

briefing

Vietnam

Analysis:

2007 Revision of Internal Training Manual 'Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region'

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Table of contents:

1.	Executive Summary.....	3
2.	Recommendations.....	3
3.	Introduction.....	4
4.	Summary of Content.....	4
5.	Analysis.....	5
5.1.	Comparison of core provisions for treatment of Protestants	5
5.2.	Areas of concern	6
5.2.1.	Reduction of politically-loaded language; yet continued political suspicion of religion	6
5.2.2.	Continued administration of restrictive control over religion.....	7
5.2.3.	Concealment, not removal of provisions for forcible renunciations of faith.....	8
5.2.4.	Deficiency of normalisation process.....	9

1. Executive Summary

In 2006, an internal religious affairs training manual covering the northern highland provinces was leaked from the government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). This document implicated the government in a plan to 'resolutely subdue the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant religion in the region' (p. 44). After widespread international criticism, the government undertook to revise the manual, and a new edition was provided to foreign diplomatic officials in 2007.

Although the revised version involves a lessening of the inflammatory language which was more characteristic of the 2006 manual, there is no change to its core objective to 'solve the Protestant problem' by subduing its development. It retains a suspicious tone about the politically nefarious nature of religion and its potential to cause instability among ethnic minorities, which provides the context for this response. Whereas the 2006 manual provided specific legitimacy for local officials to force renunciations of faith among members of less well-established congregations, the 2007 edition imposes an undefined and arbitrary condition of stability upon the freedom of a congregation to operate.¹ Therefore, the treatment of any congregation deemed not to 'stably practise religion' is implicitly left to the arbitration of local officials, who had previously been mandated to force renunciations of faith. Without a full and unconditional prohibition on forcing renunciations of faith, the amended manual does not go far enough to address the problems in the 2006 original.

Of further concern is the fact that despite the promulgation of a policy framework for the registration of congregations in 2004-05, the training manual still uses the terminology of 'pilot projects'. This indicates a severe deficiency in the normalisation process of Protestant congregations in the northern highlands, and brings into question the efficacy of Vietnam's current policy framework for religious activities.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the government of Vietnam should:

1. Undertake a revision of the 2007 training manual which unequivocally prohibits forcing renunciations of faith and which does not impose an ill-defined condition of stability on the functioning of Protestant congregations;
2. Expedite the registration of Protestant house churches, particularly those among the ethnic minorities, and ensure that local authorities are obliged to facilitate this process;
3. Enforce measures to prevent any attempts to force Protestants to renounce their faith and ensure that the training of local officials in the treatment of religious activities is fully consistent with international standards on religious freedom;
4. Establish and implement a comprehensive legislative framework for religious groups to engage in peaceful activities, both religious and humanitarian, which is fully consistent with international standards on religious freedom and free from ill-defined caveats.

It is recommended that states and regional actors should call upon the government of Vietnam to adopt these recommendations.

¹ The terminology of 'stability' is used repeatedly in lesson three, section IV, which outlines the core policy for the treatment of religious groups. The use of the term has its roots in the *Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organisations* (21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11) (Article 16(1)c).

3. Introduction

An internal religious affairs training manual covering the northern highland provinces was promulgated by the government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) in 2006, entitled *Training Document: Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region*.² This document, which implicated the government in a plan to ‘resolutely subdue’ the burgeoning of Protestantism in the region, was leaked and attracted international criticism. The government undertook to revise the manual, and a new edition was made available to United States officials in late 2007.

The 2007 edition of the training manual for the northern mountainous region³ is also marked as being for internal circulation, and provides a revised policy framework for officials dealing with Protestant Christians in the region. The majority of these Protestants are drawn from ethnic minorities and belong to unregistered house churches.

The fact that this manual is a revision of the 2006 edition makes it an important gauge of Vietnam’s present official policy and approach to religion in general, and specifically Protestantism among the ethnic minorities in the northern highlands.

The 2007 manual has yet to be translated into English in its entirety; the analysis has therefore been undertaken in consultation with researchers fluent in Vietnamese. All page references correspond to the original Vietnamese language version. Those of the 2006 edition correspond to the equivalent in the unofficial English translation.⁴

4. Summary of Content

At a total of 37 pages (including appendices), the 2007 manual is shorter than the 46-page 2006 edition, and reads more clearly. Like its predecessor, the 2007 manual is divided into three sections, or ‘lessons’.

