

Stifling Christianity in Vietnam --- By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Hanoi has tried to stop news from leaking out about the riots in Xuan Loc diocese, which has the country's largest concentration of Roman Catholics, numbering some 800,000 followers of the faith. The area is an important industrial center and now a large suburb of Ho Chi Minh City. Tensions have been building in Xuan Loc since April 1 when the Dong Nai People's Committee issued an order for the diocese to disband all "illegal groups" including the Catholic Mothers group, Holy Communion Youth and Association of Heads of Catholic Families. "Activities of these organizations no longer lie within the boundaries of normal religious activities," the local government directive said.

FULL TEXT

For many Vietnamese Catholics, this Christmas season has brought more conflict than celebration. Riots have broken out in some dioceses over restrictions on religious freedom and land rights. Residents in these areas have seen few improvements in their standard of living since Vietnam embarked on its "Doi Moi" plan of economic reform. Rural unrest will continue until Hanoi loosens its grip on two sources of relief from poverty -- church-run development programs and land ownership laws.

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The spark that ignited two days of protests on Nov. 8 was the confiscation by local officials of some land belonging to the church. The already-seething population of Catholics demanded that the property be returned, and in confrontations with the police several people were injured and buildings burned down. Vietnam's official spokesman denied that the protests had any religious aspect to them. The government is now following its usual pattern of detaining "troublemakers" -- who can be held by local officials without trial for up to two years. Once things have quieted down, Hanoi will go back to ignoring the fact that its restrictions on religious activities and its failure to pass reasonable land laws are stoking up pockets of resentment across the country.

There are about seven million Roman Catholics in Vietnam, the second largest Catholic population in Asia after the Philippines. Most are free to attend mass and celebrate festivals, but the church itself remains under some of the toughest restrictions imposed by any country. Church property is controlled by the state, candidates for seminaries are closely vetted to ensure their allegiance to the Communist Party and all appointments by the church must be approved in Hanoi.

What this means is that some men have waited decades to be ordained while most parishes in Vietnam lack priests. Much of the apparatus of state control is focused on the church hierarchy. Bishops cannot travel without permission and they are forbidden to speak out on social issues. The church is not allowed to print its own publications or carry out significant charity work; indeed Vietnam is one of the few countries to have expelled nuns from Mother Teresa's order. Even at the lowest level, officials direct petty forms of discrimination toward Catholics. A choir master in a Saigon church was interrogated for copying unauthorized sheet music of a hymn. Catholics in Hanoi who work for the government complain in private that they have no chance of promotions if they are open about their religion.

On Oct. 11, Paul Joseph Pham Ding Tung, cardinal archbishop of Hanoi, wrote to Prime Minister Phan Van Khai on behalf of Vietnamese bishops to ask for some easement and concessions. He requested permission to publish a quarterly magazine and to increase the number of seminarians. "In a number of dioceses in the north there are young people who have studied for years and are eligible to become Catholic priests to serve areas that have not had priests in decades," Cardinal Tung wrote. He also asked that religious orders be allowed to open schools and to take care of the sick, orphans and the elderly.

Last year the Vietnamese bishops sent a similar letter to the government. When after five months they finally received a response, all their requests, even the most modest, had been turned down. The leadership in Hanoi was not interested in seeing an expansion of religious freedoms. In their zero-sum view of politics, any increase in freedom for religious or social groups diminishes the power of the Communist Party, which at its last Congress in 1996 signaled that the leitmotif of its rule at the turn of the century was not to be more reforms but more control.

Restrictions on religions, which apply not just to Catholics but to all faiths in Vietnam, underlie the tensions in Dong Nai and were a factor in protests in Thai Binh. But it is land and the actions of corrupt local officials that have brought people onto the streets. The system of land tenure is so murky and slanted against the average citizen that it has become a constant source of resentment against the government.

The state owns all land in Vietnam. Individuals may obtain leases on it but their legal weight is limited and varies depending on the region and the vagaries of the local bureaucracy. Since the late 1980s farmers have started to think that they own their land, but real power over it still lies with local officials who are the most corrupt layer of the Vietnamese bureaucracy. Not only has this tension prompted thousands of land disputes, but it also is a major reason for low investment in agriculture and the desperate rural poverty that has left nearly half of all children malnourished.

Vietnam urgently needs land laws that give security to the rural population. The government should also ease controls over religions so these groups can carry out much needed aid and development work. Financial aid should focus on land issues and support for religions and other social groups. Only then will this money enhance the lives of Vietnamese and not merely shore up the power of the Communist Party whose members make up less than 3% of the population.

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