

## **VIETNAM, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & PNTR**

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testimony before the  
United States Senate  
Committee on Finance

on

“S.3945—A bill to authorize the extension of nondiscriminatory treatment (normal trade relations treatment) to the products of Vietnam”

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Chairman Grassley, Senator Baucus, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the privilege of speaking with you about Vietnam, religious freedom, and whether or not to establish permanent normal trade relations with Vietnam.

My family is familiar with this country, its blood literally a part of Vietnamese soil. Two of my uncles served as Marine infantry officers in Vietnam, earning three purple hearts among three tours. I was born in the great state of Iowa because my Hawkeye mother, Margaret Ann, went home to have me while my father, Bob, a Marine aviator, flew 300 combat missions out of Da Nang. As a result, our family has a clear-eyed instinct for engaging the world as it is; an instinct confirmed by my own nine years of experience as a Marine infantry officer.

Yet we are also a family of faith. We believe in things like forgiveness and reconciliation. My father, for example, has long worked to build bridges to Vietnam. In 1988, he brought World Vision, the world’s largest faith-based relief and development NGO, back to Vietnam in order to serve its people. Similarly, the Institute for Global Engagement—the organization he founded after serving as the first U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom—has worked to serve the Vietnamese people since 2001.

The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) is a “think tank with legs” that promotes sustainable environments for religious freedom worldwide. We take a comprehensive approach that first seeks to understand the nexus of faith, culture, security, development and the rule of law within a given society. We then use relational diplomacy to simultaneously engage both the government (top-down) and the grassroots (bottom-up). The result, we pray, is respectful dialogue and practical agreements that help transition countries toward sustainable religious freedom.

As a faith-based organization, we are well-positioned to engage complex places where religion is a core issue. By way of brief example, two months ago, IGE took an American delegation of Muslims and Christians to Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Tribal Areas. Working in support of a Memorandum of Understanding that we signed last year with the NWFP government, we established a scholarship program for Muslim students and minorities from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions at the University of Science and Technology in Bannu. At

the program's core is education on religious freedom and respect—perhaps the best long-term tool we have for fighting terrorism.

Our work in Vietnam reflects the same principles. This September marks my fourth trip to Vietnam since the U.S. designated Vietnam a “country of particular concern” (CPC) in September 2004. Over the course of these visits, to include several meetings with Vietnamese officials visiting the U.S., I have had the opportunity to meet and observe many government and religious leaders in Hanoi, as well as at the provincial level (particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands)

(I should note that the focus of our work is with the Christian ethnic minorities of the Central and Northwest Highlands because these faith-based groups are the largest and have suffered the most).

While there are many technical and tactical issues to debate regarding PNTR with Vietnam, religious freedom in Vietnam, and the relationship between the two, I believe that we can distill these discussions to two strategic questions:

- 1) Has Vietnam begun to move toward a rule-of-law system that will preserve, protect and promote religious freedom in Vietnam, as well as enhance the trade between our two countries?
- 2) And, if so, how should the United States practically encourage Vietnam to continue moving in the right direction?

Vietnam has made the strategic decision to seek a strong bilateral relationship with the United States, which requires the removal of religious freedom sanctions. One cabinet level official remarked to me last year: “Whether we like it or not, we recognize religious freedom as a permanent U.S. national interest.” As a result, I believe, the decision has been made at the highest levels—and confirmed at the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress this past April—to do whatever it takes to remove, and prevent further, U.S. sanctions.

In other words, in the last two years, a strategic shift has taken place in the Vietnamese mindset. This shift, irrespective of origin, has begun to provide for the religious freedom of all Vietnamese citizens. This change is confirmed in the conversations I've had with senior Vietnamese officials and demonstrated in the talking points advanced by provincial authorities at the beginning of each meeting.

