

New Religious Phenomena of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands at Present

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Abstract: For the past few years, new religious phenomena in Vietnam have attracted much attention from researchers of different disciplines. Although the number of publications on this issue still remains limited, they have provided a preliminary assessment of the new phenomena. The paper focuses on analyzing some major characteristics of the phenomena and their influence on socio-economic development, political stability, and social order in the area of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands at present. This is the place, where new religious phenomena have been found most in Vietnam now. Especially, religious organizations have appeared and developed rapidly among local ethnic minorities; some organizations have their own characteristics with a large scope of activity and profound influence, but too few research works have been done.

Key words: New religious phenomena; religion; faith; the Central Highlands.

1. Introduction

From 1986 up to now, there have been more and more new religious phenomena appear in the Central Highlands, especially in the ethnic minorities area. In 2015, the number of new religious phenomena in this area amounted to 20. They have different origins, scopes, content of activity, extent of influence, and development tendencies as well. Religious organizations, including

those of new religious phenomena, have attracted a large number of believers. At the peak periods, thousands of people were induced to take part in activities of the new religious phenomena such as “Degar Protestantism” and “*Hà Môn*” in many locations. Dissemination and development of new religious phenomena have caused negative impacts on social life, resulting in stressful and anxious mentality among a part of population and religious believers, as well as sowing division in the great national unity and complicating the local situation. As a result, most of the new religious phenomena are not recognized officially by the local government; and, local authorities often carry out

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management and drastic struggles against illegal activities of religious abuse.

2. Basic characteristics of new religious phenomena in the Central Highlands

Of all the new religious phenomena in the Central Highlands at present, the most developed ones were mainly formed and developed inside some local ethnic minorities and most of them originated in Protestantism or Catholicism. Classified by location, origin, nature, and content of activity, they can be divided into 3 major groups, as below:

- The group of the new religious phenomena formed in the Central Highlands consists of following religious organizations: “Degar Protestantism”, “Ha Mon”, “Amí Sara”, “Po-Khap-Brau”, “Vietnam Protestant Church of God in Christ”, “Vietnam - US Lutheran Fellowship Church”, “The Cross of Jesu Christ”, and “The Prayers’ Committee for Protestant Restoration”, etc. For the religious organizations in this group, the origin and content of activity are closely related to Protestantism, except for Ha Mon, which is related to Catholicism. The number of believers of the religious phenomena in this group is the highest, compared with the rest two groups. They are mainly people of local ethnic minorities; there are just few Kinh people, who are often the heads of the two religious organizations, including Vietnam Protestant Church of God in Christ and Vietnam – US Lutheran Fellowship Church. Most of them have the content of activity involved with political factors; for example, Degar Protestantism, Vietnam Protestant Church of God in Christ, Vietnam – US Lutheran

Fellowship Church, The Cross of Jesus Christ, and The Prayers’ Committee for Protestant Restoration. At first, some of them were merely faith organizations that relied much on superstition, such as Ami Sara, Po-Khap-Brau, and Ha Mon, but they were then gradually induced by hostile outsiders, especially the Fulro - an exiled reactionary organization - to get the political content. The most typical for this is Ha Mon.

- The group of the new religious phenomena coming from other regions of Vietnam consists of following religious organizations: “*Tâm Linh Hồ Chí Minh*” (the spirit of Ho Chi Minh), “*Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh*” (Ho Chi Minh Gem Buddha Statue), “*Việt Nam Thánh Mẫu*” (Vietnam Mother Goddess), “*Tâm Linh Đạo*”(Spiritualism), “*Đạo Trời Thái Bình*” (the Peace Providence), “*Đạo Tràn Hương Quảng*” (Huong Quang Spiritual), “*Pháp Môn Di Lặc*” (Maitreya Buddhist), “*Bửu Tòa Tam Giáo*” (the Three-religion temple), “*Tổ Tiên Chính Giáo Đại Đạo*” (the Fundamental Orthodox Ancestor), and “*Trường Sinh Học*” (Bioenergetics), etc. These new religious organizations have the origin and content relating to Buddhism, Taoism or traditional faiths; some of them are influenced by Buddhism, Taoism and traditional faiths, so they can be seen as miscellaneous religions. Participants of those new religious organizations are mainly Kinh people, but the number of participants in each organization is not high at all. For some of them, the total number of participants is just a few dozen. Their activities are mainly involved with superstitions for individual/social issues.

