

“Religious Roots of the 2001 Ethnic Minorities Uprising in Vietnam’s Central Highlands”

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Fourth Triennial Vietnam Symposium –April 2002
Texas Tech University - Lubbock Texas

“Those who protest injustice are people of true merit.” – Ho Chi Minh¹

The western plateau (Tay Nguyen) of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), commonly called the Central Highlands, was the setting in early 2001 of demonstrations by ethnic highlanders who, for the purposes of this paper I will call Montagnards.² Initial response by state-run media was to cast the event as the result of legitimate grievances over land rights exacerbated by local mismanagement and general economic under-development.³ This soon changed when media reinterpreted it as the result of an anti-communist exile group in the U.S. which instigated separatism/sessionism among the Montagnards. Further, state-run media blamed evil elements which “abused religion” threatening national unity. Further, they identified “Dega Religion” as an illegal ally aimed to stir locals to seek a independent ethnic state. The uprisings initially took place in Pleiku (Gia-Lai), Buon Ma Thuot (Dak-Lak) and later spread to Kon-Tum (Kon Tum) and is estimated to have involved as many as 30,000 people.⁴

In February the area was sealed off to all expatriates, NGO workers, foreign embassy personnel, and news journalists and tight security measures were taken to deal with the local population.⁵ International news services in September 2001 indicate that 14 members from several ethnic groups in Gai Lai and Daklak provinces were sentenced to prison terms of six to 12 years. Human rights advocates have taken notice of the exodus of hundreds of ethnic minorities into the border jungles between Cambodia and Vietnam to escape pressure placed on them by civilian and military police. Thus what began as a mostly non-violent “disturbance” escalated into a major conflict involving destruction of public property followed by brutal government reprisals.

The cause of the unrest is a complex of economic, social, cultural and religious issues. However, the religious element seems to be a smoldering pre-uprising factor and one which is likely to remain as a long-term challenge to stability in the region.

¹ From “Word Play” in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966*, ed. Bernard B. Fall, (Signet Books, The New American Library, 1967), 137.

² The Vietnamese officially call them *Dan Toc Thieu So* (Ethnic minorities). “Dega” is a name which some of the ethnic minorities embrace while most others strongly reject.

³ Acknowledged in letter of Vietnam’s Press attaché, Embassy of Vietnam, in letter to the *Washington Times*, January 23, 2002 .

⁴ Kay Reibald’s letter to the Editor in the February 17, 2002 *Washington Times*.

⁵ So tight were SRV restrictions that authorities would not allow the author to attend the local ECVN Sunday church service when he was in Hue in March 2001. No reasons were given.

The purpose of this paper is to separate out the varied strands which intertwine to explain the religious roots of the uprising as well as to identify the government's response which includes extra-judicial acts and highly questionable interpretation of articles of religious freedom found in its national constitution.

THE FEBRUARY 2001 DEMONSTRATIONS

Government accounts indicate that on February 2, 2001, about 1000 demonstrators marched before provincial offices in Dak-Lak's capital Pleiku protesting the arrest and jailing of two Gia-Rai men, Ralan Bon and Ralan Djan on January 29.⁶ The charges were "violating the law" and "inciting division among the national-unity bloc."⁷ Petitions were presented demanding resolution of conflicts over Kinh encroachment on tribal lands. Demonstrations elsewhere continued on February 3-6 in the nearby provincial capitals Buon Ma Thuot and Kon-Tum and surrounding villages. In the ensuing melee, property was destroyed and arrests made. It was the beginning of a yearlong deployment of army and security forces to deal with widespread unrest. Members of military security police took up positions in virtually every hamlet across the affected provinces. All foreign personnel were evacuated, tourism stopped. Until now, press, diplomatic and international observers continue to be excluded except for rare and carefully orchestrated visits under the watchful eyes of security police.

