

# The Impact of Policies on Religious Security in Vietnam Today

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## Abstract

Religion is a crucial factor in the cultural, social, and political life of Vietnam, where a diversity of religions and beliefs exists. This paper analyzes the impact of religious policies on religious security in the current context. Since the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist Party and State have consistently upheld a policy of respecting freedom of belief and religion, viewing it as a key strategy in building national solidarity. All religions in Vietnam are equal before the law, and any acts that exploit religion for political purposes or cause public disorder are strictly dealt with. Vietnam's religious policies have undergone significant positive changes, especially since the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, with the improvement of the legal framework and the enactment of regulatory documents such as the Law on Belief and Religion [1], which has facilitated the stable and appropriate development of religious activities in line with societal progress. Officially recognized religious organizations, along with charitable, educational, and healthcare activities operated by religious groups, have made important contributions to social welfare and national development. However, religious issues also present challenges, such as the exploitation of religion for subversive purposes, causing political instability. As a result, the management of religion is a sensitive and complex area that requires careful consideration to both protect religious freedom and maintain social security and order.

**Keywords:** Religion, security, policy, religious freedom, national solidarity

## Introduction

From a legal perspective, religion is understood as "human belief that exists with a system of concepts and activities, including worship objects, doctrines, religious laws, rituals, and organization" (Law on Belief and Religion, 2016). Religion is not only a matter of spiritual and emotional life but also a cultural and ethical issue, serving as a social behavior regulator that guides individuals toward truth, goodness, and beauty. Religion has a deep influence on many aspects of social life, fulfilling multiple functions in society, each with its strengths and limitations. To ensure freedom of religion and promote positive aspects while minimizing negative ones, the State must manage religious activities in alignment with the overall development of society. This is also a complex and sensitive field that attracts both domestic and international attention, as it can be exploited to divide national solidarity and cause political and social instability. The influence of international conditions, the negative impacts of globalization, and the market economy, along with the hostile forces' schemes to "politicize religion," can potentially affect Vietnam's religious life,

creating many risks, including the misuse of religious activities to violate laws or exploit management gaps to distort the Party's policies and the State's laws. Internal conflicts, power struggles, and religious activities that deviate from ethical and cultural norms, including profiteering and moral decay within religious organizations, are also concerns. These issues not only complicate religious management but also provide opportunities for hostile forces to create divisions between religion and the government, between believers and non-believers, and to carry out activities that disrupt political and social stability. Recognizing this, Vietnam has emphasized "respecting freedom of belief and religion" as a key policy since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945, which has been consistently reaffirmed in all Party Congress documents since then. The State has strengthened the legal framework and enacted regulations related to religion, most notably the Law on Belief and Religion (Law No. 02/2016/QH14, effective January 1, 2018) and Decree No. 162/2017/ND-CP, dated December 30, 2017, which provides detailed regulations for implementing the Law on Belief and Religion.

## Research Methodology

This paper utilizes a document-based research method combined with policy analysis to evaluate the impact of religious policies on religious security in Vietnam. Specifically, the research draws on legal documents and materials published by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs and relevant agencies, including the Law on Belief and Religion [1], associated decrees, and summary reports on religious affairs and religious management. Additionally, the research compiles statistical data and reports from religious organizations to analyze the development of religions in Vietnam and the relationship between religious policies and security matters.

The content analysis method is applied to interpret changes in religious policies over various historical periods, highlighting both the positive impacts and limitations of these policies on societal stability. Furthermore, case studies on policy changes following the Doi Moi reforms (1986) are used to illustrate the progress and challenges in religious management in Vietnam today.

## Results and Discussion

Vietnam officially recognizes 16 religions with approximately 26 million followers, 55,000 clergy members, over 130,000 religious workers, and nearly 28,000 places of worship [2]. Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the early Common Era, and today it has nearly 14 million followers, over 30,000 clergy members, nearly 68,000 religious workers, approximately 18,000 places of worship, and 40 training institutions across the country [3]. Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam in the 16th century and currently has over 7 million followers, more than 4,000 priests, 44 bishops, one cardinal, over 16,000 monks and nuns, and more than 5,500 churches and chapels nationwide [3]. The Cao Dai religion, which originated in Vietnam in the early 20th century, now has about 2.5 million followers, nearly 12,500 clergy members, nearly 23,000 religious workers, and approximately 1,300 places of worship spread across 37 provinces, mainly in the southern and central regions [3].

