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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN VIETNAM

ISSUE

Although respect for human rights in Vietnam has improved markedly in the past few years and Vietnamese enjoy considerably more freedom, the Vietnamese authorities continue to deal harshly with any calls for a multi-party system or for greater religious freedom.

BACKGROUND

While Vietnam remains one of the world's last "hard-core" communist states it has embarked on a series of sweeping economic reforms. The political lessons from the fall of the Soviet empire and dramatic changes in Eastern Europe were not lost on the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The challenge for the CPV is how to control the accelerated pace of economic progress while at the same time ensuring that its monopoly on political power remains intact. To this end, individual human rights are often sacrificed for Vietnam's alleged collective interest (and coincidentally the survival of the CPV).

On 30 April Vietnam announced the release of the last political detainees who had been held in re-education camps since the fall of Saigon in 1975. This closed the final sordid chapter of summary incarceration of tens of thousands of South Vietnamese officials and soldiers and their consequent massive physical deprivation. Nevertheless the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) maintains a pervasive and ruthless internal security apparatus.

According to the new 1992 constitution "human rights in all respects, political, civic, economic, cultural and social are respected". The constitution guarantees the customary personal freedoms of speech, movement, association, belief and practice of religion, press, ownership of lawful income, and even the right of self-expression. The caveat, however, is that all of these freedoms must be practised "in accordance with the law". Thus Nguyen Dan Que, a political prisoner and Canada's most prominent interest case was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment last November. His crime: openly advocating a multi-party system for Vietnam. Other "dangerous reactionary elements" have also recently received equally harsh sentences. A number of buddhist monks and Catholic priests (several of whom are Canadian interest cases) remain incarcerated or condemned to internal exile. Detention of religious figures is a curious situation since both Buddhist and Catholic rites are openly practised in all regions of Vietnam. These religious detainees remain concrete examples of the dichotomy between the fears of an often repressive atheist society and Vietnam's history of intense religious beliefs and practices. A number of writers poets and journalists also remain incarcerated for spreading "anti-socialist propaganda". A number of such detainees however have been quietly released over the past few months.

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