

## POLICIES TOWARD PROTESTANTISM IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM OVER 30 YEARS OF INNOVATION

***Abstract:** The article presents the renovation and success in policies toward Protestantism in the Central Highlands over 30 years of Innovation (Đổi mới) in Vietnam. It also indicates the issues to be interested in the near future in order to warrant the religious needs of the people, direct of religious activities in accordance with the law, and ensure political security there.*

***Keywords:** Policy, Protestantism, Central Highlands, Vietnam.*

### **1. The Protestantism's situation in the Central Highlands before the policy of "normalizing" activities**

Since 1911, missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) arrived Đà Nẵng from the Southern China to set up the first Protestant church in Vietnam<sup>1</sup>. As a result of disadvantage in the missionary work in the plain provinces at that time, in the late 1920s, the CMA had its first steps to expand religion into the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands province such as Lâm Đồng in 1929, Đắk Lắk in 1932, Gia Lai in 1938. For Kon Tum province, until 1959, Protestantism firstly appeared in Đắk Glei district. In 1942, at the Nineteenth General Assembly, the Vietnamese Protestant Church passed a resolution with the content of promoting missionary work in ethnic minority areas. In 1960, the General Assembly of Vietnam Federation of Friendship (Vietnamese Protestant Church-South) decided to establish the Upper Land District (Địa hạt Thượng du) for the ethnic minority believers in the Central Highlands. In 1969, Vietnam Federation of Friendship decided to divide the Upper Land District into two counties as the Middle Upper Land District (Trung Thượng hạt) and the Southern

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\* Academy of Politics Region III, Vietnam.

Upper Land District (Nam Thượng hạt). Before 1975, Protestantism had expanded into 16 ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, with a total of 71.200 ethnic minority believers in the area. The two Upper Land Districts of the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South) therein contained 61.500 believers with 216 local churches (chi hội), 42 pastors, 91 missionaries, two Bible schools and seven missionary centers (Đà Lạt, Buôn Ma Thuột, Pleiku, Bảo Lộc, Phước Long, Quảng Đức, Đơn Dương)<sup>2</sup>.

By 1977, the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées* - FULRO) relied on Protestantism as a mental weapon to entice the ethnic minorities, as a means of mass mobilization. Therefore, localities in the Central Highlands had a policy to cease the Protestant activities in order to stabilize the political situation. Although this religion was no longer existed in the administrative aspect, since the middle of 1980s, it has formed the missionary teams, deacon committees in the villages. Protestantism has had a rapid increase in the number of believers and the extent of their development in the Central Highlands. Beside the recovery in the areas where Protestantism was introduced before 1975, it has spread throughout the region. In addition, migration of thousands Protestants to the Central Highlands was also one of the reasons for the increase the number of believers. By April 2003, twelve Protestant denominations had the missionary activities in the Central Highlands with a total of 296,478 followers, in which the number of believers of the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South) accounted for 80.5% of all Protestants throughout the region<sup>3</sup>.

## **2. Guidelines and policies towards Protestantism and achievement over 30 years of renovation in the Central Highlands**

In December 1986, the sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam was held with a comprehensive and radical renewal with appropriate steps and procedures. Besides, the Party has a renovation towards religions, starting with the Resolution No. 24 of the Political Bureau (Politburo) of the Central Committee Communist Party of Vietnam *on strengthen the religious affairs in the new context* (16/10/1990), and the Announcement No. 184-TB/TW

