

May 23, 2012 | by [Robert P. George](#)

The following testimony appeared in the Cornell University International Affairs Review today. For a link to the original, go to <http://www.ciartest.diplomacist.org/?p=1766> .

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has testified before Congress on Vietnam numerous times over the past seven years. Before each appearance, USCIRF had hoped to bring news of dramatic changes; greater respect for universal rights; lifting draconian controls over free expression, religion, and association; and the cessation of the silencing of dissent. Sadly, the Commission cannot report such changes today. In fact, Vietnam has been backsliding on human rights for the past several years and religious freedom conditions remain very poor and are deteriorating.

Religious Freedom Conditions

The U.S.-Vietnamese relationship has grown rapidly in recent years, but it has not brought needed improvements in religious freedom and related human rights in Vietnam.

The government of Vietnam continues to control all religious communities in some manner, actively suppresses independent religious practice, and detains individuals viewed as challenging its authority, particularly those who publicly advocate for fewer religious freedom restrictions.

To be sure, religious activity continues to expand in Vietnam. The government has made important concessions over the past decade in response to international pressure, including the 2004 designation of Vietnam by the United States as a "Country of Particular Concern" or CPC for its severe religious freedom abuses.

Nevertheless, individuals continue to be imprisoned for engaging in independent religious activity or religious freedom advocacy; new converts to ethnic minority Christianity face discrimination, harassment, and forced renunciations of faith; and religious communities face violence from police and "contract thugs," including Catholics peacefully protesting land disputes and forced disbandment of the "Plum Village" Buddhist order.

The most egregious violations have targeted the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups; ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands and northwest provinces; and ethnic Khmer Buddhists in the Mekong Delta.

Over the past year, there have been more than a dozen new arrests of ethnic minority Protestants and Catholics and two Hoa Hao activists who met with the Commission during 2009. Violence continues to occur, targeting Catholic communities protesting land confiscations and Hmong religious gatherings.

Relations between the Vietnamese government and Catholics, particularly clergy and laity affiliated with the Redemptorist Order, have deteriorated significantly in recent years. Peaceful protests in land disputes and prayer vigils to honor detained human rights defenders have led to violence by police and more than a dozen arrests. Ethnic minority Protestants continue to

experience campaigns of forced renunciations of faith, focused on curtailing both independent religious activity and new converts. Fr. Nguyen Van Ly was also returned to prison last year after being given medical parole.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

USCIRF is not alone in its conclusions about religious freedom conditions in Vietnam. Its assessments are shared widely by members of Congress in both parties and Vietnamese-Americans and by others committed to the advance of human rights and religious freedom. The Commission's conclusions are also those of the Obama Administration. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stated publicly that Vietnam and the United States have distinct differences in the area of human rights. She has expressed her "concern about [the] arrest and conviction of people for peaceful dissent, attacks on religious groups and curbs on Internet freedom," and said that if the U.S. and Vietnam are ever to develop a "strategic partnership," "Vietnam must do more to respect and protect its citizens' rights."

The U.S. government has political leverage and diplomatic resources to advance religious freedom and related human rights in Vietnam. The question is whether or not such leverage and resources will be used.

USCIRF believes that CPC designation is warranted for Vietnam.

The CPC designation worked when used previously from 2004 to 2006, producing tangible results without harming progress on other issues. The Vietnamese government released some prisoners and loosened some controls over religious activity. Meanwhile, trade, humanitarian programs, and security cooperation expanded.

A CPC designation will produce progress again if used as the International Religious Freedom

Act of 1998 intended. The idea that vigorous human rights diplomacy will curtail advances on other bilateral interests fails the test of fact.

In addition to a CPC designation, both the Administration and the U.S. Senate can demonstrate its commitment to human rights in Vietnam by signaling support for passage of the Vietnam Human Rights Act. This bill should be discussed, considered, and passed during the current session of Congress.

Both the CPC designation and the Vietnam Human Rights Act are powerful tools to spotlight abuses of religious freedom and related rights, encourage future improvements, and clearly signal that the United States supports those in Vietnam who seek to advance both prosperity and guaranteed rights.

Conclusion

The Obama Administration's newly unveiled East Asia policy, the so-called "Asia Pivot," offers an opportunity for the United States to demonstrate that its interests in human rights and religious liberty are pursued in tandem with its interests in trade and security.

A CPC designation for Vietnam would convey that message. Any expansion of U.S. economic or security assistance programs in Vietnam should be linked with human rights progress and the creation of new and sustainable initiatives in religious freedom and programs in non-commercial rule of law and civil society development.

Vietnam and the United States share a unique and tragic history. Their engagement is no longer one of bullets and bombs, but of ideas and institutions. The Vietnamese leadership out of necessity abandoned its Marxist economic ideals and now simply clings to political control. The same vigilance and pressure that dragged Vietnam onto the path of a market economy

need to be applied to weaken its grip on totalitarian authority and end its silencing of dissent and repression of religious communities.

United States policies and programs should reflect this goal and support those who seek greater freedoms and guaranteed rights in Vietnam. Our diplomacy must send the clear message that U.S. interests in Vietnam are not only economic, but humanitarian, and include the universal desire to speak freely, worship without fear, and organize openly without suffering persecution. This is a message that will register when delivered clearly by the U.S. government, giving hope to millions among Vietnam's people.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Samantha Schnitzer at Sschnitzer@uscirf.gov or (202) 786-0613.

[v](#)