

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 24 May 2017

Evanglizing Post-Đổi Mới Vietnam: The Rise of Protestantism and the State’s Response

*Chung Van Hoang**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Though it has a shorter history than Catholicism, Protestantism is one of the fastest growing and dynamic faiths in Vietnam. Ushered in by American and Canadian missionaries, Protestantism became closely associated with the ethnic minorities in the highlands of the country. In 2014, the total number of Protestants among ethnic minorities was estimated to be 770,000.
- There is strong distrust between the state and these minorities, however, stemming from the way the faith is deeply intertwined with issues of Hmong identity and autonomy. In a series of protests over land rights and ethnic autonomy among the Hmong, it was found that the majority of protesters were new evangelical Protestant converts.
- The faith has also made inroads into urban areas. The total number of Protestants in the lowland was 650,000 in 2014, with new converts more likely to be young and better educated. The total number of Protestants in Vietnam as a whole is estimated at 1.5 million, a seven-fold increase from 1975.
- The Vietnamese state watches the religion closely and considers it as having a strong “foreign element” as most pastors are fluent in English and frequently travel out of the country.
- In an effort to monitor the religion the state issued Directive No. 01/2005/CT-TTg *On some tasks regarding Protestantism* in 2005. The directive makes it necessary for existing Protestant churches to apply to the government for official recognition and also requires new denominations and groups to register with the local authorities.

* *Chung Van Hoang is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute.*

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM

The Protestant community in Vietnam, present since 1911, has been a small one until the last decade of the 20th century. For much of the time, Protestant churches, missionaries, pastors, and followers in northern, central and southern Vietnam experienced difficulties in implementing missions and dealing with different political regimes. Until 1975, the total number of Protestants was around 200,000 and this number did not change over the following decade. However, since *Đổi mới* reforms began in 1986, Protestantism's growth has been phenomenal, with the community now estimated to be 1.5 million in size.

Protestantism has had a short history in Vietnam compared to other mainline religions. Although Roman Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam in 1533, the first evangelical missionaries arrived in 1911 from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), established by Canadian Pastor Albert Benjamin Simpson in Đà Nẵng. Upon establishing their initial base, these missionaries would embark on church planting missions in other cities such as Hanoi and Hải Phòng. However, the French administrators of Indochina applied restrictions over these missionaries because of the former's suspicion over the activities of North-American missionaries.¹

Only after the end of WWI did the French regime relax its regulation over Protestantism. More missionaries arrived in Đà Nẵng (Annam), Hanoi, Hải Phòng (Tonkin) and Cochinchina (later the South), resulting in the translation of the Bible into Vietnamese. By 1927, 87 missionary bases had been established and around 4,000 Vietnamese baptized. In the early 1930s, C&MA missionaries headed to remote upland areas and began evangelizing to the ethnic minorities.

The signing of the Geneva Agreement in 1954 put an end to the first Indochina war and Vietnam was temporarily divided into North and South. The Republic of Vietnam was established (1955-1975) in the South and favoured Catholicism while suppressing Buddhism and other indigenous religions such as Hòa Hảo Buddhism and Caodaisim. As a result, Protestantism moved to base itself in Saigon. This saw greater financial resources being poured into missions in the South, to the extent that by 1971 Protestant missionary activity was "a multiple million dollars enterprise".² Consequently the number of baptized Vietnamese increased beyond expectations. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, it was estimated that there were 70,000 ethnic minority Protestants from the Central Highlands while the total number of Protestants nationwide was 200,000.³

Protestantism fell into inactivity during the 1975-1985 period for two main reasons. First, new religious regulations were imposed by the communists government. Second, many missionaries and pastors who worked for or had close relationships with the former South

¹ Reginald Reimer, *The Protestant movement in Vietnam: Church growth in peace and war among the Ethnic Vietnamese*. MA thesis, California: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1972, p. 27.

² Reginald Reimer, 1972, p. 6.

³ Ban Tôn giáo chính phủ (Government Committee for Religious Affairs), *Religion and Religious policy in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Tôn giáo (Religion Publishing house), 2015, p. 125.

Vietnamese regime were put into re-education camps. All missionary and ministerial activities were postponed and all churches were technically closed. Religious practices were conducted at the individual level instead, and took place at “house churches”.

