

THE RELATION BETWEEN VIETNAMESE STATE WITH PROTESTANT CHURCHES

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Vietnamese Party and State have carried out innovation policy on religion so the relation between Vietnamese State and religious organizations has been changed including the relation between Vietnamese State with Protestant organizations.

The special characteristic of Protestant missionary and developing history in Vietnam and the diversity of Vietnamese Protestant organizations are important characteristics to define the relation between Vietnamese State and Protestant organizations in Vietnam.

On special characteristic of Protestant missionary and developing history in Vietnam

Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) brought Protestantism to Vietnam in 1911. In Vietnam Protestantism is rigid because Protestantism has not been in contact with Vietnamese traditional culture and other religions in Vietnam. Protestantism has ignored the worship of ancestor so Vietnamese people do not like it although Vietnamese culture is open culture. It has often received and accepted other cultures as well as other religions.

In the French domination, Protestantism was suspicious in disposition because it came from Northern America and the French colonialists based on Catholicism so the French Government did not like this religion. The French government used many measures to forbid Protestant development.

When our country carried out 9 years of war of resistance against the French colonialists (1946- 1954). President Hồ Chí Minh advised pastor Lê Văn Thái, the head of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (Northern region) at that time to found “national salvation Protestantism” with the reason “Protestantism does not take part in political activities” but this pastor refused Hồ Chí Minh’s advice¹. According to State view, Protestantism was absent in the sacred war of resistance against the French colonialists of our nation.

During the US invasion of Vietnam (1954-1975), Protestantism not only developed in town men, in officers who did work in the government of

¹ Lê Văn Thái 46 year keeping position (memoirs)

Americans and their puppets but also in rural areas especially in ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

When the South was liberated, at first Protestantism had some disorder. The inner missionaries was in conflicted. Some Protestants, in the Central Highlands, were allied with reactionaries from FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races). From the end of 1980s to 1990s, Protestant development in ethnic groups in the Central Highland, especially in the Dzaos and the Hmongs in the Northern mountainous regions has brought about many complicated problems to influence many aspects of social life. This development has been unordinary

On the special characteristic of Protestant organization

Buddhism as well as Catholicism has only one organization. Since being born, in Protestantism there were many denominations. At present. Protestantism has more than 100 denominations. It is difficult to have exact figure of Protestant churches in the world. Because more and more new Protestantism denominations come into the world. Protestant organization is different from other religions. Up to 1975, in the North there was the Christian and Missionary Alliance, its churches concentrated in the Vietnam General Protestant Church, in the South there were the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) with 200.000 believers (making up 85% total number of believers in cities and provinces) and some other Protestant denominations as Seventh –Day Adventist Church, Baptist Church, Pentecostal Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Fellowship Church with 60.000 believers.

From 1980s many new Protestant denominations appeared. Apart from the Vietnam General Protestant Church and Vietnam Federal Protestant Church and some Protestant denominations which have been before 1975 there are many new denominations. According to Dr, Trần Hữu Hợp in the Mekong River Delta total number of new Protestant denominations is more than 40 denominations². Protestant denominations operate independently with private organizational form. On dogmas, Protestant denominations primarily base on Bible but they have private dogmas regarding religious life.

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² Dr. Trần Hữu Hợp : *Protestantism in Mekong River Delta. Actuality and some problems in the development.* The article in the Roundtable Conference Protestantism in Vietnam from 1975 to 2011

The North was liberated in 1954. Vietnamese Communist party has led people to carry out social transform action and socialist construction. In 1954, 1955 a group of the Northern Protestant believers and missionaries emigrated to the South. Protestantism in the North met many difficulties. In 1958 our Party and State helped Protestant believers (about 5000 believers) who were living in the North to establish the Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region). The Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region) operated according to orientation “ *Worshipping God and serving the Homeland*”. The operation of the Vietnam General Protestant Church has been recognized by State. Some leaders of the Vietnam General Protestant Church were the members of Vietnamese Fatherland Front. Up to 1975 the Vietnam General Protestant Church had 31 Congresses. The Vietnam General Protestant Church ‘s activities have been related to the cause of nation.

After 1975, the Vietnam General Protestant Church has operated normally. Religious life of believers have been ensured. Because of objective and subjective condition, the Vietnam General Protestant Church could not continue to hold Congress. Until in 2004 the 32nd Congress of the Vietnam General Protestant Church was held.