- The group of new religious phenomena imported from abroad firstly to Vietnam

and then to the Central Highlands consists of following religious organizations: “*Thanh Hải Vô Thượng Sư*” (Master Supreme Ching Hai), “*Pháp Môn Diệu Âm*” (Master Ruma), “*Falun Gong*”, “*Yi-guan-dao*”, “*Maitreya Buddhist*”, “*Shan-dao*”, “*Wu-wei*”, and “*Charismatic Renewal*”, etc. In some of those religious organizations, such as “*Thanh Hải Vô Thượng Sư*” (Master Supreme Ching Hai), “*Pháp Môn Diệu Âm*” (Master Ruma), “*Falun Gong*”, and “*Yi-guan-dao*”, there are both Kinh and ethnic minority believers; whereas, there are only Kinh believers in some others, such as “*Maitreya Buddhist*”, “*Shan-dao*”, “*Wu-wei*”, and “*Charismatic Renewal*”. All these religious organizations share some common characteristics, as below: the number of believers is not considerable; the content and activities are mainly miscellaneous as a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk faiths in the place of origin (before being disseminated to Vietnam). In this group, the Charismatic Renewal is the only organization originating in Catholicism. Initially, these organizations carried out merely superstition-based activities, but then some of them started to have political factors in the content of activity. The most typical are the Master Supreme and the Falun Gong, which were imported from Taiwan and China.

Believers of the new religious phenomena in the Central Highlands come from different social strata, including: intellectuals, retired civil servants, workers, artists, small-business people, officials of the former government, etc. Local ethnic minority peasants, however, make a majority of the believers; some of them have a very complicated or difficult living situation; some are diseased people; and,

some are those, who have been facing misfortune, etc. At first, most of the believers were not interested in political activities at all, but they were then induced by overseas reactionary organizations or individuals, who were leaders of the new religious organizations. A majority of the local ethnic minority believers used to be Protestant or Catholic. The believers, who are Kinh or ethnic minority migrants from other places, just account for a little proportion; they mainly used to be followers of Buddhism or the traditional faiths that have been influenced much by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Of the founders, leaders, and key members of the new religious organizations, some used to be dignitaries or important believers of Protestantism or Catholicism; some used to be highly respected in community; and even, some are currently civil servants or dismissed soldiers, etc. Those people tend to collaborate conservatively and closely together in carrying out activities, aiming at maintaining the existence of the religious organizations they founded and the important positions they are keeping in the community of believers as well as protecting their own interests owing to contributions made by believers towards the religious organizations and families of the founders/leaders.

The new religious organizations often carry out activities secretly or semi-secretly. When local authorities start management and struggles against their illegal activities, they go underground or move to another areas. As a result, the number of such religious organizations and believers varies

rapidly, making it difficult to identify and collect statistical data precisely. In addition, believers, especially leaders and key members, often do not admit to being involved in the new religious phenomena.

The new religious phenomena not only set up organizations with leaders and key members to run activities, but they also set up local sub-unions and groups, such as the women's groups, the youth groups, the teenage groups, and the elderly groups to carry out dissemination and group activities. Remarkably, those sub-unions and groups are more active and more effective in conducting community activities, compared to the grass-roots mass organizations; they, therefore, attract more attention and participation from local people.

The content of the new religious organizations' propaganda and activities often borrows a lot of factors from the orthodox religions and traditional faiths, but they mainly tend to give explanations about dogmas and canons. It bears boldly theocratic features, giving much prominence to the exceptionally mysterious ability of the leaders and the blessing of the Supreme Being of the organizations. (For example, when someone wants to get something, he/she should write it down in a paper and pray for it. And then, he/she should burn the paper and mix the ash with water to be drunk. A miracle will come to him/her). Activities of the new religious organizations are often attached to specific issues in daily life of local people, particularly pressing issues and difficulties that local people on their own cannot deal with. At that time, they are easily induced to rely on some spiritual belief, in order to

feel psychologically relieved, especially for the issues involved with luck-seeking.