The first of these (twelve pages) provides a ‘brief religious demography of Vietnam’. The general perspective on religion and the state in this section may be summarised as follows: ‘Religious believers [must] follow the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam and contribute to the revolutionary task of the people’ (p. 1); ‘The Party and the State of Vietnam have a policy appropriate for each religion’ (p. 1); the abuse of taking advantage of religion by Vietnam’s enemy forces must be stopped (pp. 2-3; cf. p. 33); ‘The State of Vietnam will implement its management of religion through the leaders of the various religions’ (p. 2); ‘It is strictly forbidden to take advantage of religion to practise superstition, to violate the policies and laws of our State, to incite division among the people, to cause disturbances, to violate the common good or threaten the security of the State’ (p. 4); and ‘every religious activity must be registered or have prior permission’ (page 9).

² CSW published an analysis of this document in November 2006. This analysis and an unofficial translation of the *Training Document: Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region (2006)*, are available at: <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=81&search>.

³ This area is defined as including the provinces of Bac Kan, Cao Bang, Dien Bien, Ha Giang, Hoa Binh, Lai Chau, Lang Son, Lao Cai, Son La, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang and Yen Bai provinces, and the western highlands of Nghe An and Thanh Hoa. This is considered to be a sensitive area for national security.

⁴ More recent partial translations of some sections of the 2006 manual are used in this analysis; where this is the case, the equivalent section in the full unofficial translation is referenced.

The second lesson is a descriptive section (thirteen pages), entitled, 'A brief overview of the Protestant religion', and providing an introduction to Protestantism and 'the views of government concerning the Protestant religion in Vietnam'.

The main interest in the document consists in its third lesson (eight pages), which sets out the policy and steps for dealing with Protestants in the region, and with which this analysis is chiefly concerned. It was the corresponding lesson in the 2006 manual which constituted a significant affront to religious freedom.

The 2007 edition has three official forms appended, similar to those in the 2006 manual. The first is a registration form for Protestant activities by congregation or meeting place (for use by these congregations); the second, a certification form for Protestant religious activities for a local congregation (for use by government authorities); and the third, an agreement form to allow a private house to be used for religious activities.

5. Analysis

The main concerns surrounding the 2006 edition of the training manual were:

- Its antagonistic approach towards religion and religious organisations;
- Its arbitration of legitimate and illegitimate modes of religious belief and its assumption that religion is exploited by enemies of the nation;
- Its provisions for arbitrary treatment of Protestants by local officials;
- Its strongly-implied sanction for forcing renunciations of faith.

In analysing the revised version of the manual, it is important to do so in light of these concerns, and to consider the extent to which they have been addressed.

5.1. Comparison of core provisions for treatment of Protestants

A comparison of the core stipulations for the treatment of Protestants in the two editions of the training manual, provides an important indicator of the extent to which the revised manual represents a significant change from its predecessor. The focus for this exercise is section IV of the third lesson, entitled, 'Tasks/Responsibilities on Protestants in the Northwest Mountainous Region in the Future' (pp. 31-32), which is the equivalent of section V in the third lesson of the 2006 manual.

The objectives for the plan, as given in this section, differ from their 2006 counterpart in that they no longer include the clause, 'To stop and defeat the scheme exploiting the Protestant religion by all the internal and foreign enemy forces to defeat the revolutionary mandate and heritage of our Party and State' and instead emphasise 'maintaining political stability and public order'. However, the troubling core objective is retained: 'to solve the Protestant problem' in this area, and specifically 'to resolutely subdue the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant religion in the region'.

The components of this task, as outlined in the revised manual, no longer involve a formal classification of congregations into three categories, according to how well they are established.⁵ However, the basic notion of distinguishing between stable and less well-established Protestant places of worship, continues to inform the stipulations of the manual. Most significantly, whereas in the 2006 manual, special provisions were outlined for 'category one' congregations (that is, those 'which have had followers of the Protestant faith

⁵ Cf. 2006 edition: lesson three, section V.2.iv (unofficial translation, p. 46).

for a relatively long time, and where the citizens have a genuine need to practise their religion, clearly understand their doctrines and ceremonies and regularly practise the religion'), the language in the 2007 edition shifted to those 'that stably practise religion' which, in effect, is identical. The heavily-criticised stipulations for members of congregations belonging to categories two and three to be 'mobilise[d]' to 'return to their traditional beliefs' has been removed, but no clear stipulation is made for congregations which do not meet the undefined criterion of stability.