An incident in 1986 marked a turning point for Protestantism in Vietnam. In 1986-1987, short-wave radio programmes from Manila reached the ethnic Hmong in their language and hence gave them access to Protestantism. These programmes came from the church in Manila and were designed by the overseas Hmong community.⁴ The Evangelical Church in Vietnam (ECVN) in the North took the opportunity to send missionaries and bibles to the new believers, and missionaries from the US, Australia, Germany, South Korea also made their way into Hmong territories. An estimated one-third of the Hmong population converted to Protestantism with the numbers in the north-west region jumping from 1,000 in 1986 to 170,000 in 2014.⁵

After *Đổi mới* reforms began in 1986, pastors and evangelists of ECVN (South) who returned from re-education camps resumed their missions among the ethnic minorities in the Southern region and the Central Highlands. They soon met great success, especially among the Ê Đê in Đắk Lắk province and the Hmong who migrated to this region. By 2014, the total number of Protestant ethnic minorities reached 770,000 of which 550,000 resided in the Central Highlands, the coastal area of central and southern Trường Sơn range.⁶

Dynamic missions were also found in the lowland, especially in urban areas. The total number of Protestants in the lowland was 650,000 in 2014.⁷ New converts to Protestantism are from all walks of life but the faith has been especially popular among the young and better educated.

By 2010, nine Protestant Churches representing different denominations were granted legal status.⁸ In 2013, the religion was found to be present in 62 out of 64 provinces⁹ and in 2015 the total number of followers was roughly estimated to be at 1.5 million,¹⁰ a seven-fold increase from 1975. Although Protestantism has been the fastest growing faith since 1986, it faces many difficulties in terms of theology, religious competition, cultural conflict, and response from the political regime.

⁴ Tam T.T. Ngo, “Protestant conversion and social conflict: The case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam”. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2015, p. 280.

⁵ Ban Tôn giáo chính phủ, 2015, p. 129.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁸ Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, Vũ Văn Hoàng Hà, and Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, *Hỏi đáp chính sách của Đảng, Nhà nước về tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo (Q&A of Policy by Party and State on beliefs and religion)*. Hanoi: Chính trị Quốc gia (National politics), 2013, pp. 19-21.

⁹ Nguyen Cao Thanh, “Đạo Tin Lành ở Việt Nam từ 1975 đến nay: Tư liệu và một số đánh giá ban đầu” (Protestantism in Vietnam from 1975 to the present: Data and preliminary evaluation). Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

<http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/2737/Dao_Tin_lanh_o_Viet_Nam_tu_1975_d_en_nay_tu_lieu_va_mot_so_danh_gia_ban_dau> (accessed on February 2017).

¹⁰ Ban Tôn giáo chính phủ, 2015, p. 129.

PROTESTANTISM, ETHNIC MINORITIES AND IDENTITY

One of the foremost tasks of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is to maintain national solidarity and ethnic unity. This has been challenging because of the desire of some ethnic minority groups for autonomy, as well as the distrust between ethnic minorities and majority. Indeed, while there are a total of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, the 53 minority groups put together account only for 14 per cent (11 million) of the total population of 92 million. Most of these groups are scattered in remote and mountainous areas (except the Khmer and the Cham), along the borders with China, Laos, or Cambodia. These areas are often characterized by high mountains, thick forests, and unfavourable conditions for agriculture. The inhabitants there are therefore saddled with an underdeveloped infrastructure, a weak economy, high poverty rate, low-quality education, and an inadequate healthcare system.

A key source of distrust between the state and Protestant ethnic minorities stems from issues of Hmong identity and autonomy. For example, two thousands-strong protests erupted in the Central Highlands in 2001 and 2004. These were said to have been provoked and financially aided by the Montagnard Dega Association with assistance from members of the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO). Protesters wanted state authorities to return their ancestral land that was taken away by the Kinh and to expel the latter from the Central Highlands. They also demanded religious freedom and autonomy for all ethnic minorities in the region.¹¹ Another protest took place in 2011 in the mountainous province of Điện Biên in the North with hundreds of Hmong participants demanding land allocation to welcome their returning King.¹² Crucially, the majority of these protesters in 2001, 2004 and 2011 were new evangelical Protestant ethnic minorities.

Another challenge is the internal conflict between ethnic minorities who are Protestants and those who are not. Conflict and separation between the evangelical and non-evangelical Hmong, for example, are not unusual¹³, often resulting in discord within families, bloodlines, and between communities.¹⁴ The most contentious issue was the refusal of Protestants to continue the tradition of ancestor worship. This is complicated by

¹¹ Hoàng Hải Vân, Sự thật về vụ gây rối ở Tây Nguyên (Truth on social disrupt in Central Highlands). Vietnam Embassy in the U.S.

<<http://viet.vietnamembassy.us/tintuc/story.php?d=20040419142721>> (accessed February 2017)

¹² Vnexpress.net, “Vụ việc ở Mường Nhé được giải quyết trong hòa bình” (The Mường Nhé incident has been resolved in peace), 2011. <<http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/vu-viec-o-muong-nhe-duoc-giai-quyet-trong-hoa-binh-2194574.html>> (accessed February 2017).