3. Main impacts caused by the new religious phenomena in the Central Highlands

3.1. Impact on cultural and socio-economic life

New religious phenomena in the Central Highlands can be seen as a factor for the formation of the same belief-based communities, in addition to the existing communities formed previously on the basis of the same family-lines or ethnic groups. Communities of the new religious phenomena consist of believers, who may or may not come from the same ethnic group; they may or may not live in the same local area, but they together carry out activities for protection and development of their own organization as well as provision of mutual help, especially for those who have fallen into difficulties or misfortune. This helps to strengthen the linkage among believers of the same organization. Furthermore, the new religious organizations often require believers to give up bad habits such as alcohol-drinking, smoking, scolding and fighting, etc. These are advantageous factors for improvement of economic conditions and relationships in family and community as well.

Yet, most of the new religious phenomena in the Central Highlands disseminate the practice of anti-scientific religious, immoral or uncultured activities for the purpose of getting illicit benefits. For example, they require believers to make a contribution of materials, labor or money towards building or rebuilding places of worship (which are, in reality, houses of the

leaders/key members of the organization) as well as maintaining and expanding the organization of the leaders/key members; they deliberately make the propaganda about the doomsday, which will come soon; at that time, those, who are faithful and sincerely donate wealth to the organization or diligently pray, will be taken to a new and better living place by the Supreme Being. Believers, therefore, do not need to keep assets or money. Instead, they should donate the assets/money to the founders/leaders of the organization to be used for rebuilding the places of worship, buying offering for the pray, and organizing group activities. For this, they will get the blessing from the gods that they worship. The more they donate, the more blessing they will get.

In addition, the new religious organizations propagandize that believers can get enough food to live on without working, if they are diligent prayers and faithful to the organization. They will be given a good life and freed from all debts, including loans from the bank or individuals, as well as they will escape successfully from sickness, diseases and misfortune. To keep believers trusting in the organization and make other family members of believers to follow the new religious phenomena, the leaders and key members of the new religious organizations require their believers not to communicate with people of other faiths; they have to work separately and exchange labor only with people of the same group; if in a family, some members are believers of the same new religious phenomenon and some are not, the believers have to live separately; they even have to get a divorce

and divide property and children. At the same time, they must not attend common meetings of the local community or participate in development assistance programs or projects of the local government or social organizations, etc. Social understanding and economic conditions of those believers/households, consequently, get increasingly worse.

Most of the new religious phenomena disseminate and practise superstition-related activities, such as: future foretelling and soothsaying. They do not take part in festivals or cultural activities of local communities. They do not practise traditional customs and faiths, while denying all the orthodox religions, including also the religion of origin, in order to show the faithfulness to the organization. As a result, cultural life of believers of the new religious phenomena is very limited without any traditional cultural values.

The new religious organizations often encourage their believers to practise non-medicine treatment. The believers should not go to healthcare or medical centers, but they should trust in and pray the gods for the blessing. At that time, they will be successfully cured, no matter what kind of treatment they use; even what they need to do is just to apply animals' droppings to the wound. In the meanwhile, the new religious organizations encourage their believers to practise witchcraft or anti-scientific treatments, such as: to write prayers down in a paper and then read the prayers and burn the paper to ashes to be drunk with water; or, to ask people to gather around the sick to pray. In addition, believers are encouraged not to eat meat or fish; or, they

should go on a diet in some certain days every week to make the body clean. In fact, this negatively affects the health of those, who follow such treatments, especially little children and old people.

As the new religious organizations carry out activities illegally, meetings of a group or family members are often held secretly at late night in deserted places in the hope of not being realized by local authorities. This also causes a bad impact on their health as well as their leisure/working/or studying time. It also results in negative impacts on the social order of local communities. Most of the new religious phenomena make children of the households, who follow the religious phenomena, drop school early. This has been very common among the households, who follow Degar Protestantism or Ha Mon in the Central Highlands. Even, a son of Y Nguyen - a medical doctor, who is one of the leaders of Ami Sara - successfully passed the entrance examinations into two universities in Ho Chi Minh City, but he was not allowed by the parents to enroll in the universities, as they did not want him to have contact with strangers; finally, he was forced to stay at home, practising their faith and getting married with a daughter of the founder of Ami Sara.

