

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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The State and the Resurgence of Popular Religiosity in Viet Nam

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Popular religion has seen a resurgence in post- *Đổi mới* Vietnam. Temple rituals and festivals have been on the rise.
- Challenges that come with this resurgence include public safety issues; high expenditure on offerings and heavy burdens on household incomes; a thriving religious economy and the emergence of spiritual entrepreneurs; and increasing claims to religious freedom.
- The Vietnamese state has found it politically expedient to view religion as a source of values and morality to be protected and upheld in the face of global and regional integration.
- The recently upgraded Law on Beliefs and Religion enhances the state's powers to regulate popular religion.

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THE RESURGENCE OF POPULAR RELIGION

Popular religion has seen a resurgence in post-*Đổi mới* Vietnam. Taken here to mean folk beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*), tribal religions, the practice of extra-sensory perception, and other as yet unrecognized religions, popular religion's rise is going against the grain of the Vietnamese state's anti-religious stance. A clear sign of this is the renovation and restoration of private and community shrines, as well as local temples for worshipping local spirits, deities, and national heroes. Meanwhile, traditional festivals are becoming commonplace and widely participated in. Once decried by state authorities as "superstition", "outdated customs", or "ashes of feudal regimes", practices such as rites to village tutelary gods or spirits and deities, not to mention cultic activities dedicated to Mother Goddesses and community or national heroes, are now relatively widespread. As a consequence of this, fortune-tellers, amulet-makers, exorcists and spirit mediums have found a vibrant religious market to make a good living by serving their clients' desire for blessings and to ward off bad luck.

A majority of the nearly 8,000 cultural festivals in Vietnam are religious in nature. Major ones attract large numbers of local and trans-local pilgrims and tourists. It was estimated that eight million people visited the Hùng kings temple during the seven-day festival in 2016. On the most important day, the number of visitors reached two and a half million.¹

CHALLENGES OF THE RESURGENCE

This resurgence has come with a set of challenges. The first is the concern for public order and safety. In a bid to outshine each other, local authorities compete to promote their festivals and attract tourists by creating "national records" in terms of securing larger worshipping spaces, more numerous offerings, or higher quantity of performers. For example, the legendary Hùng kings festival, different localities boasted of significant ritual offerings. One touted its "largest traditional rice cake" which weighted 4.3 tons (Hung Yên province in 2014)² while another boasted of its "largest bottle of alcohol" measuring 4,000 litres (Phú Thọ province in 2010)³, both of which required a large number of ritual performers. However, visitors complain about the unprofessional and low-quality services provided by organizers of the festivals. The influx of curious visitors often makes the local traffic difficult to control and contributes to the pollution of the local environment. Meanwhile concerns are raised over the brutal killing of livestock like pigs, buffalos and chicken in public space as sacrifice. Moreover, the high frequency with which such festivals and rituals like spirit possession are organized have led some to complain about their authenticity.

¹ Hùng kings are considered to be both legendary and historical ancestors of the Vietnamese. Their main temple is now located in Phú Thọ province of North Vietnam. The anniversary of their death is turned into the 7-day national festival. <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/2-5-trieu-khach-chen-nhau-ngay-gio-to-ca-nghin-can-h-sat-duoc-huy-dong-300255.html> (accessed 28 May 2017).

² <http://www.baomoi.com/dac-san-viet-nam-va-nhung-ky-luc-to-nhat-ky-quac/c/19190097.epi> (accessed 17 June 2017).

³ <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/tuyentruyenhiennhap/item/32367102-lam-phat-ky-luc.html> (accessed 15 June 2017).

Secondly, the resurgence of popular religion has been a drain on household incomes and time. The high season of annual festival takes place between the first and third month of the lunar calendar and during this period, both villagers and state officials will take leave from work to go on pilgrimage. Meanwhile worshippers continue to spend increasingly more on offerings and donation at the sacred places. During my fieldwork in April and May 2017 in Bắc Ninh province, I was told by festival organizers that they would receive US\$25,000 a day during the height of the festival for the Lady of Treasure. In fact, public donations have been increasing year after year as the Temple for the Lady of Treasure now attracts visitors from all parts of the nation. From my observation it is not uncommon for a person or family to spend US\$5,000 or even US\$15,000 on private rituals performed at home or at a temple. More broadly, according to a newspaper report, it was unofficially estimated that in the late 2000s, Vietnamese burnt 40,000 tons of votive paper and objects for offerings. Notably, in Hanoi alone, residents spent around US\$20,000,000 annually for burnt offerings.⁴ This increase in religious expenditure is not only a waste of resources but also contributes to air pollution which has become a major challenge facing Hanoi today.

Thirdly, popular religion has given rise to a thriving religious economy. Temple mediums, spiritual masters, fortune-tellers and the like have become spiritual entrepreneurs. These spiritual entrepreneurs make money from clients who seek advice and solutions to problems such as illnesses, broken relationships, family crises, and failures in business. It is not uncommon for spiritual entrepreneurs to invent new rituals and demand new requirements for offerings in order to “bribe” the spirits and “fight” the evils, thus increasing their income. Such practices have entrenched the religious economy in Vietnam where entrepreneurs are better at selling spiritual services than demonstrating moral practices. Nevertheless the commercialisation of successful festivals is beneficial to local economies which, in turn, draws in support from local authorities. As such, there is little incentive for regulation.