After the South was liberated completely (30th April, 1975), Some Protestant missionaries in the Central Highlands took advantage of economic and social difficulties to associate with FULRO against Vietnamese revolution. Protestantism was took advantage of political purpose so Protestant believers made political-social instability and obstructed building new society in the Central Highlands. Before this situation, local government is forced to break out Church and Protestant churches closed door. In this condition, Protestant believers were only allowed to practise their religious activities at home.

The one time, the relation between Vietnamese State and Protestant Church was gradually settled. The Resolution no 24/NQ-TW of Politburo of the Party Central Committee dated on 16th October, 1990 defines that: Churches and religious denominations which have orientation, objective and regulations correspond with the law; the organization and good staff that are ensured on both the spiritual and the temporal will be considered by State.

After Resolution no 24, in 1990- 1999 there were many document related to Protestantism such as: Announcement no 145 (15th June, 1998), Instruction no 37 (2nd July, 1998), Announcement no 184 (30th November, 1998), Ordinance no 69 (21st March, 1991), Ordinance no 26 (19th April, 1999) and Ordinance no 379 (23rd July, 1993). Basing on these documents, a plan was set up. This was *Plan 184 A on carrying out guideline for Protestantism in some provinces and cities*. This guideline was based on following principles:

- 1- *To recognize Protestantism is a religion in Vietnam. Protestant church is allowed to operate when its charter and regulations corresponds with the laws; its religious orientation is progressive; it has leader and leader's legal status is ensured and he has prestige in believers; political elements which take advantage of religion are rejected,*
- 2- *To meet the need of religious activities of people, the activities of each church will be considered. Believers of denomination which is not allowed to operate practice their religious activities at home. There is not a policy on unite Protestant churches.*
- 3- *To care believers' life and mobilize people to understand clearly policy of our Party and State and the scheme and trickery of enemy; help people chose religious belief, to follow or not follow belief. No use administrative measures force people to leave Protestantism³*

Basing on general principles, a concrete plan was step up over the Vietnam General Protestant Church (northern region) and the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region).

For the Vietnam General Protestant Church (northern region): We help and guide the Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region) to prepare content for the 32nd Congress.

For Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region): because this church has many denominations including new denominations so we do not recognize all of them. We have to consider and recognize denomination by denomination. Among the Protestant denominations, Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) has the most believers and missionaries. They make up 80% total number of

³ Steering Committee 184TW: Report on 5 years of implement of Protestant affairs in new situation. Hanoi 8th September, 2004

Protestant believers and missionaries (about 350.000 believers, 450 missionaries and 350 local chapters) (in 1999). From the above condition, first of all we adopted Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) to operate. At the same time we requested Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) to prepare condition for Congress. Prepared plan consisted of many contents such as: Congress of local churches, strengthening of management board, appointment of representatives, compiling of Charter replacing the old regulations; setting up operation plan of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region); appointment of persons who take part in leading Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region).

For Protestantism in the Central Highlands and in the mountainous provinces: after 1975 some Protestant missionaries and believers had combined with FULRO organization against revolution so that local government based on real situation to recognize Protestant organization whose religious activities in accordance with the law.

At the end of 1990, Protestantism developed complicatedly in Dzaio and Mong people in the Northern mountainous regions. In that time some unhomogeneous communities on belief appeared. After a long time some people find that their religious belief is Protestantism. But other people have not found clearly their religious belief yet, they follow Vàng Trú. Some believers consider themselves as believers of Vàng Trú. Some people who had adopted Protestantism but they reconvert to traditional belief. But a small group of people does not reconvert to traditional belief after leaving Protestantism. Some groups of Dzaio people follow “Thần Hùng religion”. At that time some Mong people follow “Đương Văn Minh religion”. So local government considers Protestant organization by organization the recognizes Protestant organization whose believers actually follow Protestantism. Local government creates conditions for believers to conduct normal religious practice at home and defines clearly the places for religious activities.

On 7th October, 1999 the Politburo of the Vietnamese Central Committee promulgated guideline over Protestantism. Guideline stressed following problems: Policy of our Party and State is affirmed consistently before and after that the citizen’s right to freedom of belief and the right to freedom not to follow any belief. Religion is a long problem. The religious belief is spiritual need of part of people.