¹³ Nguyễn Văn Thắng, *Giữ lý cũ hay theo lý mới: Bản chất của những cách phản ứng khác nhau của người Hmông ở Việt Nam với ảnh hưởng của Tin Lành* (Hold on to tradition or follow the new faith: nature and different reactions of the Hmong in Vietnam to Protestantism’s influences). Hanoi: Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội (Social Science) publishing house, 2009, pp. 115-116.

¹⁴ Đoàn Đức Phương, “Những chuyển biến trong đời sống tôn giáo của người Mông Tin Lành di cư ở tỉnh Đắk Lắk” (Changes in the religious life of the evangelical Hmong migrants in Đắk Lắk province). *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo (Religious Studies Review)*, Vol. 146, No. 08, 2015, pp.121-131.

the observation that “the converts believe that Protestantism is the only way to alter the ethnic group’s marginal status in Vietnam while the unconverted Hmong see conversion as a betrayal of Hmong ethnicity”.¹⁵ In the name of protecting cultural and ethnic identity, local authorities have actively intervened in attempted conversions and persuaded Protestant Hmongs to return to their folk traditions. In response, a large number of evangelicalized Hmong have migrated, partly to escape such interventions, and partly in the hope of escaping poverty and conflicts. Each year from 1992 to 2002, an estimated 3,000 Hmong migrated to Đắk Lắk and Lâm Đồng in the Central Highlands, the majority of them being Protestants.¹⁶ By 2014, 40,000 evangelicalized Hmong had migrated to the Central Highlands.¹⁷ This has in turn triggered fresh ethnic and religious challenges between the new Hmong settlers and the indigenous ethnic minorities.¹⁸

The role of pastors and missionaries is also crucial. Not only have they guided ethnic minorities spiritually, they have also aided them economically. The household income among Protestants in the upland areas has been growing for a variety of reasons including rejecting traditional customs such as expensive offerings at rituals and ceremonies, excessive drinking, and a general wasting of time and natural resources.¹⁹ They are also assisted in the learning of new skills, negotiating for lower interests for their loans, and in applying new economic models to their work.²⁰ As such these pastors and missionaries have more influence over evangelized ethnic minorities than local officials, resulting in the state’s fear that it may lose the loyalty of the ethnic minorities.

¹⁵ Tam T.T. Ngo, 2015, p. 274.

¹⁶ Nguyễn Trần Trọng, “Di cư tự do với sự phát triển kinh tế-xã hội Tây Nguyên” (Voluntary migration and socio-economical development in the Central Highlands), 2011. Communist Reviews. <<http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Nghiencuu-Traodoi/2011/11805/Di-cu-tu-do-voi-su-phat-trien-kinh-te-xa.aspx>> (accessed February 2017).

¹⁷ Government Committee for Religious Affair 2015. *Religion and Religious policy in Vietnam*, p. 129.

¹⁸ Vũ Trường Giang, “Về tình hình di dân tự do của người Hmông ở miền núi Thanh Hóa từ năm 1990 đến nay” (Regarding voluntary migration of the Hmong in mountainous Thanh Hóa from 1990 to present). *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Đông Nam Á (Southeast Asian Studies Review)*, No. 6, 2005, p. 76.

¹⁹ Nguyễn Quang Hưng, “Bàn thêm về nguyên nhân theo Tin Lành của một bộ phận người Hmông” (Further discussion on reasons to follow Protestantism among the Hmong population). *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo (Religious Studies Review)*, No. 06, Vol. 144, 2015, pp. 26-28.

²⁰ Ngọc Huyền, “Tam Nông” nơi làng đạo: Nông dân theo đạo Tin Lành làm kinh tế giỏi (Tam Nong: where Protestant farmers are doing good business), *Tạp chí Dân tộc và Phát triển (Ethnic and Development Review)*, 2008.

<<http://web.cema.gov.vn/modules.php?name=Content&op=details&mid=12253#ixzz3wKxReR6w>> (accessed February 2017).

PROTESTANTISM IN URBAN CENTRES AND THE RESPONSE OF THE STATE

Meanwhile Protestantism is quietly growing among the middle-class Kinh in the cities. Churches in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are busy during the weekdays and always full during Sunday services. Events such as Christmas celebrations by Assembly of God in Vietnam (Hội thánh Tin Lành tư gia) in 2009 attracted around 40,000 attendants in Hồ Chí Minh city and 12,000 in Hanoi.²¹

These churches are dynamic and expanding. Different divisions are set up for different ages from teenagers to older people, to facilitate Bible studies or to encourage members to provide social services. One million copies of the Bible were printed and distributed in Vietnam by the Religion Publishing house²² in 2014 alone, reflecting the great demand. Notably, an increasing number of Protestant church leaders and active members have joined political organizations such as the People's Committee and the Vietnamese Fatherland Front. Recently, a newly-baptized Protestant nominated herself as a candidate for the 14th National Assembly (2016).²³ These activities signal the state and the public's open recognition of the Protestants' presence and contribution and the initial steps taken by Protestants to engage with politics.

