

Don't be fooled by official promises, says cardinal



Cardinal John Baptist Pham Minh Man

A joint press release, issued after this month's talks in Rome between the Vatican and Vietnam, stressed Hanoi's "respect and assurance of freedom of religion and religious beliefs, as well as continued encouragement of different religions, and the Vietnam Catholic Church in particular."

However, in a recent interview with ucanews.com, Cardinal John Baptist Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh City expressed a different point of view. In his opinion, the government's policies on religion "make people threatened, doubtful and dissatisfied."

Cardinal Man, 79, said the authorities state that their policies aim to ensure social order and security. But he said that "they govern the country with self-defence instincts, fearing for their own interests, rather than searching for humanitarian goodwill."

He cited the Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in Vietnam in December 2012. While it was widely praised for its smooth organization, He told ucanews.com that the preparations were plagued by difficulties and government interference. The government demanded lists of participants and invitation letters from the Vietnamese bishops before entry visas were issued. According to the cardinal, few if any other countries have such stringent procedures, especially when welcoming Church leaders.

He added that all religious activities undergo the same intense government scrutiny. “Religious freedom is a basic human right. It is unfair that the government takes it from people or grants it to them as it sees fit,” he said.

Father Vincent Pham Trung Thanh, Redemptorist Provincial Superior, said the authorities also require lists of priesthood candidates before their ordination, as well as the names of the bishops who will ordain them. He is legally obliged to supply the candidates' names, but refuses to name the bishops in case efforts are made to prevent them from performing the ordinations.

“Ordination is by the Church, not the government, so we do not ask for government permission,” said the priest, who has been barred from going abroad since 2011. He added that the authorities have also asked him not to ordain some priests, which again he refuses.

This defiance can come at a price, for it can lead to a priest being prevented from carrying out his pastoral duties.

In the past, several priests from northern dioceses, ordained without government approval, were made to attend two-year “theological refresher courses” before being ordained for a second time.

The situation does not look likely to improve in the immediate future: quite the contrary. Pham Dung, head of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, said in May that the state’s 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief needs to be amended, “to keep pace with rapid changes in society.”

At the moment, religious organizations are only permitted by law to engage in humanitarian activities and pre-school education to a limited extent. Some observers fear that any upcoming law amendment will narrow the scope of Church activities even further.

Cardinal Man echoed the notion that government, to some extent, fears that religious groups may undermine its influence, so it keeps a tight rein on their involvement in areas such as education and healthcare.

“Early this year, the premier promised to satisfy the local Church’s desire for providing education and healthcare services for people,” said the cardinal, smiling broadly. “But he did not mention when.”

In his opinion, though, the situation is not entirely hopeless. He believes that, in recent years, government officials have seen that followers of religions, especially Catholics, want to serve the common good and build a friendly and humane society. They have no aim to struggle with the government for power.

As a result, there has been some degree of compromise.

Cardinal Man also noted that although religious activities are restricted, more and more people are turning to them as a respite from the prevailing atmosphere of atheism, moral decline, materialism, consumerism and corruption.

The fact that Ho Chi Minh City alone has 200 local churches, full of Catholics attending liturgies, tells its own story.

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