignities, monks, priests, and religious followers are encouraged to participate in the implementation of socio-economical programs, mass campaigns run my Fatherland Fronts and other unions, social and charity organizations and they are not encouraged to form their own welfare programs but to join the social welfare system.

Fourth, in terms of international relationships of religious organizations, religious organizations and individuals shall have opportunities to communicate internationally and trainings abroad, etc. like many other organizations. The opportunities and activities shall need to be done based on respect to the country's sovereignty and the law, on collaboration and solidarity among nations, on respect to culture and custom of all countries and shall not violate benefit and honor of Vietnam as well as the relationships between Vietnam and other countries. Any internationally organizational relationships should be authorized by the local government.

Monks, priests, and dignities from other countries are allowed to visit and exchange knowledge with the legally respective organizations and individuals in Vietnam or to help Vietnam implement non-governmental projects as mutually agreed between both parties and followed legal regulations of the government of Vietnam.

Besides, for lawful expatriates in Vietnam, who have need to practice their own religions, shall receive help from different level governments and religious organizations, individuals in Vietnam. Any expatriates in Vietnam wish to practice their own religions need approval from the local government.

Some data and evidences below have shown achievements that Vietnam has achieved since starting the reform on religious direction and policy of the Government and the Party.

The reformed religious policy of the Government and the Party has brought a lively environment for religious practices and religious followers. Rituals and religious festivities have been organized in large scale and in different varieties in everywhere, attracting a lot of dignities, monks, priests, religious followers and people. Spiritual needs of the people are paid much attention from the Party and Government, thus, making the religious leaders believe and inspire in directions and policies of the Party and the Government, then, the precept “good life, good religion” is encouraged.

Complimentary and refresher training courses to professional dignities of all religions are paid a lot of attention by the Party and the Government. Number of schools to train dignities has been increasing. According to statistics of the Government committee for religious affairs, up to now, Buddhism has three Buddhism institutes in Hanoi, Huế, and Hồ Chí Minh city and one Khmer Theravada institute on the progress of construction in Cần Thơ. A part from that, there are 6 Buddhist classes at the college level and 31 Buddhist classes at the vocational levels with over 3,000 students who follow Buddhism. In 1987, Catholicism had only one Grand Seminary and now it has six. The Protestant Church of Vietnam (the Southern region) also has an Institute of Holy Bible Theology. Other religions like Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo Buddhism also keep organizing instructive trainings for their dignities and followers.

Big religions like Buddhism and Catholicism all have their periodic publications and religious books for further studies of their followers. After the Religious Publishing house was founded, many religious books and prayer books have been published. In 2007, the Religious Publishing house authorized licenses to publish nearly 500 publications; especially it is considering authorizing license to publish Holy Bible in ethnic minority languages, which attract attention of many people⁵.

The acknowledgement of legal entities for religious churches and religious organizations is paid much attention by the Government. It is approved that the process of establishment, acknowledgement of religious churches and equivalent organizations is a huge endeavor of the Government on the institutionalization of directions and policies of the Party on religion.

After the issue of the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion*, many religions, which are not recognized organizationally, have registered their foundation and activities. According to the report of the Government Committee for religious affairs, to date, 13 organizations and religious sects have been granted operation licenses and are gradually recognized in terms of its organization as they have sufficient conditions as regulated by the law as the Christian Evangelist Association in Vietnam and Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ Phật hội (Buddhist Pureland Practitioner Association in Vietnam) are organizationally recognized; religious organizations such as Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Phật đường Nam tông Minh sư đạo (Southern school Buddhism), Minh lý đạo Tam tông miếu, Hội thánh Cơ đốc Phục lâm Việt Nam (Seventh Day Adventist Church), Hội thánh Báp-tít Việt Nam (Ân điển – Nam phương) (Vietnam Baptism Church), Hội thánh Báp-tít Việt Nam (Vietnamese Baptism the Southern region) (Nam Phương), Hội thánh Mennonite Việt Nam (Vietnamese Mennonite Church), Hội thánh Liên hữu Cơ đốc Việt Nam (Vietnam Nondenominational Congregation), Hội thánh Tin Lành Trưởng lão Việt Nam (Vietnamese Presbyterian Church) have been provided licenses to practice their religions and they are trying to establish their Charters and religious guidance and are applying for organizational recognition. Until 2008, 22 organizations have been organizationally recognized in a nation-wide basis, in which one is Buddhism, one is Catholicism, 11 are Cao Đài, 4 are Protestantism, 3 are Islam, one is Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ Phật hội, and one is Buddhist Hòa Hảo.

Circular No. 01/2005/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister regarding some policies towards the establishment and expansion of Protestantism in the nationwide not only affirms policy of religious freedom in Vietnam, but also help decision makers to

distinguish between religious practices and religious abuse. After the issue of the circular, many Protestant places were acknowledged. According to report of the Government Committee for religious affairs, up to 2007, in the mountainous northern areas, 80 groups have registered their operation, 40 other groups have been preparing for registration, in the Central and Highlands, and Bình Phước, 104 groups have been recognized, 1,080 groups under the Protestant Church Federation in Vietnam (Southern region) registered its operation as regulated by the law⁶.

With the open policies and law of the Government, international relations of all religions keep expanding and happen in various forms and aspects like making study-tours abroad, attending conferences and seminars, attending international religious conferences around the world, organizing trips for international and non-governmental delegates to visit Vietnam, especially religion-originated organizations to fund aid projects in Vietnam. In May 2008, with permission from the Prime Minister, the Buddhist Church in Vietnam had successfully organized the United Nation Vesak Day, and received positive appraisal by international Buddhist communities.

Having achieved the above achievement, it is necessary to mention to the comprehensive and rightful direction and policies that the Party has implemented, which are suitable to the development of the society. During the reform process, despite having to face a lot of obstacles and difficulties, the Party and the Government have been attempting to create an environment for the development of all religions, that ensures religious freedom for all of its citizens and at the same time upholds the solitary strength of the communities in the process of building a new society. Via reality, religious policy of the Government of Vietnam and the implementation of religious policies have proved the respect and firm guarantee of the Government towards religious people and met rightfully religious needs of followers, dignities, monks, priests, and religious organizations. The majority of religious followers, dignities, monks, and priests of most religions are happy and believe in the law of the government and are enthusiastic to participate in patriotic movements, contribute their resources to develop a better life with the precept of “good life, good religion” and to protect the country for a purpose of a rich people, strong nation, equitable and civilized society.

Reference (see next page):

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¹. Hồ Chí Minh's speech in the first meeting of the Provisional Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam dated 3 September 1945 indicated that "The sixth issue was the capitalist and the feudalist implemented a policy plotting to divide people and religious people so that they dominated them more easily. I recommend our government to announce our policy of religious freedom and religious followers and non-religious followers are united."

². The Socialist Republic of Vietnam. *Documentation of the 7th Party Congress*, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi 1991.

³. The Communist Party of Vietnam. *Documentation of the 7th Congress conference of the 9th Party Central Committee*, The National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi 2003.

⁴. Đỗ Quang Hưng. *Religious Issues in the Vietnamese Revolution – Theory and Practice*, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi 2005.

⁵. The Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *Summary report on State management of religion in 2007 and planned activities in 2008*.

⁶. The Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *Ibid.*