Protestant communities in the cities are also known for helping marginalized and vulnerable urban residents. Evangelical churches in Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City work closely with people who are afflicted by social dislocation, family break-ups, illness, and deprivation. Some Protestant services have successfully rehabilitated thousands of criminals, drug addicts, prostitutes, and persons with HIV, with many of these becoming converts. The state encourages Protestant churches' welfare services as it does with all other religious organizations. The state has openly recognised that religious organisations are better equipped to deliver social welfare services in certain areas due to the former's lack of funds, human resource, and welfare delivery experience. However, the worry that more Vietnamese will convert to Protestantism upon receiving such welfare looms large among the local authorities.

Nevertheless there remains a stigma attached to Protestantism. While the actual number of Protestants only accounts for over 1 per cent of the population, many ordinary people still maintain a distance from them because they believe that the government continues to keep a close watch over the Protestant community and its involvement in politics. The faith also

²¹ Trọng Thành, "Tại Việt Nam, các đêm Giáng sinh truyền giảng Tin Lành thu hút hàng chục ngàn người tham dự (In Vietnam, Christmas nights of evangelization attracted several ten thousand attendants), 2009. <http://www1.rfi.fr/actuvi/articles/120/article_6206.asp> (accessed February 2017).

²² Ban Tôn giáo chính phủ, 2015, p. 353.

²³ Phong Vũ, "Thêm người từ Showbiz tự ứng cử đại biểu Quốc hội" (More people from Showbiz nominate themselves as candidates for National Assembly), Vietnam.net, 2016. <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/giai-tri/nghe-si-ung-cu-quoc-hoi-294200.html> (accessed February 2017).

stands out because of the more visible ways it carries out its missions and organizes a community, its close association with Western values, and its intervention in social issues.

In addition to the reasons above, the Vietnamese state watches the faith closely because of its strong “foreign element”. Most pastors and missionaries based in the cities are fluent in English and move frequently in and out of the country. Meanwhile, foreign evangelical churches and organizations have been running programmes to assist the evangelical communities in remote upland areas. Furthermore, two-thirds of the 700 or so international NGOs presently active in Vietnam are faith-based organizations.²⁴

There are also Protestant-based NGOs that seek to explicitly promote religious freedom (even if they do not evangelize) through facilitating and supporting the government either in academic activities, training central and local officials, or boosting people-to-people diplomacy such as the Institute for Global Engagement (Washington DC) and Glocal.net at Northwood Church (Texas). The demand for greater religious freedom is expected to open the door to more intense evangelization, which presents a dilemma for the Vietnamese state.

To react to challenging issues brought by Protestantism, the Prime Minister proclaimed Directive No. 01/2005/CT-TTg *On some tasks regarding Protestantism* in 2005. The directive makes it necessary for existing Protestant churches to apply for official recognition and also requires new denominations and groups to register with local authorities. It was formulated essentially to tackle desires for greater religious freedom and foreign influence through religious groups. While the directive has had a cooling effect there are ground-level activities led by churches which continue to be monitored by the state.

CONCLUSION

In post-Đổi mới Vietnam, the expansion of Protestantism reflects, on the one hand, the struggle for success in the market economy and, on the other, the desire to escape from a marginal status. In the broader context, Protestantism has found its niche in the intersection between religious revivalism, Communism and capitalism.²⁵

Protestantism in Vietnam will continue to grow in scope and influence. The underlying challenge to the Vietnamese state lies in what the religion is perceived to usher in, be it

²⁴ Ủy ban Thường vụ Quốc hội (Standing Committee at National Assembly). *Hoạt động của các tổ chức phi chính phủ ở Việt Nam (Activities of foreign NGOs in Vietnam)*, 2014. <<http://www.ttb.gov.vn/Home/Default.aspx?portalid=52&tabid=108&catid=515&distid=3361>> (accessed February 2017).

²⁵ See: Oscar Salemink. *Is Protestant conversion a form of protest?: Urban and upland Protestants in Southeast Asia*. In: *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, eds. Julius Bautista, Francis Khek Gee Lim. Oxon: Routledge, 2009, pp. 37-52.

Western-style democracy, stronger civil society, an emphasis on religious morality over secularism, and a demand for religious autonomy.

As such, the state will continue to fine-tune laws and policies to better guarantee the right to religious freedom according to international standards while closely monitoring the activities of the Protestant community.

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Assistant Editors: Vandana Prakash Nair, and Veena Nair</p>
---	--	--