(1998), the Announcement No. 255-TB/TW (1999) *on the guidelines for Protestantism in the new context*. Accordingly, it is necessary to focus awareness of the Protestantism in common awareness of religions as it was expressed in Resolution No. 24 of the Politburo of the Sixth session, religion is considered as the spiritual needs of a part of the people; long-term survival; religious ethics have many appropriate things. The consistent policy of the Party and State is respect to freedom of belief, religion and non-belief, non-religion of all people. For Protestantism in the Central Highlands, it must be recognized that it is the fastest-growing religion in the ethnic minority area (compared to 1975). By 2000, the number of followers in Đăk Lăk increased by more than eight times, Kon Tum province increased 3.6 times, Lâm Đồng increased 2.6 times, Gia Lai increased 2.5 times)<sup>4</sup>. It formed a sentiment, deep religious faith in the community of believers so it should be respected and guaranteed the religious choice of ethnic minorities, normal religious practice in accordance with the law. Protestantism became a stable religious entity in the Central Highlands, which had a great influence on the ethnic minorities there. It affected to religious life, culture, customs, as well as, the process of socio-economic development, security and defense, the political stability of the whole region. Therefore, an effective solution towards the Protestant issue is not only an immediate task but it is a fundamental, long-term and important political task, which is one of the factors contribute to stabilize the Central Highlands situation, to facilitate the sustainable development of the Central Highlands, foreign relations and to enhance the prestige of the Vietnamese State. Protestantism in the Central Highlands is not only a religious prolem but it is also a ethnic issue. Therefore, the implementation of religious policy in general or of the Protestantism in the Central Highlands in particular must be closely linked to the implementation of ethnic policies along with the socio-economic development plans, defense and security in order to stabilize and raise the material and spiritual life of the people, promote the cultural identity of the ethnicities. It needs to consider the Protestant affairs as the responsibility of the entire political system and understanding the complexity and diversity of Protestant

denominations in order to have appropriate behavior. Along with innovation of awareness is a strong innovation of specific policies. Firstly, permission Protestants who have a pure religious need register for religious activities, facilitate chapels and train dignitaries in accordance with the law. Guide to new believers of denominations (unrecognized legal status) who aspire to have pure religious activity at home. They can register in families with facilities for worship, the contents of religious activities with the authorities. If they meet the demand, their religious activities will be normally favoured. The new guidelines for Protestantism have created a fresh air for the activities of this religion in the Central Highlands. Since 2001, provincial authorities have conducted surveys and assessments the current situation of organization and operation of Protestantism there, have facilitated the participation of some pastors in the campaign to establish the General Federation of the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South); delegates to the First General Assembly of the Federation (the 43rd according to church history) and approved the General Assembly's appointment of the representatives Board of the three provinces included Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk, Lâm Đồng. By 2004, 32 churches had council (Gia Lai 15, Đắk Lắk 4, Đắk Nông 1, Lâm Đồng 12) with 41,022 believers, in total of 289.826 (Kon Tum 12.640; Gia Lai 71.946; Đắk Lắk 108.341, Đắk Nông 31.349, Lâm Đồng 65.550 followers) belonged to 10 denominations, over 1.100 groups (điểm nhóm) of the whole region<sup>5</sup>. However, after four years of implementation, the level of "normalization" of Protestant activity in the area has been slow; about 10% of believers of the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South) have had religious activities at groups<sup>6</sup>. The Protestant activities in many areas have not been registered with the state managements. There have had more than 1,000 churches with hundreds of deacon committees established in Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk, Lâm Đồng provinces without registration with the government; beside many illegal activities. The State management of this religion in the Central Highlands was not effective. Thus, until 2004, the activities of the Protestant Church were still spontaneous and became a large and difficult religious issue involving many dimensions such as ethnicity, political security in the Central Highlands, the foreign affairs of the Vietnam State.

Based on the practice as mentioned above, on 4th February 2005, the Prime Minister issued Directive No. 01/2005/CT-TTG with undertakings of guiding and assisting the Vietnamese Protestant Church (North) and the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South) implement religious activities in accordance with the Charter and the Regulation of the church and the observance of the law. The needs of building worship facilities, ordinating dignitaries and fostering the teachings of Protestant denominations have been resolved. Protestant churches which were not eligible to recognize legal status could register religious activities to the commune or ward authorities. Some Protestant denominations dating back to 1975 that purely had religious activities were gradually recognized. For the Protestants in the Central Highlands, South Trường Sơn and the Central Provinces, the Directive No. 01/2005 clearly indicates the policy to continue to examine and recognize the churches of the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South) and instruct these churches to build a place of worship; training and arranging dignitaries who guide for religious activities of recognized churches in accordance with the law. Understanding the need for religious activities and observance of the law of believers in places where the insufficient conditions for recognition churches facilitated them carry out normal religious activities at home or guide them register religious activities according to group with the local authorities (village unit). It can be said that the policy of religious activities registration according to points, groups with local authorities was formed on the basis of the actual religious activities of Protestants since the year since 1980.

