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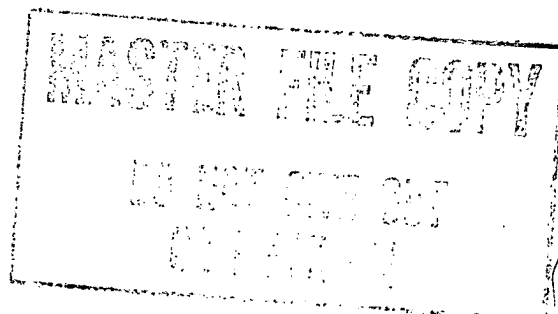
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# Vietnam: Repressing Ethnic Minorities and Religious Groups



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A Research Paper



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# **Vietnam: Repressing Ethnic Minorities and Religious Groups**



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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by   
Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries  
are welcome and may be directed to the Chief,  
Southeast Asia Division, OEA, 

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**Vietnam:  
Repressing Ethnic Minorities  
and Religious Groups**



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**Summary**

*Information available  
as of 25 October 1983  
was used in this report.*

Since the Communist takeover in 1975, the Vietnamese leadership has carried on a massive program to eliminate any potential internal threat. Hanoi has used military force or police repression against nearly every religious group and ethnic minority in the country. Church and tribal leaders have been imprisoned or exiled, organizations without state approval disbanded, religious practitioners harassed, and minorities pressed to assimilate. Wherever possible, the regime has installed or supported collaborators, who help the leadership promote an image of religious and racial tolerance.



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This policy has been largely successful. Armed resistance in the Central Highlands has been reduced to a nuisance level, and religious leaders have been neutralized politically. Fear of political—or military—activism in the south, as well as a concern that China could step up its support of anti-Vietnamese resistance throughout Indochina, ensures that the government will continue to repress religious and ethnic groups in the near future. In reality, Vietnam has little cause for concern. We believe that none of the groups poses a short- or long-term threat to the regime.



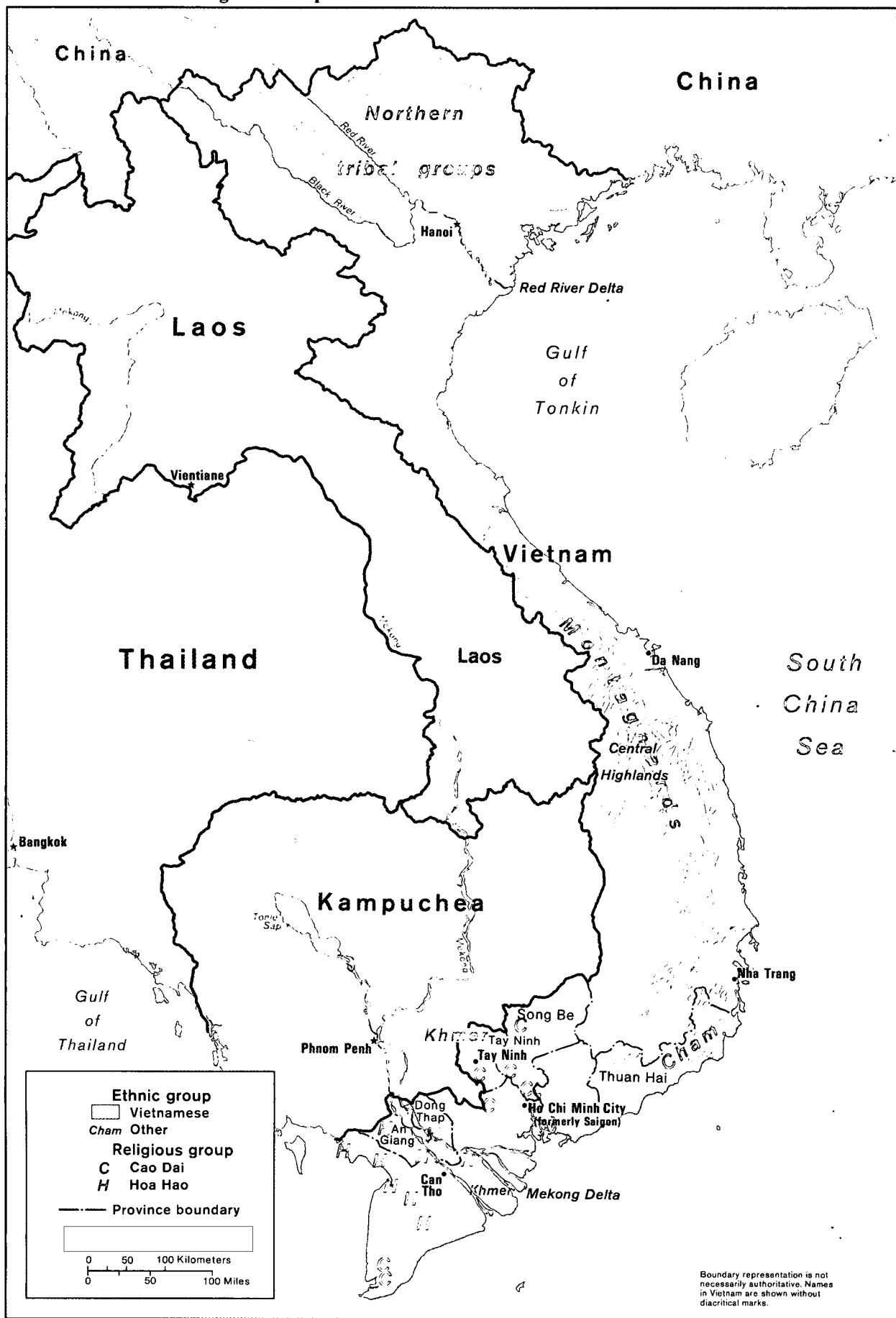
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Selected Ethnic and Religious Groups