Hoa Hao Buddhism, established in 1939, is considered one of the efforts to reform Buddhism in the southern region, founded by Huynh Phu So (1919-1946) in Hoa Hao village, Phu Tan district, An Giang province. Today, it has approximately 1,450,000 followers and 100 temples scattered throughout the Mekong Delta provinces [3]. Protestantism was introduced to Vietnam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and now has over 1.12 million followers across more than 100 organizations and denominations. The Pure Land Buddhist Association, founded by Nguyen Van Bong (1886-1958) in Dong Thap in 1934, now has about 600,000 followers, 900,000 members, nearly 6,000 clergy and religious workers, over 900 doctors and nurses, and 210 places of worship (assembly halls), which also serve as 210 traditional medicine clinics across 25 provinces, mainly in the south [4].

Islam was peacefully introduced to Vietnam between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries alongside the decline of the Champa kingdom. It now has approximately 80,000 followers (50,000 Bani Muslims and 30,000 Islam Muslims), with 89 places of worship (64 mosques and 25 Bani temples) [3]. The Baha'i Faith has about 7,000 followers spread across 45 provinces, mainly in the central and southern regions [4]. Buu Son Ky Huong, founded by Doan Minh Huyen in 1849 in Long Kien commune, Cho Moi district, An Giang province, currently has more than 10,000 followers, 90 clergy members, and 18 places of worship, mainly in several southern provinces such as An Giang, Dong Thap, Ba Ria Vung Tau, Long An, Soc Trang, Vinh Long, and Tien Giang [4].

The Tà Lon Buddhist sect was founded by Nguyen Ngoc An in 1915 in Kien Giang, and today has around eight places of worship and 65,000 followers in An Giang, Can Tho, Dong Thap, and Kien Giang [4]. The Four Debts of Gratitude sect was founded in 1867 by Ngo Loi in An Giang, and it now has around 62,000 followers, 476 clergy members, and 76 places of worship in 16 provinces, mainly in the southern regions such as An Giang, Dong Thap, Can Tho, Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, Tien Giang, Kien Giang, and Ba Ria Vung Tau [4].

Brahmanism originated in ancient India around the 10th century BC and was introduced to Vietnam in the early Common Era. Today, there are around 54,000 Cham Brahmins, with over 400 clergy members and religious workers, and 42 places of worship, mainly in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces [4].

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Vietnam was officially recognized by the Southeast Asia Union in 1929. Today, the church has more than 16,000 followers spread across 32 provinces and cities, primarily in the central and southern regions, such as Lam Dong, Dak Lak, Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Thap, Dong Nai, Binh Phuoc, Binh Duong, Can Tho, Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Khanh Hoa, Tien Giang, Phu Yen, and Quang Tri [4].

Minh Su Dao originated from the Southern Zen Buddhist sect of China's eighth-century Buddhist Zen School, officially founded by Hoang Duc Huy in 1623 in Jiangxi province, China. Minh Su Dao was introduced to Vietnam from China in 1863 and is commonly referred to as Dai Dao. Today, it has around 10,000 followers, over 500 clergy members, more than 1,200 religious workers, and 53 places of worship in 19 provinces, mainly in the south [4].

Minh Ly Dao - Tam Tong Mieu was founded in 1924 in Saigon and now has more than 1,000 followers, spread across Ho Chi Minh City, Long An, and Ba Ria Vung Tau [4].

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was introduced to Vietnam in 1962 and now has about 1,000 followers, mainly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City [4].