Additionally, the clause of 'pay[ing] special attention to helping and guiding those citizens who have a desire to return to their traditional beliefs', previously identified as a euphemism for tacitly permitting forcible renunciations of faith, has been removed. This represents a degree of softening of the provisions for forcible renunciations of faith; however, there remains a mandate to organise 'propaganda and mobilisation for the citizens to conserve and develop their own culture and the good traditional beliefs of the ethnic minorities', which suggest an active preference for the practice of the traditional religious beliefs of this population. The fact that the manual is fundamentally concerned with the subduing of the growth of Protestantism, suggests that the changes in terminology are cosmetic and do not constitute a proper protection of religious freedom.

The provisions for the classification of Protestant leaders are also amended, and involve less hostile language, but nevertheless involve concerning provisions for restrictions. As in the 2006 edition, leaders who 'have an attitude of following government authorities and the law, and have the characteristics of a good citizen' are to be given assistance. In relation to the negative category of leaders, both the descriptive language and the prescriptive treatment are less antagonistic than in the previous edition. Those whom the 2006 manual described as 'hostile and extremely resistant' are presented in the 2007 version as 'those who have a resistant attitude'. Whereas in the 2006 edition, officials were to 'treat them severely', the new edition instructs officials to 'contend strongly with them and deal with them strictly according to the law'. Also, whereas the nature of their denunciation before the people was formerly to involve 'explaining their activities of destroying the country, dividing the ethnic groups, and their other illegal actions', the new edition has amended this to 'explaining details of their illegal activities'. It is also significant that the 2007 version of the manual ostensibly draws the treatment of Protestant leaders more directly under the rule of law.

5.2. Areas of concern

5.2.1. Reduction of politically-loaded language; yet continued political suspicion of religion

In comparison to the 2006 edition, the revised manual displays an overall reduction in its use of provocative language and allegations about the politically nefarious and damaging nature of religion in general, and Protestantism in particular. However, it retains an overall, generalised suspicion about religion and its association with 'enemy forces'.

There are numerous examples in the 2007 manual of sections on the conflict between Protestantism and the government being excised, resulting in a more positive evaluation of Protestantism. The assertion that 'enemy forces' established organisations to support Protestant evangelism among the ethnic minorities is omitted (p. 35). Also omitted are the allegation that Protestants targeted traditional revolutionary bases in southern Vietnam (p. 27) and the conclusion that Protestantism only grows in areas (specifically the northern mountainous region) where the communist organisation is at its weakest (p. 34). More positively, references are made to the constructive elements of Protestantism: specifically, its rejection of feudalism (p. 13), its elevation of patriotism and its view of humanity (p. 14) and its contributions to peace and stability and the development of humanity (p. 18).

The revised manual also reduces the association of religion with specific foreign agency. However, it retains a more generalised assumption of its illegitimacy and its capacity for damaging the nation. For example, whereas the 2006 manual on occasion singled out the USA for '[taking] advantage' of religion for 'counter-revolutionary objectives' (lesson one, section I.6),⁶ the equivalent section in the 2007 manual describes 'enemy forces' as '[taking] advantage of the religion problem to serve their own political purposes' (pp. 2-3). The perception of the potential for religion to cause divisions among ethnic minorities is highlighted in a clause added to the pledge included in the appended registration form: 'to maintain and develop the solidarity between people in the village and people from other ethnic groups'.⁷

This section of the 2006 manual had been highly condemnatory about the USA in connection with human rights and religious freedom: 'Currently, the United States and all enemy forces both external and internal, are promoting the policy of peaceful evolution, which uses ethnicity, religion and human rights to fight against our revolution. The United States is currently using a number of international organisations to distort the religious situation in our country, and slander us saying that we limit and oppress religion, and at the same time they try by legal means to interfere in the religion problem in our country. For a period of time, the United States has unilaterally brought up so-called draft bills on human rights and religion in Vietnam. The United States is also currently coordinating and supporting the bad elements and extremists in the various religions to create turmoil in the religious situation in our country'.⁸