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**Vietnam:  
Repressing Ethnic Minorities  
and Religious Groups**

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The Vietnamese leadership since 1975 has expended considerable effort to eliminate Vietnam's ethnic minorities and religious groups as alternate centers of popular identification and loyalty. Hanoi's repressive policies appear to be based on fears that these groups might serve foreign interests and that the traditional political activism of some of the groups might hinder consolidation of control over the south. In addition, some of the groups have mounted armed resistance against the regime. We estimate that the guerrilla organization United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) may still have as many as 2,000 insurgents operating in the Central Highlands.

Two uniquely Vietnamese religious sects add to Hanoi's security concerns. The Hoa Hao, located in the Mekong Delta, is a militantly anti-Communist reformist Buddhist sect numbering about 2.5 million people whose founder was assassinated by the Communists in the 1940s. Relations between the party and the sect have been bad ever since, although some Hoa Hao joined the Vietcong when the Diem government suppressed the sect's private army in the 1950s. The Hoa Hao areas offered some of the stiffest armed resistance to Hanoi's troops following the fall of Saigon in April 1975, and the government in June 1983 noted that many Communist Party members and their relatives in those areas have been murdered.

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**Religious Groups: Broad Appeal**

Hanoi is most worried by the religious groups, whose appeal reaches beyond narrow ethnic lines. Vietnam's Buddhist sects, with at least 30 million followers among the country's 57 million people, are the largest organizations in Vietnam not under the control of the Communist Party. The largest and most formidable of these sects is centered on the An Quang pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City. Established in 1949, An Quang was in the forefront of political opposition to South Vietnamese governments. An Quang monks often immolated themselves during the 1960s to protest government actions, and their mass organizations, such as the Unified Buddhist Church and the Buddhist Family Organization, effectively mobilized people for political demonstrations. Today, despite the regime's attempts to break the sect by arresting its leaders, intimidating its followers, and organizing a rival church, Hanoi has been unable to wean Vietnamese Buddhists away from An Quang.

The other unique sect, the Cao Dai, has an eclectic creed that borrows heavily from both Catholicism and Buddhism. Founded in Tay Ninh Province in 1919, the Cao Dai functioned almost as a state within a state during the 1950s and 1960s when it had its own private army. Unlike the Hoa Hao, the 1-2 million Cao Dai attempted unsuccessfully to reach an accommodation with the Communists in early 1975 in order to protect the sect's Holy See near Tay Ninh City. Faced with government repression since then, Cao Dai followers have continuously attempted to form antiregime underground organizations.

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**Ethnic Minorities: Strategically Located**

Vietnam's ethnic minorities constitute only 10 to 15 percent of the population, but they play a more significant role than their numbers would seem to indicate. Some occupy strategic border areas; others play a disproportionately large role in the trade and service sectors of the Vietnamese economy.