Each of Protestant organizations is recognized when it has chapter, religious orientation in accordance with State's policy and laws; the leaders of organization have progressive orientation without reactionary elements; activities are within the frame work of Constitution and the laws. Other Protestant organizations are allowed to conduct their religious practice at home according to the lead and management of State in local region. There is not guideline on unity of Protestant organizations or sects

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The appropriate authorities regarding religious affairs from the Central government to local governments have to promptly carry out the guide documents of Party and State, especially the guideline of Politburo regarding Protestantism in new situation. Many works are done at the same time. Appropriate authorities help and create for churches to carry out Congress, elect the Management Board and appoint representatives to take part in the Congress of Vietnam General Protestant Church. Appropriate authorities help Church to compile Charter and prepare personnel apparatus. On 7th -9th January, 2001 the 43rd Congress of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) convened in Hồ Chí Minh city with 260 delegates and 200 pastors and missionaries. Local governments create condition for the representatives of dignitaries, believers of churches in the Central Highlands to take part in Congress. Although the Protestant condition in the Central Highlands was complicated at that time.

The Congress was successful, Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) was recognized legal person status by State. In 2001, 25 provinces and cities among 32 provinces and cities of the South have representative committees or representatives. The religious activities of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) take place morally in accordance with the laws. In 2002, our State allowed Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) to establish the Institute of Bible and Theology to train dignitaries for Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region)

The 44th Congress of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) convened from 1st -4th March in Hồ Chí Minh City with 821

formal representatives (they were pastors, newly appointed pastors, missionaries and believers to be elected from 34 provinces in the South) and 500 attending delegates.

In the first days of Congress, many missionaries and believers expressed their joy and gratitude to the helps of local governments. They believe that pastoral activities as well as activities of churches of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) will be increasing more and more (Vietnamese News Agency)

For the Vietnam General protestant Church (northern region): at the end of 1999, our State had guideline for the Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region) to carry out the 32nd Congress. Some works would be done for preparing of Congress. Ha Noi Protestant church which has had an important role in the Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region), conducted Congress and elected the Management Board for 2003-2005 term. The organization of Hanoi Protestant church was strengthened. After preparing, in March, 2004 Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region) promulgated draft *on regulations of Vietnam General protestant Church* (Northern region) to collect suggestions of believers. The Regulation of Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region) consisted 10 chapters and 76 articles. At the same time the drafts on rules, on canon law, on disciplinary measures of Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region) were promulgated. The draft on Canon law consisted 6 chapters and 18 articles , The draft on disciplinary measures consisted 5 chapters and 10 articles.

On 1st February, 2004 the 32nd Congress of Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region) convened in Protestant church in Hanoi with 157 delegates (they were pastors, missionaries and the faithfuls to be elected from churches in 20 provinces and cities) and 400 believers. The Congress elected , the Management Board of Vietnam General Protestant Church and adopted regulations. On 4th February, 2005 the representatives of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs granted the Announcement of Government on accepting New Regulations and the Management Board of Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region) for 2004-2008 term.

On 24th -25th February, 2009 the 33rd Congress of Vietnam General protestant Church (Northern region) convened in Hoành Nhị church

(Nam Định province). Pastor Nguyễn Hữu Mạc was elected the President of Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region).

On 18th June, 2004 The Ordinance *on Belief and Religion* was promulgated. The problem on recognition of religious organization including Protestant organization was defined concretely in Article 16. This Article consists 3 sections (1,2,3). We quote section 1 here.

1- An organization shall be recognized as a religious organization if it meets all the following conditions:

- a- being an organization of people sharing the same religious belief, of the religious dogmas, canon law and rites are not contrary to the fine customs and habits and the interests of the nation;*
- b- having a charter and statutes depicting the goal , objective and action orientation that are in close association with the nation and not contrary to the provisions of law.*
- c- Having its religious activities registered and conducted on a stable basis.*
- d- Having lawful office, organization and representative.*
- e- Having an appellation not duplicating that of any other religious organization that has been recognized by the competent State authority⁴*

On this problem, State promulgated Government Decree no 22/2005/ ND-CP on *Guidance for Implementation of a number of Article of the Ordinance on belief and Religion* on 1st March, 2005. Article 8 of Government Decree on *Recognition of religious organization*, and section 2 explained about “*the duration of stable religious operation*” as follows:

Certificate of stable religious activity granted by the provincial State governance body for religious affairs where the organization’s main office is located. The duration of stable religious operation shall be counted from the date of the organization registration for activity and shall be stipulated as follows:

20 years for organization established in Vietnam after the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion,

⁴ The Government Committee for Religious Affairs: Vietnamese Legal Documents on belief and Religion, Region Publishing House, Hanoi 2005 p. 17

One year for organization established in Vietnam 20 or more years before the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion.