Evidence of this shift began with the promulgation of nationwide ordinances (November 2004), instructions (February 2005), and guidelines (March 2005) on religious freedom. Although significant discrepancies among these documents must be clarified—for example, the registration process for faith-based groups is unclear when the three documents are laid side-by-side—the government has begun the unprecedented process of training officials at all levels about these decrees and how religious freedom should be addressed. This shift has also created the space in which religious freedom organizations like IGE can contribute to an opening civil society by providing third party accountability regarding religious freedom. Finally there is increasing awareness among government officials that faith-based groups contribute to social stability by: 1) providing for the poor and needy, 2) alleviating the financial responsibility of the state to provide

the same services; and 3) by serving as a moral bulwark against the increased corruption that inevitably accompanies an economy in transition.

This evolution of word and deed among government officials at the national and provincial level mark the beginning of a new pattern in the history of Vietnam's human rights.

To be sure, the implementation of these changes is uneven and there are too many examples of people of faith, to include Buddhists, being harassed because of their belief system (in some places much more than others). Yet these positive changes continue to take place, deepening and broadening the opportunity for a rule-of-law system to take root and permanently provide for religious freedom as well as normal trade relations.

In this overall context, America should do everything within its power to promote and sustain this change, to include the establishment of PNTR and the lifting of CPC status.

These two particular actions send the strong signal that we both *respect* the efforts made thus far by the Vietnamese government to establish the rule of law (especially the protection of religious freedom), and that we *expect* the government of Vietnam to continue creating the rule-of-law structure necessary to promote religious freedom and free trade in a sustainable manner. If such efforts do not continue at a reasonable pace, the U.S. should be ready to quickly reinstate sanctions.

Perhaps most importantly, establishing PNTR and removing CPC encourages the progressive elements among Vietnam's leadership. Vietnam possesses many true patriots amidst its government's bureaucracy. I have met many of these national servants who want what is truly best for their country and their citizens. If we do not tangibly support them, hardliners gain the advantage and impede the progress that we all seek.

To maintain the current momentum, both governments should agree to a rule-of-law roadmap that, in particular, ensures steady progress in religious freedom. A critical component of that roadmap, I believe, is the continuation of the practical, confidence-building steps that have been taken thus far by the Vietnamese through the partnership between IGE and the Vietnam-USA Society (VUS).

On 1 July 2005, IGE and VUS signed an agreement to take three tangible steps together to build religious freedom in Vietnam whereby: 1) IGE would host a Vietnamese delegation of government and religious officials in Washington, D.C. (February 2006); 2) IGE would take a delegation of scholars and pastors to Vietnam (June 2006); and 3) IGE would co-sponsor a conference on religion and rule of law in Hanoi (September 2006).

The first step called for a delegation of Vietnamese government and religious leaders to come to America (which took place this past February). For the first time in Vietnamese diplomatic history, the government did not choose its country's religious representatives for a delegation; instead, these authentic voices from the Christian community were selected by IGE. Importantly, during the course of our meetings with U.S. officials, these pastors were not afraid to sometimes disagree with the government officials—demonstrating an emerging public square for honest discussion of religious freedom issues among Vietnamese.

These discussions took more formal form on 28 February, when the delegation participated in an off-the-record conference of experts that IGE co-sponsored with Georgetown University and The George Washington University. This forum—the first of its kind—provided an opportunity for American and Vietnamese officials and practitioners to meet and discuss the many issues related to religious freedom, including the current U.S. sanctions.

The second step of our agreement called for IGE to bring a delegation of scholars and pastors to Vietnam to understand the progress and challenges of implementing religious freedom in the Central and Northwest Highlands (which we did last month). While our conversations in Hanoi with the Communist Party, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Committee for Religious Affairs, and Buddhist and Christian leaders confirmed Vietnam's strategic commitment to promoting religious freedom, our experiences at the provincial levels also confirmed the uneven progress made in implementing these religious freedom reforms.