Fourthly, this religious economy and spiritual entrepreneurs have spearheaded innovation and creativity with regards to religious beliefs and practices. New religious groups have emerged to offer alternatives to old ones. A characteristic of these new groups is the borrowing and mixing of doctrines from established religions and popular religion to create their own beliefs and communities. For example, there are many groups across the nation with several thousands members who worship Hồ Chí Minh – the very symbol of the Vietnamese Communist Party – as a brave new Jade Buddha. The activities and impact of these underground communities challenge the party-state's official ideology and the authorities' management of unrecognized religious groups.

Fifth, practitioners of popular religion increasingly claim the right to religious freedom. This is different from established religions which are framed as cultural traditions and historic customs. This claim of the right to religious freedom requires legal grounds. However, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Home Affairs insists that it only regulates state-recognized religious organizations, and is thus not in charge of popular religion. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism argues that it has no legal basis to handle festivals, activities and spaces with inherent religious elements.

⁴ <http://www.thanhniennews.com/travel/hanoi-village-enters-third-year-of-votive-paper-ban-29750.html> (accessed 30 May 2017).

Without any official ministry or law to appeal to, the claim to the right to religious freedom remains indeterminate.

In short, the biggest public concern is that while religious practitioners struggle for more freedom, validity and legitimacy to practice their beliefs, they have not shown corresponding responsibility towards public interests, and this is where many feel that the state should intervene.

THE STATE'S RESPONSE

Before *Đổi mới*, “religion” was officially defined through state-recognized religious organizations while most types of popular religion were seen as “folk beliefs”. Likened to superstition, these “folk beliefs” were said to hinder societal progress and were thus marginalised and eliminated. Since *Đổi mới*, there has been a shift in the official evaluation of the role of religion in national development towards a more inclusive approach. The state now sees religion as a source of values and morality to be maintained, protected and upheld. Indigenous and traditional values are emphasized to assist the Vietnamese in global and regional integration. Such changes in the official approach to religion also reflects how the state is responding to the concerns over religious freedom raised by international NGOs and agencies such as Human Right Watch,⁵ the US Commission of international religious freedom,⁶ and the Institute of Global Engagement.⁷

In addressing such internal and external pressures, the state has slowly begun to build a specific legal framework. The first important legal document was the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religion (introduced 2004) and its associated guidelines for execution. The Ordinance was recently upgraded to the Law on Beliefs and Religion which will be passed in November 2017 and will come into effect in January 2018. Notably, the new Law designates the whole of Chapter 3 with 6 articles for managing popular religion.⁸ While the Chapter provides specific definitions of such terms as “religious beliefs”, “religious festivals”, “activities of religious beliefs”, and “bases of religious beliefs”, it also stipulates procedures and conditions for the organization of a religious ritual and related activities. Clearly, the scope of state regulation of religion has been significantly expanded.

⁵ See its 2001 report at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/wr2k1/asia/vietnam.html>; and 2016 report at: <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/vietnam.pdf> (accessed 3 July 2017).

⁶ See its assessment of the tenth year since Vietnam was removed from the List of “Country of Particular Concern” at: <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam.%20Assessing%20the%20Country%20of%20Particular%20Concern%20Designation%2010%20Years%20after%20its%20Removal.pdf> . Accessed 3rd July 2017.

⁷ For example, see its views at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15570274.2016.1184452> (accessed 3rd July 2017).

⁸ See the Introduction to the Law and its full text at: <http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/248/0/10478/Gioi-thieu-Luat-Tin-nguon-ton-giao> (accessed 19 June 2017).

In practice, the increase of the state's management of popular religion can be seen in the tighter regulation of rituals and performances. Along with issuance of various resolutions, directives and guidelines, the state has selectively legitimized popular religion by classifying festivals, granting licenses (nearly 8,000 festivals), and upgrading certain festivals into national events. Notably the Death Anniversary of the Hùng kings has been recognized as a national ceremony and has been a public holiday since 2007. Spirit possession ceremonies associated with the cult of Mother Goddesses in the Central and Northern regions have been upgraded from superstition and a forbidden activity to a state-recognised cultural-religious activity. In 2015, the government submitted a dossier on the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms to UNESCO for recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The dossier was approved in April 2017⁹ and there are now plans for its religious practices to be promulgated nationally and internationally. At local levels, authorities have actively helped communities restore and renovate old sacred spaces and the associated rituals and festivals. They also provide local communities with detailed instructions and suggestions so that ritual performances and the organization of festivals do not contravene political and cultural programmes and legal frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Religiosity looks set to grow as Vietnam develops. This is because religion offers possible solutions to the feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty associated with modern life. Many Vietnamese also participate in these practices as a form of entertainment and relaxation after attaining some level of affluence. Festivals associated with religious rites are held to please the sacred entities in exchange for good crops, peace, security, fertility, and prosperity. But many localities also see the organization of community festivals as a practical way to reinforce their solidarity and autonomy, and to boost the local economy.

Although the state has positively linked religion to the nation's developmental strategy and updated legal documents accordingly, its current approach and management of popular religion have been criticised by religious practitioners for its ambiguity and inconsistency. One of the key problems is that the distinction made between "beliefs" and "religion" creates more problems than practical solutions for the regulation of diverse religious worldviews. The state thus needs to work towards a coherent legal framework for managing religion.

⁹ <http://vietnamnews.vn/life-style/373968/viet-nams-mother-goddesses-receive-unescos-recognition-certificate.html#t5rFLooJFcDRZk8.99> (accessed 31 May 2017).

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