The initial characterization of the uprising by government spokespersons was that it was based on misinformation, legitimate grievances and "evil elements abusing religion." Nay Lan, Deputy Director of the Gia-Lai province people's committee told foreign correspondents in March, 2001 that "misleading information" from outside forces prompted the marches but also that demands for resolution of land disputes were "normal."⁸

Information received by outside observers and human rights advocates tell a somewhat different story. While land grabbing of ancestral lands is indeed a smoldering issue, religious persecution by government cadres and officials in all three of the provinces had become intolerable. The arrest of the two Gia-Rai men was the spark that started a firestorm of protests which spread quickly across the provinces. Mistreatment of the Evangelical population is at the heart of the unrest. Except for a few Montagnard churches in large cities, almost all Evangelicals, swollen in some cases by ten-fold increases since 1975, have been angered by breakup of their services and the continuous injustices of extra-judicial mistreatment. The official recognition which Kinh Evangelicals (ECVN) recently received in March 2001 has not been extended to Montagnard Evangelicals who have been denied any legitimacy and are forced to meet in their homes, often secretly.⁹

MONTAGNARDS AND THEIR GREVIANCES

Who are the Montagnards?

⁶ Reports say the demonstrators in the provincial capitals in the first few days numbered close to 20,000. See *South China Morning Post*, Saturday, February 10, 2001

⁷ Press release of the Embassy of the Social Republic of Vietnam in the United States. February, 8, 2001.

⁸ Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) release, March 16, 2001, Friday, 07:46 Central European Time.

⁹ Official recognition for the ECVN was finalized in March 2001 but this was not extended to the Montagnard sector which had, until 1975, been an integral part of the ECVN.

Vietnam's population may be divided into two parts, ethnically speaking. The ethnic majority called *Kinh* have inhabited lowland portions of Vietnam's 1500 mile coastline and its two river deltas since modern times. Vietnam's upland mountains were occupied exclusively until about 1850 by 54 ethnic minorities which French colonialists called Montagnards a name later adopted by American military. Few *Kinh* lived in these mountains until the land policy of Ngo Dinh Diem encouraged occupation in the 1950s.

What are the Montagnard grievances?

Montagnard grievances driving the 2001 demonstrations are of one general and two specific kinds. It is recognized by all observers that Vietnam's highland minorities have suffered disproportionately and continuously from government neglect and exploitation. This was true prior to reunification in 1976 but has been more acute since, especially in the south. Inadequate or non-existent health and social services, rare educational opportunities, and insensitivity to religio-cultural matters added fuel to their anger. Undoubtedly, historic antipathies between the *Kinh* and the Montagnards exacerbated resentment.

Land issues are a more recent and specific matter. The socio-economic reforms of *Doi Moi* in the late 1980's did little to improve their lot and in some ways made it worse. Resettlement of lowland majority *Kinh* into the highlands to take lands traditionally belonging to the Montagnards alienated them further from government officials who orchestrated uncompensated landgrabbing. This loss of land, together with restrictions placed on traditional shifting cultivation, proved economically disastrous. *Kinh* migrants planted thousands of newly acquired hectares to coffee at a time of booming prices resulting in Vietnam becoming the world's second largest coffee exporter. But in the early 1990's when coffee prices crashed, it took the economy of the nation, Tay Nguyen, and the already stressed Montagnards with it.¹⁰ The situation was a tinderbox ready for conflagration.

A second crisis, and one which this researcher believes was the primary catalyst, is that Evangelical Montagnards of Tay Nguyen have been the target of insufferable religious persecution. To understand this we now turn to who the Evangelicals are and what has been their experience with the government.

Who are the Montagnard Evangelicals and what are their grievances?

While injustices over land rights are widely felt regardless of tribal or religious affiliation, Evangelicals have additional complaints. Immediately after Reunification virtually all the 398 church buildings used by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands were closed. Their properties were appropriated, activities were suspended and leaders were "re-educated" in detention camps.¹¹ Repeatedly since 1975 they have been the target of brutal, extra-judicial measures, in part because most of the older generation had been converted by American missionaries.¹² Furthermore, in the pre-1975 period some Evangelicals in the Central Highlands had supported

¹⁰ See "Vietnam Caught in Coffee Grind: As prices plunge, farmers in the central highlands are suffering." By Amy Kazmin. The Financial Times Limited (London), Section: Commodities & Agriculture; March 1, 2002, Edition 1; pl 30.