No country can avoid mistakes or shortcomings in its policies and laws regarding religion, and it cannot achieve perfection

overnight. Vietnam is no exception, having previously implemented a rigid atheism policy that restricted religion without transforming society enough to prevent people from turning to religion as their “last resort” or “final hope.” This limitation was addressed after the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party (1986), leading to fundamental changes in religious policies. From 1986 to 2017, the Party, State, and various ministries in Vietnam issued over 30 legal documents on religion, including notable ones like Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW (2003), Announcement No. 119-TB/TW (2003), Announcement No. 160-TB/TW (2004), Regulation No. 123-QD/TW (2004), Announcement No. 121-TB/TW (2004), Announcement No. 148-TB/TW (2008), Conclusion No. 57/KL-TW (2009), Conclusion No. 58/KL-TW (2009), Conclusion No. 08/KL-TW (2011), Directive No. 23/CT-TW (2013), Announcement No. 150/TB-TW (2013), Conclusion No. 101/KL-TW (2014), Ordinance on Belief and Religion No. 21/PL-UBTVQH11 [5], Law on Belief and Religion [1], and several decrees and regulations.

Since 1986, the Party and State’s political documents have consistently affirmed the implementation of a policy of religious freedom, without discrimination against citizens based on religion, and recognizing the ethical values of religion as having much in common with communist ideals. Religious communities are also national communities within the unified bloc of national solidarity. Religion is a spiritual need of the people and will continue to exist alongside the nation in the process of building socialism. The Party and State have thus recognized religious communities as stable realities and have created a reliable communication network within the faith community and society. Religion plays a role in assisting the State in maintaining moral order and social stability, cooperating with the government in implementing social welfare policies such as healthcare, education, rural development, poverty alleviation, charity, and social security. Moreover, in Vietnam, religions are present in political and social institutions as full-fledged participants in the right to religious freedom for their followers.

In the past, some Communist Parties and socialist states viewed religion as backward and misguided, placing little expectation on religion in solving human problems. In Vietnam, religion and cultural identity are seen as important factors in creating a common foundation for patriotism and national consciousness. Many studies in Vietnam have increasingly emphasized the role of religion in transforming individual lifestyles, behaviors, and societal attitudes in various areas such as occupation, communication, ethics, lifestyle, customs, traditions, science, environment, and human rights. The relationship between the State and religion has gradually shifted from ideological conflict to persuasion, cooperation, and mutual support. Since the Doi Moi (Renewal) period, along with changes in perceptions of religion, the Party and State have developed clear policies on religion and a coherent relationship between politics and religion, based on the principle that religious policy is no longer an ideological struggle. Implementing this political perspective, Vietnam’s religious

policy has become increasingly aligned with international law and conventions on religious freedom, upholding the State’s responsibility to protect religious freedom through several key aspects.

Regarding religious activities of followers: All religious activities of followers at home and places of worship, according to traditional laws and rites, have been restored. Directive No. 01/CT-TTg opened the registration for collective religious activities, not only for Protestantism but also for other religions. Notably, large-scale religious events have been held, including Vesak 2008, Vesak 2014, and Vesak 2019 for Buddhism; the 2010 Catholic Holy Year Opening Ceremony; the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Protestantism in Vietnam in 2011; and the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (1517-2017), with the participation of tens of thousands of domestic and international followers.

Regarding the recognition of religious organizations: Before the Doi Moi (Renovation) period, only three religious organizations were recognized: the Vietnam Evangelical Church (1958), the Vietnam Bishops’ Conference (1980), and the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (1981). Since Doi Moi and up to 2020, the government has recognized 38 religious organizations, with four more granted registration, bringing the total number of recognized religious organizations with legal status to 41. It can be said that most religions in Vietnam now operate normally in terms of organization and are regulated by law [6].

Regarding religious clergy training: Before Doi Moi, there were only a few training institutions, leading to “underground” training activities. Now, the country has 62 religious clergy training institutions, including 17 at the university level (four Buddhist academies, nine Catholic seminaries, and three Protestant Bible schools), with over 10,000 students. Additionally, 1,200 clergy members have pursued master’s and doctoral studies abroad.

Regarding religious publication: Before Doi Moi, there were hardly any religious publications. Since the establishment of the Religious Publishing House in 1999, more than 500 titles with millions of copies are published annually. Specifically, more than one million copies of the Bible have been printed. Additionally, there are 15 newspapers and magazines that serve as media outlets for religious organizations.