So far, over 10 years of implementation guidelines for registration of groups according to the Directive 01/2005 of the Prime Minister, the religious activities situation of the Protestant denominations gained achievement.

Firstly, it resolved the needs of legitimate religious activities of Protestants; religious activities were stable in the condition of having churches, dignitaries. By the middle of 2015, the Central Highlands provinces have approved the proposal to organize a council of 231 churches, and three branches (Kon Tum: 5 churches, Gia Lai: 57

churches, Đắk Lắk: 44 churches, Đắk Nông: 26 churches, Lâm Đồng: 99 churches and 03 branches) in which the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South) had 220 churches and branches, acceptance religious activities registration for 843/1103 groups, 97 religious establishments were built and repaired and upgraded<sup>7</sup>. For small groups belonged to denominations without registration, many localities have implemented the declaration of groups to meet the their needs of religious activities.

Secondly, it helped the government have the number of “convert” to respect the right of religious practice freedom in churches and groups for more than 95% of Protestants. At present, the whole region has 440.158 believers (Kon Tum: 17.216, Gia Lai: 116.730, Đắk Lắk: 159.298, Đắk Nông: 54.321, Lâm Đồng: 92.593), the ethnic minorities therein accounted for 97% (427.909 people). Thus, the total number of believers in the whole region has increased by 6.2 times compared to 1975; by 4 times compared to 2004 (before implementing the policy of registration of groups in village). The area of Protestantism has also been much expanded. By the middle of 2014, Protestantism has been presented in 584 villages of 170 communes in all 17 districts of Gia Lai province. Thus, there were an additional 8 districts, 75 communes, 308 villages compared to 1994, and an increase of 10 districts, 128 communes, 480 villages compared to 1975<sup>8</sup>.

The result of the implementation of the policy on Protestantism have fundamentally changed the situation of this religion in the trend of stability. It did not only fulfill the legitimate aspirations of the Protestants but it also met the requirements of religious management by law. Many dignitaries, deacons and believers have had trust in the views and policies of the Party and State. Protestant organizations, after being recognized, have complied with laws as well as the guidelines of companion with the nation. The atmosphere of religious activities, in the legal groups, has been stable; dignitaries and believers have been social and cooperative with the authorities. The effectiveness of state management of Protestantism has been enhanced; thereby it actively fought to defeat the conspiracy to take advantage of the Protestant of hostile forces and contributed to the State’s foreign affairs. It can be said that it is difficult to stabilize the

Central Highlands as the present without achievement of work for Protestantism.

### 3. Conclusion

The work for the Protestant churches in the Central Highlands has clarified and affirmed the correctness of the policy on religions of the Party. It became a practical basis for the development of guidelines and policies for Protestantism in the North West region and the other Protestant denominations. It has been appreciated by the international public opinion, however, the fact showed that the implementation of the Protestant policy in the Central Highlands has remained unresolved issues or some issues have been slowly resolved, of which the historical problems, new management problems, and urgent issues that should be concerned.

The renewal of the policy on religion in general, the drafting and adopting the Law on Religion and Belief is an immediate concerned issue<sup>9</sup>. In particular, the fundamental problem is that this law must show the following objectives: *First*, recognition and institutionalization religious freedom in the spirit of the 2013 Constitution (Article 24, Chapter II). *Second*, warranty all religious activities which are carried out in accordance with the law, ensuring the activities of the religions towards the trend of companion with the nation and the principle of equality among religions. *Third*, it is necessary to promote the positive aspects of religion, to consider religion as a social resource, as well as, to overcome the limitations and negative effects of religion on the development of society; Fighting to prevent acts of taking advantage of religion to harm the common interests of the country, violating the right to freedom of belief and religion and non-belief and non-religion. *Fourth*, unity people of different faiths, religions or non-belief and non-religion for a common goal of the whole nation. *Fifth*, strengthening the role of the State in regulating religious and belief activities; It is a legal recognition of the State responsibility for religious natural persons and legal persons, and also a means for the State to effectively manage religious activities. The Law must harmonize the relationship between the state and religious organizations. This relationship shows that the