For organization established in Vietnam less than 20 years by the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion, the duration of stable religious activity shall be composed of the time from the organization's establishment to the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion, plus the time from the organization's registration to the achievement of 20 years⁵.

The Ordinance and its regulations on recognition of religious organization are legal bases for offices regarding religious management to consider and recognize religious organizations. Prime Minister promulgated Instruction no 01 on *Some Tasks regarding Protestantism*⁶ (Instruction- for short). Articles 4 and 5 of Instruction dealt with Protestantism in the Central Highlands, Southern Trường Sơn region and Central provinces (article 4) and Protestantism in the Northern mountainous provinces (article 5).

The full of articles 4 and 5 as follows:

4- For Protestant followers in the Central Highlands, Southern Trường Sơn region, Central provinces:

To continue considering and recognizing eligible Chapters of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) and create favorable conditions for them to build places of worship and train and assign dignitaries who will give religious guidance to those chapters that have been recognized in keeping with stipulations by the law.

For places where conditions are not yet available for the establishment and recognition of a chapter, if local followers have a need of purely religious practice and commit to observe stipulations by the law and not to act for FULRO , or to be involved with "Dega Protestantism" (Which is actually an organization of the FULRO reactionaries), the communal or ward authorities shall create conditions for them to conduct normal

⁵ The Government Committee for Religious Affairs: Vietnamese Legal Documents on Belief and Religion, p. 35

⁶ Instruction of Prime Minister no 01/2005/CT-YG dated on 4 February, 2005

religious practice at home, or permit them to register for religious practice at a suitable place in hamlet or village.

5- For people coming from Northern mountainous areas who have just adopted Protestantism, proper policies shall be devised on the basis of their belief-related needs, along the following lines:

Protestantism followers who have practiced Protestantism for some time and have genuine belief related needs should be , for the time being, guided to practice their religion at home, or register for religious practice at a suitable place in the hamlet or village. When condition are available, they shall be facilitated to practice their religion normally in accordance with stipulations by the law.

People who have adopted Protestantism but are now wishing to reconvert to the nation's traditional belief, conditions should be created to help them realize their wish.

With Instruction no 01, the problem of Protestantism including recognition of churches is resolved .

Up to 2008 Binh Phước province and provinces in the Central Highlands have recognized 106 chapters of Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region). 1.156 Protestant groups in these provinces are guided to register for their religious practice with local government.

Governmental provinces in the Central Highlands built 20 churches and chapels. Bình Phước province has kept 165 chapels.

The Religious Publishing House allowed Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) to publish 300.000 bilingual Bibles such as Viet- Bana, Viet-Gia rai, Viet-Ede meeting the religious need of ethnic minority people.

For ethnic minority people following Protestantism in Northern mountainous regions (mainly Mong and Dzao people) appropriate authorities from central offices to local offices carried out actively Instruction 01. According to documents of appropriate authorities, up to 2011 250 Protestant group in the North have been recognized and are engaged in regular activities.

After Ordinance on Belief and Religion and Instruction 01, 8 Protestant churches were granted registration certificate or recognized by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

They are:

Vietnamese Christian Missionaries

Vietnamese Seventh –Day Adventist Church

Southern Baptist Church of Vietnam

Vietnamese Mennonite Church

Vietnamese Christian Fellowship Church

Vietnam Presbyterian Church

Vietnam Baptist Church

The Assemblies of God of Vietnam

In the future Protestant churches and groups will continue to be recognized

Protestantism is complicated religion on both denomination and missionary history. Because our Party and State carry out principle to respect the right to freedom of belief and religion of people so the Protestant Church was recognized,. After Ordinance on belief and Religion and Instruction 01 were promulgated , governments at all levels carry out actively Ordinance and Instruction. The relation between Vietnamese State and Protestant churches has improved. Protestant missionaries and believers entrust in guideline and policy on religion of our Party and State . They carry out actively their religious orientation “*Living the Gospel, worshipping God and serving the Homeland and the nation*”

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