Regarding land, construction, and renovation of places of worship: Currently, religious organizations in Vietnam have over 30,000 places of worship, all of which have been restored or renovated. Of these, about 40% have undergone large-scale renovations, and nearly 10,000 new places of worship have been built. Some have been constructed on a grand scale, such as the Truc Lam Tay Thien Monastery (5.2 hectares in Vinh Phuc), Truc Lam Ham Rong Monastery (10 hectares in Thanh Hoa), Truc Lam Phu Lam Monastery (19.5 hectares in Quang Nam), and the Bai Dinh Pagoda complex (539 hectares) and Tam Chuc Pagoda complex (5,100 hectares) [7].

Regarding operational guidelines: Religious organizations in Vietnam, once recognized by the government, have established and strived to implement operational guidelines that align with national interests and comply with the law. Buddhism's guideline is "Dharma - Nation - Socialism," while the Vietnamese Catholic Church's is "Living the Gospel in the Heart of the Nation." Protestantism follows the motto "Living the Gospel, Serving God, Serving the Nation," Cao Dai is "Glory to the Nation, Brightness to the Religion," and Hoa Hao Buddhism follows "For Dharma and the Nation" [8]. By adhering to these progressive guidelines, religious organizations actively participate in charitable activities, contributing to addressing societal issues, from the struggles against French colonialism and U.S. imperialism to the new social issues that have arisen.

Regarding charitable social activities: Before Doi Moi, religious charitable activities were not given much attention and were mostly spontaneous. Currently, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha operates 150 Tuệ Tĩnh clinics, 655 traditional medicine clinics, 10 general clinics, and 1,000 charity classes. The Vietnam Catholic Church runs 189 healthcare and rehabilitation centers, 159 facilities for the disabled and orphans, and 797 preschools [9].

Regarding international relations: Before Doi Moi, religious international activities were limited, except for some Buddhist activities within the framework of the Asian Buddhist Conference for Peace (ABCP) and Catholic ordinations from the Vatican. During the Doi Moi period, the international relations of religious organizations expanded significantly. Between 2005 and 2013, 205 foreign religious delegations visited Vietnam, and 1,343 Vietnamese religious delegations went abroad. To date, the Vietnamese government has agreed to allow the Vatican to appoint a permanent representative (with the function of a nuncio or ambassador) to handle relations with the Catholic Church in Vietnam and the Vietnamese state [7].

In addition to the positive changes in religious activities, the Vietnamese government has successfully addressed religious issues that have arisen in ethnic minority regions in the northern mountains and the Central Highlands, particularly related to Protestantism. The government has also effectively implemented special policies for the Khmer people in the South, who follow Theravada Buddhism. Since Directive No. 01/CT-TTg (2004) was issued, efforts to resolve cultural conflicts have been combined with the implementation of economic, cultural, and social development policies. In the Central Highlands and the Northwest, Protestant religious activities have been normalized, with Protestant groups in villages registering their activities with local authorities.

By the end of 2020, in the Northwest, nine congregations were officially recognized, and nearly 800 Protestant groups had registered their religious activities with local authorities. Unregistered groups continued to hold religious activities as usual

while preparing for registration as per the regulations. Alongside the registration of these groups, religious clergy training is also being carried out. Several Northwest provinces have progressed toward recognizing Protestant congregations and the construction of places of worship. Meanwhile, in the Central Highlands, 311 congregations have been officially recognized, and 1,400 Protestant groups in villages have registered their religious activities with local authorities [10]. Furthermore, other religious activities in the Central Highlands, such as the publication of religious texts (the Bible has been translated into the Ede, Bana, and Jarai languages), the establishment of congregations, clergy training, and the construction and renovation of places of worship, have all proceeded as usual. Local authorities and relevant sectors have made significant efforts to implement these activities, achieving important results. As for Theravada Buddhism among the Khmer people, the government approved the establishment of the Khmer Theravada Buddhist Academy in Can Tho in 2006. By 2022, six classes had been trained with over 200 monks. During this period, nearly 100 Theravada Khmer monks pursued master's and doctoral studies abroad in countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and India. To meet the demand for reading, study, and research among monks and Theravada Khmer Buddhist followers, the government supported the printing of 208,300 Theravada Buddhist scriptures from 2004 to 2014, along with the distribution of original Pali Canon texts and Khmer-language Buddhist scriptures (156 sets in Tra Vinh, 60 sets in An Giang, 75 sets in Kien Giang, 52 sets in Soc Trang, three sets each in Vinh Long and Tay Ninh) [11].

