

## Religion in Vietnam

# Higher powers

**A proposed law on religion will not help the faithful**

Sep 26th 2015 | HO CHI MINH CITY | From the print edition



AFP No peace for Thich Khong Tanh

BULLDOZERS are idling outside the Lien Tri Pagoda, a complex of yellow buildings near the Saigon River. Officials plan to destroy it and fill this sparsely populated district of Ho Chi Minh City with skyscrapers. One property firm calls the area the “Pudong of Saigon”, referring to a glittering riverside district of Shanghai. But the pagoda’s chief monk, Thich Khong Tanh, is not so enthusiastic. He is fighting eviction.

Mr Tanh says the lure of profits is not the only reason the authorities would like his pagoda to vanish; it is not officially sanctioned by the Communist Party and is a sanctuary for political dissidents, former prisoners of conscience and disabled veterans who fought for the

former South Vietnamese regime. Officials “want to isolate and control us,” he says. “But moving means isolation, so the monks here don’t want to move.”

About 24m of Vietnam’s 90m people identify with a religious faith; Buddhism and Catholicism are the most popular. But the party has always viewed religion warily, in part because three of its former foes—the French, the Americans and the government of South Vietnam—were friendly with the Catholic Church. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the party seized church lands and put pressure on worshippers to join approved denominations like the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, which was founded in 1981 and reports to the Fatherland Front, a party organisation.

Many religious leaders who refused to accept party control were arrested or harassed. Thich Quang Do, the patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, a banned group, has spent three decades in prison or internal exile, or under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City—“longer than Aung San Suu Kyi,” says Vo Van Ai, a church spokesman who lives in France. Other leaders of banned sects, including evangelical pastors in the Central Highlands, a restive region with many ethnic groups, have fared almost as badly.

After a trip to Vietnam in 2014, the UN’s special rapporteur on religion said that planned visits to parts of the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta, a stronghold for worshippers of the Hoa Hao Buddhist faith, had been “unfortunately interrupted” and that some Vietnamese he had wanted to meet had been threatened by police. Officials, presumably, wanted to conceal their efforts to suppress religion.

The party has somewhat softened its stance. Since the 1990s, temples, pagodas and churches have been refurbished and allowed to celebrate religious holidays, such as the Buddha’s birthday, that were once taboo. But the government has issued more regulations governing worshippers and their faiths, with dispiriting results. One such was a law on religion passed in 2004 that criminalised the “abuse” of religion to undermine national security. Another decree, issued in 2013, made it more difficult to register religious groups.

Next month the National Assembly, Vietnam’s parliament, plans to debate another law aimed at streamlining these statutes. A draft version includes some small improvements, such as reducing the amount of time a religious organisation must have operated in Vietnam before it can be formally recognised by the state from 23 years to ten. Senior legislators quoted by the official Vietnam News Agency say the law will help to bring domestic religious policy in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Vietnam signed in 1982. Yet critics, including Human Rights Watch, a New York-based NGO, say the

law is so vague that it could give Vietnam's powerful security state even more freedom to police religious groups that it does not like.

In May the Interfaith Council of Vietnam—a group of dissident religious leaders of various faiths—wrote an open letter of protest denouncing the law as a ploy by the party to reinforce its power and stifle worship. Dinh Huu Thoai, a Catholic leader and one of the letter's 22 signatories, says the law's text is riddled with arbitrary and confusing clauses. For example, it allows worship in homes and other "legal" places, but does not say what is legal.

It is difficult to predict how harshly the authorities will interpret the bill. But its passage will certainly do little to boost the government's image as a defender of human rights. Thich Khong Tanh, the monk at Lien Tri Pagoda, reckons that freedom of worship is only improving for those who belong to state-sanctioned denominations. "Anybody who is independent will face oppression and difficulty," he says. His own troubles are far from over.

From the print edition □□ □□