A similar suspicion is couched in more generalised terms in the 2007 edition: 'The taking advantage of religion by the enemy forces is attached to ethnic problems and to human rights, and also takes advantage of a few shortcomings in the implementation of our religion policy to distort the religion situation on our country... The taking advantage of religion by the enemy forces has in the past and continues currently to produce many problems which remain to be solved'. The association of 'taking advantage of religion by the enemy forces' to human rights appears to be a thinly-veiled reference to the same activities of the USA which were heavily condemned in the 2006 manual.

Although this section is less inflammatory in its condemnation of foreign exploitation of religion, its conclusion is still wary of the exploitation of religion by the now unspecified enemy: 'our religion work at the present time must both guarantee the religion needs of religious believers, and must be vigilant, fight against and defeat the scheme of taking advantage of religion by the enemy forces to sabotage the revolutionary heritage of our citizens'. This mandate creates legitimacy for the suppression of any religious activities which may be arbitrarily deemed to meet such vague criteria.

5.2.2. Continued administration of restrictive control over religion

The 2007 manual retains the core objective outlined in the 2006 original: 'to resolutely subdue the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development of the Protestant religion in the region'. This provides an unequivocal mandate for restrictions and control.

Despite the more positive appraisal given to Protestantism, its rapid growth and development in Vietnam continues to be met with suspicion. This is continuous with the

⁶ Also translated, 'reactionary political moves' (cf. unofficial translation, p. 5).

⁷ Appendix one: Registration form for Protestant activities by congregation or meeting place', section 9.

⁸ Lesson one, section I.6 (cf. unofficial translation, p. 5).

2006 manual, which associates religious propagation with 'the taking advantage of religion of the enemy forces' (p. 49). The 2007 manual portrays Protestantism as the fastest-growing religious group in Vietnam (p. 20) and indicates a belief that it will continue to grow (p. 21). It also identifies a number of ethnic minorities among which Protestantism has grown substantially (p. 28), concluding that although this considerable growth has slowed, it has the potential to resume (p. 29). These are compounded by repeated additional references to the growth of Protestantism, confirming this to be an area of concern for the government.

This analysis is reflective of reality: the Protestant population has grown substantially among members of numerous ethnic minorities in the northern highlands during the past two decades, including the remote border regions. This fact is recognised in the 2007 manual, which relates the pattern of growth to what are perceived as the problematic issues of ethnicity and national security in a new paragraph: 'The problem of ethnic minority peoples in the northwest mountainous region following the Protestant religion is an issue of religious belief, and simultaneously an issue of culture and ideology, and of a religious organization, and an ethnic issue related to political security, to the socio-economic situation, to the policy of ethnic solidarity, and to our foreign policy ... all of which demand from our Party and State both an immediate and long-term solution' (p. 30).

Fundamentally, it is highly concerning that, however freshly it is couched in the 2007 manual, the deliberate response of the government to the growth of Protestantism continues to be to 'resolutely subdue' what it perceives to be 'the abnormally rapid and spontaneous development' of Protestantism in the northern highlands.

5.2.3. Concealment, not removal of provisions for forcible renunciations of faith

In the 2006 manual, officials were mandated to categorise Protestant congregations according to how well-established they were considered to be. With regard to the second and third categories, those deemed to be less well-established, officials were to 'mobilise and persuade' their members to 'return to their traditional beliefs'. This provided sanction for officials to force Protestants belonging to newer or more vulnerable congregations to renounce their faith, and provided a justification for doing so.

The formal categorisation of Protestant congregations is removed in the 2007 edition, but this only superficially deals with the problem in the 2006 manual. The 2007 manual specifies a mode of dealing with the equivalent of category one, identified in ambiguous terms as those 'that stably practise religion'. Such congregations are to be guided to register with the local authorities. However, this section of the 2007 manual disregards the equivalents of categories two and three, which are therefore excluded from the purview of this provision. The treatment of any congregations deemed not to 'stably practise religion' is therefore implicitly left to the arbitration of local officials. The imposition of an undefined condition of stability should not be set upon the religious freedom of each congregation.