¹¹ Freedom House, "Directions," Document 2, "Program 184A - Development of Policy on Protestantism in Some Provinces and Cities," 2-3.

¹² For an account of Evangelical missionary work in the Central Highlands read Homer S. Dowdy, *The Bamboo Cross*. (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1964).

FULRO (*Front Unifié pour la Lutte des Races Opprimées*), an insurgent movement among highland minorities organized in the 1950s to pursue independence from Vietnamese rule by militant means. After 1976, this reality fueled the SRV's suspicions that all Evangelical highlanders were subversives or had sympathies in that direction. Pockets of FULRO resistance were finally rooted out in the 1980's. However, there seems adequate evidence that in the late 1990s American-based Montagnard exiles, operating out of South Carolina, had actively fomented support among some Evangelical followers for opposition against the SRV. To counter this, the government took advantage of the February 2001 demonstrations to root out separatist elements, justifying their mistreatment of Montagnard Evangelicals on the grounds they are foreign agents at worst, and oppose national unity at best.

Violation of religious freedom is not, of course, limited to the case of Montagnard Evangelicals. Though under *doi moi*, Vietnam's version of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, government repression lessened, nevertheless, all Vietnam's religious communities continued to complain of restrictions on their religious freedom such as government control of and ongoing confiscation of property, intrusive influence over selection of religious leaders, severe curtailment of clergy training, and prohibitions on religious publications.¹³ These state-sponsored systematic attempts to thwart religious life and activity are typically denied by government spokespersons who claim that Vietnam has never restricted religious freedom.¹⁴ However, internal Politburo documents leaked to outside observers as well as hundreds of testimonies and complaints by religious persons to credible organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Asia Watch contradict those denials.¹⁵

The largest concentration of Vietnam's Evangelical Christians is in the four provinces where the disturbances occurred.¹⁶ It is estimated that 500,000 of the nation's 1.2 million Evangelicals reside there. Furthermore, the growth rate since 1976 has been staggering. Increases occurred among the Mnong, *Gia-rai*, *Ba-na* and Stieng tribes. Among the *Ê-Çê* of Dak-Lak the numbers increased from 15,000 in 1975 to 150,000 by 2000.¹⁷ Oskar Saleminck quotes Oskar Weggel as saying evangelical ranks in Tay Nguyen doubled between 1975 and 1987 constituting a "success story of religious conversion."¹⁸ The sizeable and rapid growth of Evangelicals who are willing to act in unison to express their dissatisfaction with government treatment of their co-religionists partially accounts for the massive, swift and brutal measures taken in 2001.

¹³ Here I speak of difficulties faced by Catholics, Buddhists, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Muslims as well as Evangelicals.

¹⁴ See statement by Phan Thuy Thanh, spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry as quoted in the Vietnam News Agency (Hanoi) press release of February 15, 2002, entitled "Vietnam Protests U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedoms."

¹⁵ See documents cited on the Freedom House web site.

¹⁶ For a recent account of the Evangelical Church of Viet Nam (ECVN) see the forthcoming issue (16:1) of *Crossroads*, "The Evangelical Religious Movement Among the Hmong of Northern Vietnam and the Government Response to It: 1989-2000" by the author.

¹⁷ Director Vo Tan Tai of the Dac-Lac Provincial Religion Department indicates there are 260,000 followers of the various religions in the province making up 29 percent of the total population. Further that Evangelicals increased ten-fold to 117,000 in the past twenty years. Source: Mike Bengé's 27 February, 2002 email "Dega Protestantism"

¹⁸ Saleminck, "King," pp. 521-522.

The regular and unrelenting abuse of Evangelical Montagnards is well known and in some cases especially egregious. In the north, the Hmong have been the target of systematic suppression.¹⁹ Human rights and religious freedom advocates have scores of documents giving credible evidence of extra-judicial acts against pastors and church groups, property destruction and confiscation, physical abuse, forced reconversions back to pre-Christian traditional religion, jailings and imprisonments.²⁰ Reports of the World Evangelical Fellowship in 1999 and 2000 have become a part of the record in United Nations Human Rights Commission hearings in Geneva in 2000.