3.2. Influence on the great national unity and national consciousness

In the Central Highlands at present, one of the sensitive factor affecting relations within an ethnic group and between different ethnic groups as well as the relations with the whole nation is the cohesion between ethnic and religious

issues. Regarding to this, the conversion from the orthodox religions to the new religious phenomena, especially those involved with “Degar Protestantism”, “Ha Mon”, “Amí Sara”, “Po-Khap-Brau”, “Vietnam Protestant Church of God in Christ”, “The Cross of Jesus Christ”, “The Prayers’ Committee for Protestant Restoration”, and Master Supreme Ching Hai, etc. has caused strong multi-dimensional and complicated influence on society. It is, however, the most important that they have contributed a part towards the formation of communities following the same new religious phenomenon. The cohesion of members in those communities is not only set up among the believers within an ethnic minority or in the same local area, but some new religious organizations, such as Degar Protestantism, also have developed the linkage among members from different regions and nations as well. All of those who follow a new religious phenomena share the same belief; they just keep the linkage with members of the same organization, making their social relations limited within a group of people. To keep believers, the new religious organizations always ask their believers to isolate themselves from local community and family; for example, they are required not to exchange greetings, communicate, or go together with those who are not members of the same belief, even though those are their parents, spouse, or children. Especially, they must not have contact with local officials or members of the teams that mobilize people to leave the new religious phenomena. They must not get married or work/stay together with people of different belief. They must not take part in meetings or general activities of the local community.

If they cannot avoid being there, they will have to gather in a group separately from others and they must not express their own attitude or opinions. They must not take part in implementing any guidelines, policies, or programs of the Party, the State, and local governments. As they do not participate in community activities and do not benefit from the State development policies, their relations are just limited within a group of people who have the same belief. The traditionally ethnic and religious community cohesion is, consequently, broken and those believers are getting more and more difficulties in the living conditions, etc.

Remarkably, in some areas, where the new religious phenomena have developed, this type of cohesion has transgressed the traditional cohesion by kinship, ethnicity and religion. In the areas, where a lot of people follow the new religious phenomena, the leaders and key members of the new religious organizations can make stronger influence on some activities of the local community, compared to village prestigious people and grass-roots officials. As a result, these new religious organizations have caused directly or indirectly negative impacts on implementation of socio-economic development, ethnic and religious policies.

The religious conversion and the cohesiveness of the new religious phenomena, particularly for those, which bear the extremist thinking, do not only come fully from the need of local people, but there are also impacts caused deliberately by illegal propaganda and inducements, resulting in a big change in the faith life among a part of ethnic

minority population and violating the political security and social order in the Central Highlands. It is, herein, necessary to emphasize that hostile forces have taken advantage of historical and psychological characteristics of ethnic minority people as well as shortcomings in the policy implementation and the unequal socio-economic development between regions and ethnic groups to induce ethnic minority people to follow the new religious phenomena. The eventual goal is to gather people of the same belief within an ethnic minority or from different ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and abroad to form communities of spiritual linkage, aiming at building a force and inducing local people to take part in the reactionary political organizations, such as Degar Protestantism and Ha Mon which are attached closely to the Degar State. At the same time, they try to stimulate the narrow nationalism, differentiate and drive a wedge between Kinh people and ethnic minority people, between the local ethnic minority people and ethnic minority migrants, between believers of the new religious phenomena and other ethnic minority people, especially between the local ethnic minority people and Kinh believers, for the purpose of sowing division and contradiction between different ethnic groups and undermining the great national unity in the Central Highlands.

Some extremist leaders of the new religious phenomena also induce and stimulate believers to take part in anti-governmental activities, resulting in social disorder and contradictions, such as: to participate in anti-government demonstrations and disturbances in 2001,

2004, and 2008 led by Degar Protestantism; to raise unjustified complaints, asking for restoration of previous religious organizations and recognition of illegally and newly established religious organizations; to claim on getting the ancestors' land and previous worship places; to cross the border illegally and make disturbances, aiming at internationalizing and politicizing religious and ethnic issues in the Central Highlands; to disseminate illegal religious and reactionary documents; to take control over and smear the reputation of local officials and Party members; to make corrupt use of the information about how the local authorities deal with illegal activities of believers of the new religious phenomena, especially those of local ethnic minority, to distort the Party/the State policy and calumniate as well as smear the current regime. Specifically, they slander and accuse the grass-roots political system and local officials of violating human rights and the freedom of belief for the purpose of arousing suspicion, damaging the solidarity, and decreasing the people's trust in the current regime.