Overall, Vietnam's current religious policy has shifted markedly toward reducing administrative procedures for registering religious activities and other religion-related matters. The policy is flexible, addressing the legitimate needs of religious organizations such as establishing, merging, appointing, and promoting clergy members; organizing religious activities involving foreign elements; constructing places of worship; conducting charitable social activities; and hosting international religious conferences and forums. Religious holidays are treated as national celebrations, with the participation of high-ranking leaders at religious ceremonies reflecting the openness and friendliness between the government and religious communities. Through political agendas, religious policies, and programs mobilizing the people for national construction, unity, and cultural preservation, the government has promoted religious activities that help preserve and enhance traditional cultural values, contributing to the nation's development. The renewal in Vietnam's religious policies and laws has brought about a revitalization of religious life. According to statistics from the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, as of 2019, Vietnam had recognized 43 organizations from 16 religions (a 250% increase compared to the pre-Doi Moi period). The number of followers is approximately 26.3 million people (a 12% increase), with 27,916 places of worship (a 15.2% increase),



about 53,000 clergy members (a 55% increase), and 133,662 religious workers (a 69% increase). Religious training institutions have rapidly expanded during the Doi Moi period (Buddhism has three academies and 44 training centers at various levels: primary, secondary, and university). Catholicism has seven major seminaries, and Theravada Buddhism among the Khmer people has one academy. The number of religious books and publications has increased, with the Religious Publishing House (under the Government Committee for Religious Affairs) alone publishing more than 400 religious titles annually, in addition to religious books, newspapers, and magazines published by religious organizations themselves. Since 1986, the influx of funds into the religious sector has surged, leading to the construction of many new, large-scale religious structures. The number of religious delegations traveling abroad and visiting Vietnam for activities such as missionary work, conferences, seminars, and retreats has also significantly increased. Overall, religious organizations have operated stably, aligning with national interests, expanding their charitable activities, contributing to social welfare, vocational education, the care of disabled children, those with terminal illnesses, and the elderly living in isolation. Religious organizations are also increasingly participating in political life, with representation in the National Assembly, People's Councils at various levels, the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and the Committee for Catholic Solidarity. International negotiations involving religious issues in Vietnam have also increased significantly in recent years.

### Conclusion

In the current context, where religion is not only a part of spiritual life but also has significant influence on culture, society, and politics, developing and implementing religious policies is essential for ensuring the country's stability and sustainable development. Since the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Party and the State have consistently emphasized religious management, highlighting the freedom of belief and religious equality for all citizens. The introduction of the Law on Belief and Religion [1], along with detailed regulations, demonstrates the State's commitment to creating an environment where religious activities can be conducted freely, transparently, and fairly. This policy not only meets the religious needs of the people but also contributes to building national unity, helping to maintain societal stability and peace.

However, in the face of globalization and the rapidly changing social environment, Vietnam's religious policies also face numerous challenges. Hostile forces are constantly seeking to exploit religion to cause disorder, divide national unity, and create political instability. This requires the State not only to maintain flexibility in its religious policies but also to take decisive measures to prevent and address the misuse of religion for political

purposes. At the same time, it is necessary to enhance public education and awareness regarding religious policies to improve citizens' understanding of their rights and responsibilities in practicing belief and religion.

A highlight of Vietnam's religious policy is its encouragement of religious organizations to participate in social activities, such as healthcare, education, charity, and social welfare. These activities not only strengthen religious faith within communities but also contribute to improving the quality of life for the people, particularly in remote areas where economic and social conditions remain difficult.

In general, Vietnam's religious policies have made significant strides in ensuring religious freedom, maintaining social order and security, and promoting the role of religion in the country's development. However, as the international and domestic situation becomes increasingly complex, Vietnam must continue to pursue flexible policies that are appropriate to the current realities while strengthening the legal framework to address new challenges. This will ensure sustainable development and harmony between religious life and the stability and security of the nation.

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