Leaders of Protestant congregations continue to be bifurcated into two ill-defined categories, as in the 2006 edition: 'those who have an attitude of following government authorities and the law, and have the characteristics of a good citizen' and 'those who have a resistant attitude' (p. 32). Those in the latter category are to be dealt with 'strictly, according to the law' and publicly denounced. Although the terminology is different and ostensibly recognises the rule of law, this is nevertheless continuous with the provisions of the 2006 manual, and subjects Protestant leaders to the arbitrary judgement of local officials.

The mandate to facilitate the return of ethnic minority people to their traditional beliefs, has its origin in the 2004 *Special Instructions Concerning the Protestant Religion* (01/2005/CT-TTg)

of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai,⁹ which is cited in lesson three, section IV: ‘Concerning the segment of society that followed the [Protestant] religion, and now have a need to return to the traditional beliefs of that ethnic group, create the conditions and help them realise that desire’. This reflects the highly questionable assumption that some ethnic minority people had converted to Protestantism under duress, and required rescue by the government. It is a cause of major concern that this provision, which provides a basis for forcible renunciations of faith, exists within the policy framework for religious activities.

The nature of how this instruction may be carried out is suggested in section IV.2.b of lesson three: ‘Organise propaganda and mobilisation for citizens to conserve and develop their cultural identity and the good traditional religious beliefs of the ethnic minorities, and to give up their backward customs, and simultaneously vigorously pursue economic and social development, raising the living standard and intellectual standard, with the goal of addressing the root causes of the unusual growth of the Protestant religion’ (p. 32). The final clause, of addressing the root causes of the flourishing of Protestantism, provides a context for interpreting the two preceding clauses. The notion of opposing Protestant growth by the promotion of traditional culture (here ‘the good traditional religious beliefs of the ethnic minorities’) is a method which has been commonly employed in the northern highlands. For example, CSW has heard testimony about the government funding of animist festivals in ethnic minority areas, which cultivate Christian tensions between animists and Christians, who may be uncomfortable with participating. The notion of promoting socio-economic development to support the objective of addressing the ‘unusual growth of the Protestant religion’ is rooted in the Marxist view that material betterment reduces the appeal of religion.

Without a full and unconditional prohibition on forcing renunciations of faith, the amended 2007 manual does not go far enough to address the problems of the original 2006 manual.

5.2.4. Deficiency of normalisation process

Three years after the promulgation of the *Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organisations* (21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11) and the *Decree on Religion* (22/2005/ND-CP) for its implementation, which sets out a process for the official registration of congregations, the 2007 manual continues to employ the terminology of ‘pilot projects’ with regard to registration (p. 33). Its stipulation for unregistered congregations is to ‘prepare conditions to consider resolving the issue at an appropriate time’; in the meantime, Protestants are to ‘continue religious practice in their homes’ (p. 33).

The deficiency in this process of normalisation is more significant in light of the statement in the 2007 manual that ‘In 2002 and 2003, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) unilaterally issued documents accepting into membership more than 500 branch churches in northwest mountainous provinces’ (p. 28).¹⁰ The term ‘unilateral’, implies government consternation at the decision of the church to extend recognition to these congregations without government permission. However, Article 11 of the constitution of the ECVN-N, which was approved by the government in 2004, provides that the authority to accept new congregations rests with the executive committee of the church. The government has given assent to the registration of a considerably smaller number of these congregations: unconfirmed indicators have suggested a maximum of 50, but the only known official list

⁹ 01/2005/CT-TTg, dated 4 February 2005.

¹⁰ This corresponds loosely to the actual situation, whereby the ECVN-N issued letters of acceptance to between 1,000-1,100 congregations Hmong and other ethnic minority churches, beginning in 2002. From 2003-04, the ECVN-N assisted 534 ethnic minority congregations to submit applications for registration, before being ordered to stop submitting applications.

provides eighteen. No confirmed reports exist which suggest that the number of registrations in the area is increasing.

The chronic deficiency in the normalisation process highlights a major inadequacy in Vietnam's current policy framework for religious activities, and brings into question its efficacy.