On the one hand, the formation and development of new religious organizations have been making a contribution towards strengthening the linkage among people of the same belief. On the other hand, they have been causing complicated impacts on ethnic issues and ethnic relations in the Central Highlands, especially in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and national border areas; in addition, there have been also negative impacts on the internal cohesion of every ethnic group, the national great unity,

and especially the national consciousness among a part of population. In the next few years, the problems caused by the new religious phenomena, particularly the organization-based cohesion probably will be increasingly severer; hostile forces will make corrupt use of these phenomena for the political purposes, resulting in more and more negative impacts on the traditionally social relations of ethnic groups and religions in the Central Highlands. This may lead to the seeds of division and separation, which can be stimulated and used to make a claim on the independence, autonomy, and foundation of "a religious kingdom" for "the Degar State" led by Fulro - a reactionary exiled organization.

3.3. Influence on the political system and local officials

In addition to the leadership boards, the new religious organizations have also set up groups and sub-unions of believers (such as the women's groups, the youth groups, the teenage groups, and the elderly groups) to carry out dissemination and provide mutual-help activities in earning a living, aiming at gathering people and directing them to join the most suitable group. Those organizations have also taken part in dealing with issues of the local community involved with their believers. Accordingly, a network of the new religious organizations has been set up at the village level. In the prevalent period, those sub-unions and groups are more active and more effective in conducting community activities, compared to the grass-roots political organizations. This causes some influence on the people's awareness of the role of the grass-roots political

organizations and local officials in the areas, where a lot of people follow the new religious phenomena. In some areas, consequently, the roles of village patriarchs, village heads, and grass-roots political organizations have been less significant in the eye of local people; whereas, the roles and the reputation of leaders and key members of the new religious organizations have been more important.

In formation and development of the new religious organizations, the extremist ones and their leaders make every effort to weaken the roles of grass-roots political organizations and village leaders. They try at all costs to induce local officials, Party members, village patriarchs, and heads of clans to follow the new religious phenomena. At the same time, they try to increase the influence of the new religious phenomena on local community. Some leaders of the new religious organizations carry out political activities, trying to arouse social contradictions; for example, they disseminate a fabrication that local socio-economic achievements have been gained and people have got more interests, thanks to their organizations; they set up illegal organizations against the government; they organize shooting practices, in which the targets symbolize the local officials and Party members; and, they tacitly threaten and vandalize properties of local officials and their family as well, etc. Those activities have made a part of population worried much. In some areas, local people and even local officials and Party members, felt insecure a lot, when Degar Protestantism held demonstrations and disturbances in 2001, 2004, and 2008.

Leaders of the extremist religious organizations sometimes accuse falsely local officials and governments of violating the religious freedom; they try to exaggerate some shortcomings of the local officials and governments in the ethnic and religious work; they calumniate the local government of violating democracy and human rights or oppressing and discriminating ethnic minority people and religious believers; they try to reduce the people's trust in the current regime, firstly in the grass-roots political system; they drive a wedge between ethnic groups and sow division in the great national unity; they stimulate the narrow nationalism and arouse internal contradictions as well as conflicts among ethnic groups and religions; they incite local ethnic minority people to be dissatisfied with Kinh people and ethnic minority migrants; they tacitly mobilize local people to protest against the political system and local officials; they make reasons for hostile forces to slander and undermine our State, resulting in political insecurity and social disorder as well as obstructing local governments in implementation of the State and the Party guidelines, policies, and laws.

3.4. Influence on political security and social order

The new religious organizations tend to oppose and make non-cooperation with the government. This can be seen clearly in the fact that leaders and key members of those organizations always avoid meeting local officials and the State working teams; they do not take part in implementation of the Party and the State guidelines, policies, laws, or programs. Some of the new

religious phenomena have even sanctified President Ho Chi Minh and other national heroes, while showing the discontent at the present society; they have taken advantage of the shortcomings in corruption and bureaucracy of a part of the State officials and the Party members as well as current social evils to stimulate, criticize and disparage strongly the regime and the government.