In Vietnam's Northwest, Protestant evangelicalism is growing rapidly with 1200 Hmong "house churches" seeking recognition and registration from the government under the auspices of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North). Although Hanoi has officially encouraged the recognition and registration of these churches, provincial authorities still practice bureaucratic discrimination against the Hmong Christians. Local authorities regularly tell Christians that they cannot state their religion on their identification cards while returning unopened church registration applications to the congregations. If someone is not officially Protestant, and if no church application has been received, then the government can maintain the appearance that there are no problems. This clumsy approach serves no one except those who prefer religious freedom sanctions to continue.

Still, unregistered house churches are increasingly allowed to meet. The first full-time Catholic priest since 1950 has been installed in the town of Sa Pa (Lao Cai). And our trip itself was an indication of continuing movement in the right direction. According to officials in Hanoi and the Northwest, IGE is the only international NGO to have been allowed into the Northwest. It is also important to note that we were not refused access to areas or people by local officials. Indeed, local officials and pastors spoke openly about how Christians and government officials have contributed to recent problems.

Meanwhile several complicating factors make it difficult to discern whether or not religious freedom violations have taken place. The Hmong tribes tend to practice a "slash and burn" form of agriculture as they migrate among provinces (and international borders). These habits create tension with local residents, as well as government officials who are trying to establish development programs for a region where roughly 50% of the people live on less than 50 cents/day. The extreme geography of the region only accentuates development efforts as many remote villages do not have access to the outside world during rainy season when landslides, impassable trails and roads, and swollen rivers prevent travel.

When Hmong convert to Christianity, there is often tension within the family as the non-Christian members of the family feel that the Christians have betrayed the family, its ancestors and the culture (a feel shared by neighbors and the local witchdoctor). There are often issues of land inheritance associated with the conversion, depending on the age of the convert, as younger members of the family feel left out.

Making the situation more complex is the Hmong word “Vang Chu.” In a spiritual context, it can be translated as “God” or “Christian.” In a political context, however, “Vang Chu” can mean “king” or “lord,” reminding local officials of Hmong separatism as well as Hmong support for the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

The final complicating factor is the Christians themselves. First, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)—which must recognize and take responsibility for the 1200 Hmong churches before the government will register them—does not have a presence in any of the Northwest provinces. Each of the 1200 Hmong churches must go to the Hanoi headquarters of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) to coordinate its actions with the provincial government where the church wants to register.

Second, a seminary does not exist to serve the Northwest’s 120,000 Christians (some estimate as many as 250,000). Without certified pastors, the government will not recognize these 1200 churches. Untrained pastors also limit the spiritual maturity of these believers. Third, for example, an unregistered and aggressive house church from the south—Lien Huu Co Doc (roughly, “Christian Alliance Church”)—is growing quickly in the Northwest. Unfortunately, most reports suggest that this church is buying converts, even churches, in order to demonstrate its “success” worldwide. Without a proper understanding of Christianity, and extremely poor to begin with, Hmong Christians are susceptible to these financial advances.

On the other hand, we also visited the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak and Gia Lai during this second step of our religious freedom agreement with the Vietnam-USA Society. Previously known for the severe persecution of Christians, these provinces are now moving forward to provide for the spiritual needs of its 200,000 Christians. In Dak Lak, the province has made land, and building permits, available to the nine officially registered churches (which now only lack money to build). Churches with thousands of members are now worshipping freely.

The future is even brighter in Gia Lai. Twenty-nine churches have been registered in the last two years and 235 designated places of worship are being organized into churches. Plagued with a shortage of certified pastors (there are only nine), the local Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) council has worked directly with the provincial authorities to establish three different seminary tracks.

The difference between the Central and Northwest Highlands is threefold. First, the local government leadership is making a comprehensive effort to implement Hanoi’s decrees, and educate its officials. Second, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) is organized at the provincial level, working directly with the People’s Provincial Committees. Third, the government and the church recognize that more seminary graduates serves both of them.

More pastors equates to better churches which live out the faith by taking care of the poor (while also alleviating some of the state’s financial burden to otherwise provide these services). More pastors also means more Christians who better understand the tenets of their faith and are thus less susceptible to personality cults or separatist movements.