One evidence of oppressive government acts in Tay Nguyen is a translation of a December 1998 complaint sent by *Ba-na* Christians to eighteen offices, including that of the Prime Minister in Hanoi, and several in Gai-Lai province. Signed by eleven Evangelical believers from De A Lao Hamlet, Lo Pang village, Mang Yang district in Gai-Lai, the complaint detailed how officers of the Peoples Committee and Fatherland Front destroyed their property, seized fields, stole rice and cattle, and forced them to do labor for the government. In the petition they cited published promises of Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu concerning religious freedom. This did nothing to effect redress. In fact, all signatories were subsequently arrested by the police, taken to prison and beaten severely.²¹ While abuses reported elsewhere may be the work of rogue officials, incontrovertible evidence shows most of these incidents are government-directed from highest echelons of the state and province.

CONCLUSION

The details of how religious persecution of Montagnards in Tay Nguyen served as a driving force in the 2001 uprising cannot, of course, be learned until inquiry by impartial observers is permitted. However, it is this researcher's opinion that when more of the facts are known, it will become clear that religious suppression by the SRV was a, if not the, critical factor.

What of the future? Some of the following has no solid evidential support and some might also be merely guesswork. But, for what it is worth I offer the following.

1. Land rights issue will slowly subside as Montagnard's adapt to new socio-economic realities caused by the needs of the government to find land for its expanding population. Efforts to study and plan for economic development are underway to aid Montagnards in Tay Nguyen. There is some evidence officials will try to make token compensation to Montagnards for lands seized.
2. The religious unrest will not subside unless the SRV lets up on its repressive measures and grants the limited freedoms enjoyed by the Kinh ECVN. Until then tensions with the SRV will remain and perhaps increase as Evangelical numbers continue to swell since Montagnards find Christianity's emphasis on justice and freedom so appealing to their circumstances.

¹⁹ See copies of secret and top secret internal SRV documents in "Directions for Stopping Religion." The Center for Religious Freedom. (Freedom House, November 2000). ISBN 0-932088-00-7

²⁰ See "The Persecution of Protestant Christians in Vietnam." Religious Liberty Commission, World Evangelical Fellowship, Singapore. February 2000.

²¹ Copies of all documents are in the author's files.

3. Montagnards will continue to embrace Evangelicalism as a way of maintaining (older Evangelicals) or gaining (newer converts) a religio-ethnic identity which expresses its historic antipathies with Kinh and contrasts sharply with the Communist government's godless philosophy, anti-religious practices and sham articles of constitutional freedom of religion.
4. The government has good reason to be concerned about internal and external elements which incite Montagnard separatism. The few Evangelicals who succumb to separatist activities endanger the majority who do not.
5. The SRV fears the power of a burgeoning Evangelical Montagnard movement which unites across traditional ethnic lines to form a powerful bloc which may be hard to control. They are very mindful, as are the Chinese, of the unifying and vivifying power of religion to overthrow governments. The experience of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, which were overthrown by a massive religious movement, is a lesson not lost on Vietnam. Nevertheless, the SRV seems to recognize that some greater recognition of Montagnard Evangelicalism would help to control them. In December 2001 two countervailing events occurred. More than twenty Montagnard leaders were summoned to Hanoi to be lectured about not using Christmas as an occasion to foment further disturbances. Yet at about the same time and with the approval of the government's Bureau of Religion, the top leaders of the ECVN, almost entirely Kinh, traveled extensively in Tay Nguyen to counsel with Montagnard Christians. This may indicate that the government is preparing to offer some long overdue limited official recognition to Montagnards - at least in larger cities where church buildings prior to 1975 served congregations. Until now, there has been no freedom to hold public meetings - with very few exceptions.²² Of course, there is no way that even if all 398 churches which existed prior to 1975 were reopened, they could accommodate a burgeoning Evangelical population that has increased tenfold since that time.

²² At most, ten churches in major cities have had some limited freedom to hold public services.

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