Exiled reactionary organizations generally and ethnic minority reactionary organizations specifically often carry out activities under the cover of some new religious phenomena to sabotage Vietnam; they deliberately stimulate internal contradictions or conflicts for the purpose of creating religious - ethnic hot spots and undermining our political stability, national security and sovereignty. For the past few years, especially, overseas reactionary organizations have tried to establish contacts with some new religious organizations, particularly Degar Protestantism, Ha Mon, and some other organizations involved with the reactionary Degar State as well as local ethnic minority people in the Central Highlands, aiming at sabotaging Vietnam.

In the Central Highlands, the new religious organizations generally and the extremist organizations specifically carry out illegal activities very complicatedly, especially in local ethnic minorities, aiming at increasing their influence in the remote and mountainous areas as well as the national borders and revolutionary bases. At the same time, they try to get more believers from various ethnic and social groups, particularly women and young

people. Some key members of Degar Protestantism, Ha Mon and other extremist religious organizations often launch extremist activities that violate the law and the religious freedom; for example, they induce and even force family members and relatives of the existing believers as well as members of local community to follow the new religious phenomena. Those people are sometimes persuaded just to sign in the list of members so that they can submit a claim to the local government, asking for recognition and approval for activities of their religious organizations. They tacitly cause damage to the family economy of local officials and make threats against them.

To induce more people to take part in the new religious organizations, the leaders and key members use trickery to stimulate local people to oppose the government (for example, they propagandize and distort the Party guidelines and the State policies by holding general meetings, in which they play a cassette tape or make a phone call abroad so that believers can hear members of their clan residing overseas talk and appeal for formation of a separate religious organization among local ethnic minority people; or, they induce people to attend the demonstrations and disturbances, asking for foundation of the Degar State); at the same time, they force believers to boycott the Party guidelines and the State policies (for example, believers are encouraged: not to pay taxes; not to perform the military obligation; not to agree with the construction of public service works; not to practise birth-control; not to let children take disease-preventive vaccines; not to go

to clinics/hospitals for medical examination and treatment, but they should pray and use witchcraft methods instead; not to borrow loans from the bank; to receive neither charity houses nor house-building support, etc.).

For the past few years, it has been rather common in the Central Highlands that local ethnic minority people involved with Degar Protestantism were induced to take part in demonstrations and disturbances against the local government; and, after the demonstrations and disturbances were pacified, they were stimulated to cross the border to Cambodia and then request political asylum in some country; the implicit target is to internationalize and politicize ethnic and religious issues in the Central Highlands. By now, some local ethnic minority people still continue to cross the border by small groups, but they are organized more carefully and are picked immediately in the border. This problem is really complicated, intensifying contradictions inside each ethnic group and between different groups as well. In addition, those who failed to cross the border as well as those who are kept in Cambodia or expelled back to Vietnam maintain secretly unforeseen relations and activities involved with political and security factors, leading to a range of sensitive and complicated issues relating to ethnic and religious affairs, social management and national border control.

The activities that make corrupt use of illegal religions and faiths in the Central Highlands have contributed a part towards arousing anxieties and suspicion, weakening the internal unity among a part

of ethnic minority population and between different ethnic groups as well. At the same time, they have caused a negative impact on the people's trust in the current political system. Some hot spots involved with the political stability and social order occurred in the Central Highlands. Anti-government demonstrations, disturbances, and illegal border-crossings were held, linked closely with the claim for separation and autonomy of a part of the local ethnic minority people. To induce and stimulate local people to form a community of Degar Protestantism and similarly "Ha Mon" aiming at development of the "Degar Catholicism" afterwards is a major way to gather a local political struggling force and organize illegal border-crossings, asking for separation and autonomy as well as causing political instability and weakening the grass-roots governments. All of these are carried out with the view to establishing a "Degar State" in the Central Highlands.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Although not all the new religious phenomena are "heretical" or "miscellaneous" and causing negative impacts on social life, basically almost all the new religious organizations appearing in the Central Highland during the period of Doi moi rely on superstitions and make corrupt use of beliefs. Some of them, such as Degar Protestantism, Ha Mon, and the Master Supreme Ching Hai, have carried out activities involved with political factors, resulting in a lot of negative impacts on social life. For example, they made a part of population feel worried a lot; they drove a wedge between groups of people and sowed division between different religions,