State does not interfere in the internal affairs of the religions, but religions must companion with the nation, and religious organizations must comply the laws of the State as the other civilian organizations. Similarly, the law must ensure the harmony between religious freedom and public interest. The law on religion and belief of Vietnam must be based on the characteristics and reality of religious life in Vietnam as well as the other characteristics of Vietnam such as history, culture and society, however, it is harmony and integration in international conventions. In which, the question of legal persons of religious organizations is the most fundamental issue. The State should make efforts in this regard to give religious organizations a legal status that affirms the legitimacy and independence of recognized religious organizations. The law should define the basic principles of religious management and the handling of legal violations by the subject and the object in the State management of religion and religious activities in order to ensure non-infringement the religious policy of the Party and the State, contribute to the consolidation of the national unity, protection of national security.

For the specific policies towards Protestantism in the Central Highlands, as a result of the many issues posed by the diversity of groups such as a group inter-village, commune, there are many groups from 1,000 to 2,000 followers, but there are also groups less than 50 followers<sup>10</sup>; some groups belong to church, some independent groups outside the church; the distribution of believers as well as the number of churches of denominations is not the same; The issues of dignitaries and ethnic compositions of Protestants among the denominations in the Central Highlands is also different; along with the needs for religious practice conditions such as building, repairing, guider the religion, bible, etc., so the implementation of the policy towards Protestantism in the Central Highlands in the near future, on the one hand, continues to require groups register religious activities in accordance with the law (by 2015, there were 260 unregistered groups in the whole region); Instructs believers in groups where they are not qualified for concentration activities if they have a need; Based on the natural-social conditions, distribution density, number of believers, ethnic



composition of each recognized denomination for flexible and appropriate resolution as well as consideration of the demand of using the land for religious purposes of recognized local Protestant organizations to have solutions to each specific case in order to facilitate the religious practice of believers.

With the advantage of a secular religion, simple rituals and rules, democracy, openness, Protestantism has great attraction to ethnic minorities. The current situation shows that, in the coming years, the implementation of religious policy towards Protestantism in the Central Highlands requires appropriate stages, ensuring the freedom of religion of Protestants expressed in reality, the direction of this religion activities in accordance with the law, promoting the positive values of religion in general and Protestantism in particular in the national construction and defense in the period of international integration./.

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**NOTES:**

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- 2 Data of Standing Agency of Steering Committee in the Highlands, and Department of Protestant Affairs, Government Committee for Religious Affairs.
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- 6 Nguyễn Thanh Cao, *Đạo Tin Lành sau 05 năm thực hiện Chỉ thị số 01 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ*. Bài đăng trên website của Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ: [http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/169/0/2677/Dao\\_Tin\\_lanh\\_sau\\_05\\_nam\\_thuc\\_hien\\_Chi\\_thi\\_so\\_01\\_cua\\_Thu\\_tuong\\_Chinh\\_phu](http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/169/0/2677/Dao_Tin_lanh_sau_05_nam_thuc_hien_Chi_thi_so_01_cua_Thu_tuong_Chinh_phu).
- 7 Data of Department for Ethnicity and religion of Steering Committee in the Highlands (6/2015).
- 8 Data compiled by the author in Gia Lai province. It should be noted more about the administrative units, in 1975 Gia Lai province had only 7 districts, in 1994 due to separation increasing to 11 districts, 153 communes, wards.
- 9 Draft of Religious and Beliefs Law is being consulted for the fifth time.
- 10 Ngô Văn Minh (Chủ nhiệm), *Hoạt động của đạo Tin Lành sau đăng ký điểm nhóm ở tỉnh Gia Lai - Thực trạng và giải pháp từ góc độ quản lý nhà nước* [Activities of Protestantism after registration in Gia Lai province - Current situation and solutions from the perspective of State management]. Đề tài khoa học cấp cơ sở năm 2014 của Khoa Dân tộc và Tôn giáo thuộc Học viện Chính trị khu vực III chủ trì.

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