The third component of IGE’s religious freedom agreement with the Vietnam-USA Society is to co-convene Southeast Asia’s first-ever conference on religion and rule of law in Hanoi this

September. Working with the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute for Religious Studies, Brigham Young University Law's International Center for Law and Religion Studies, and Emory University Law's Center for the Study of Law and Religion, this conference will give regional policymakers, scholars, and government officials an opportunity to learn from their comparative countries' examples.

Together, these three steps are tangible indicators of where and how Vietnam is moving toward a more transparent, rule of law system that will one day protect and promote the religious freedom of its citizens. Progress is uneven to be sure, especially in the Northwest. But it is also quite clear that national and provincial authorities are headed in the right direction.

In summary, as one observer put it, "Vietnam wants to change, it's just not sure how to." So how should we continue to work with Vietnam?

First, we need to establish a rule-of-law roadmap for moving ahead on religious freedom. The immediate step is to end the bureaucratic discrimination taking place in Vietnam's Northwest by eliminating all issues related to identification cards and by registering at least half of the 1200 Hmong churches in that region.

Second, Vietnam must clarify the discrepancies among the ordinances, instructions and guidelines on religious freedom if government officials are to be comprehensively educated and trained about them. That said, joint classes at the district and commune levels—where government and religious officials are taught together—would help immensely. As information is distributed and people are taught how to observe the rule of law, stereotypes between potential antagonists are reduced by sharing a common classroom.

Third, we need to send a strong and unambiguous message to Vietnam's leaders that we are willing to work with them. Establishing PNTR and lifting CPC sends that signal. And we should communicate that if Vietnam falters or backslides, we will not hesitate to re-impose sanctions.

Fourth, we need to encourage a more clearly defined structural process through which the Evangelical Church of Vietnam—North and South—coordinates with provincial authorities and provides seminary training to more pastors.

Fifth, and finally, we need to broaden and deepen the kind of people-to-people diplomacy that has been taking place between IGE and the Vietnam-USA Society. For example, at the end of our September 2006 conference on religion and rule of law in Southeast Asia, IGE will renew our commitment to the Vietnam-USA Society by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU will institutionalize this historic regional dialogue, establishing an annual conference series on religion and rule of law.

The MOU will also deepen mutual understanding and foster new initiatives through ongoing reciprocal visits of U.S. and Vietnam faith, business, academia, and government leaders. New initiatives achieved through the MOU might include local economic development projects; business investment; training for local government officials and religious leaders; seminary scholarships for pastors; and establishing a mechanism for regular contact between religious leaders and government officials.

This kind of progress does not come easy. In fact, it is the direct result of the difficult and long-term work of building relationships of trust and respect. Through relational diplomacy, however, it is indeed possible to understand one another and, as a result, develop solutions that are sustainable, if only because we have developed them together.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to participate in this vital discussion.

About Chris Seiple:

Chris Seiple is the President of the Institute for Global Engagement ([www.globalengage.org](http://www.globalengage.org)). Next month he defends his Ph.D. dissertation on “U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations, 1991-2005” at the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University. He also holds an M.A. in National Security Affairs (Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict) from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and a B.A. in International Relations (East European/Soviet Studies) from Stanford University. He is a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Council on Foreign Relations. He is the founder of the Council on Faith & International Affairs.

About the Institute for Global Engagement:

The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) promotes sustainable environments for religious freedom worldwide. As a faith-based organization, IGE believes firmly in universal human dignity and is committed to the protection of all faiths through the rule of law. IGE encourages governments to respect their citizens’ right to religious freedom and educates people of faith to exercise that right responsibly. Operating at the nexus of faith, culture, security, development, and the rule of law, IGE’s relational diplomacy—currently focused on East and Central Asia—enables respectful dialogue and practical agreements that help transition countries toward sustainable religious freedom.