causing damage to the great national unity; they made the local political situation complicated and aroused contradictions in local community, making it more difficult for social order management; they made changes in the traditional customs and lifestyles; they violated properties, material assets, labor time and even dignity as well as health and life of local people; they relied much on superstition, deluding believers and disseminating anti-scientific, uncultured beliefs which were far different from general norms of morality and lifestyle, etc.

For the past time, the new religious phenomena in the Central Highlands have been, therefore, viewed by public opinions generally and local authorities specifically as “strange”, “miscellaneous” or “heretical” religions that rely much on illegal and anti-scientific superstitions, contrary to our national habits and customs as well as the people’s interests. In reality, we haven’t yet behaved properly towards the new religious phenomena as socio-cultural ones. Because the new religious phenomena (locally created or disseminated from other regions/countries) occurred more widely for the past few years, resulting in considerable social impacts, researchers and authorities started to pay attention to them. From the management perspective, local authorities have implemented some measures combining mainly the State administrative management with propaganda and mobilization in the hope of making people give up the new religious phenomena and follow faiths and religions legally; they have disseminated necessary information widely, helping people realize correctly and choose appropriate faiths. In reality, some encouraging achievements have been

gained, as below: Basically, many new religious phenomena that carried out illegal activities have been restricted or dispersed; those, who made corrupt use of religion and faith to practise superstitions and make social disturbances for the purpose of getting illicit earnings, have been administratively handled; a lot of illegal documents involved with the new religious phenomena have been confiscated. These contribute a significant part towards preventing development and negative impacts of the new religious phenomena.

However, there have been still shortcomings in awareness and implementation of the measures to take control over and handle the new religious phenomena. As a result, some relevant problems haven’t been thoroughly dealt with yet. Some new religious phenomena are persistently practised or moved to unpredictable areas. In the coming time, it is therefore necessary to pay attention to some following points for the management work as well as the struggle against new religious phenomena:

- We cannot deny the current existence, development and multi-dimensional complicated impacts of new religious phenomena in Vietnam generally and the Central Highlands specifically, but we have to accept them as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the modern life. Comprehensive research works must be carried out in order to recommend specific policies and measures to deal with each of the new religious organizations appropriately. To do this effectively from the Central to the grass-roots levels, it is essential to set up a mechanism for doing research and management of religions and faiths generally and the new religious phenomena particularly.

- It is necessary not to politicize issues relating to new religious phenomena, but we should make comprehensive and objective assessments of the results and consequences of the guidelines and policies on the new religious phenomena so far and draw lessons of experience, in order to build appropriate strategies and implement new policies effectively and properly.

- As religious and faith affairs are sensitive and attached closely to each others, involved with political, security, national defense, cultural, and socio-economic factors of ethnic groups and the whole country, it is essential to pay attention to their relationship and organic impacts, when building and implementing policies on socio-economic development and ethnic - religious affairs. In such a context, it is necessary to: (1) promote both theoretical and empirical research works, aiming at setting up a basic database and completing a legal framework to promulgate and implement policies that ensure the development equality of all religions and minimize the existing contradictions between religious believers and those who are not religious believers; between ethnic minority believers and Kinh believers; between different religious organizations; and, between those who follow the new religious phenomena and those who trust in the government; (2) strengthen management work and improve good religious relations between ethnic groups regionally, nationally, and transnationally; set up stable and developed residence communities and at the same time prevent the formation of too large communities of religious linkage in the border, especially in the areas, where a lot of people of the same clan and the same religion live; (3) strengthen the trust of religious believers and dignitaries in the

present regime, overcoming current contradictions and divergences through communications and dialogues; and, take advantage of positive factors and encourage more religious people to take part in national defense and development; and, (4) respect and use prestigious people and intellectuals of religious organizations so that they can direct and encourage religious believers to collaborate with the local government in implementing ethnic and religious policies and opposing the organizations that make corrupt use of religions and faiths to carry out illegal activities.

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