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Vietnam's 3-4 million Catholics, longtime opponents of the Communists, were major supporters of the former Republic of South Vietnam. Catholics in 1975 and 1976 mounted short-lived armed resistance against the regime and have continued—especially in the south—to resist assimilation into the Communist state. Vietnam's 100,000 to 200,000 Protestants, although less active politically, are heavily represented among the hill tribes of the Central Highlands, where armed resistance continues.

The largest group is the 1.3-1.4 million ethnic Chinese, who until the late 1970s dominated retail and wholesale trade in the south and ran a large part of northern Vietnam's vital transportation sector. They

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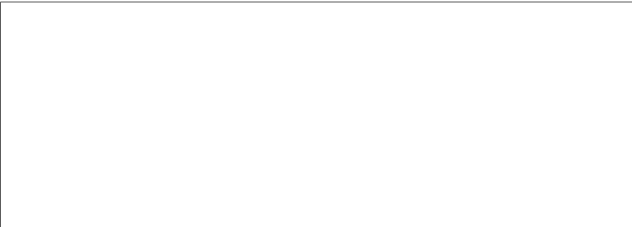
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also had become party cadre and government officials. But following the worsening of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1977 and 1978 and China's invasion of northern Vietnam in February 1979, Hanoi looked upon the ethnic Chinese—who had long been the targets of Beijing's intelligence operations—as a potentially dangerous fifth column. [redacted]

Eight to 10 percent of Vietnam's population consists of 30 to 40 major hill tribes—the largest is the Tai of northern Vietnam, who according to official estimates numbered 820,000 in 1980. Located on Vietnam's northern and western borders, the tribesmen traditionally have been excluded from the political mainstream and consider ethnic Vietnamese officials and settlers interlopers. This is especially true in the Central Highlands, where ethnic minorities seek a separate state for the 3.5 million tribesmen there. [redacted]

At present, the only significant antiregime insurgency is being conducted in the Highlands by the tribally based Fulro. Fulro was established in 1964, when two hill tribe separatist fronts merged to combat what they believed was a policy of cultural annihilation directed against the hill tribes. By 1969 Fulro had obtained autonomy for the hill tribes within the South Vietnamese state and formally disbanded. It maintained an underground network, however, and resurfaced following the fall of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). [redacted]

The approximately 800,000 ethnic Khmer (Khmer Krom) living in southern Vietnam are the only group whose position has not seriously deteriorated since the Communist takeover. Because of their ties to Kampuchea's major ethnic group, the Khmer, Hanoi has used them extensively in military and civilian positions there. According to refugee and defector accounts, Khmer Krom not only serve in the Vietnamese Army in Kampuchea (often as interpreters) but also staff Kampuchean Government and party positions. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese remain suspicious of the



Khmer Krom because of longstanding ethnic animosities and because of Khmer Krom connections with the US-backed Saigon government. Moreover, Hanoi may suspect that some Khmer Krom have ties to Khmer resistance forces in Kampuchea. [redacted]

Lastly, there are the 100,000 Cham, historical enemies of the Vietnamese and rulers of southern Vietnam until displaced by the Vietnamese in the 15th century. Now concentrated in Thuan Hai, Dong Thap, and An Giang Provinces, they are of different ethnic stock from the Vietnamese and are further separated by being Muslims. Before 1975 the Cham enjoyed a special status. They were exempt from military conscription, could go to the Middle East to make the pilgrimage to Mecca or pursue Koranic studies, and had their own Cham administrators and their own leader, the mufti. Local leaders were popularly elected, and the Muslim Association handled social and economic programs within the Cham community. Nevertheless, their historical antipathy toward the Vietnamese led the Cham to make common cause with the Montagnards, and they remain active in the Fulro resistance movement. [redacted]

**Violent Repression: Establishing Dominance**  
Immediately after the 1975 takeover, Hanoi began using military force to control the ethnic minorities and religious groups in the south. In 1976 Vietnamese troops cordoned off Hoa Hao areas, imposing a virtual economic blockade in conjunction with military sweeps. Most of the sect's top leaders were imprisoned, although five were released in 1977 in return for publicly confessing their "crimes" against Hanoi. By 1979 all Hoa Hao real estate had been seized and much of the farmland transformed into cooperatives. Sect members today are drafted into labor brigades, their schools and hospitals are administered by the regime, and their local management committees have been dismantled. [redacted]

The Central Highlands tribal groups (Montagnards) and their organization Fulro have also been the target of military operations. Aggressive patrolling and constant sweep operations by the Vietnamese Army have

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reduced Fulro's effectiveness; Fulro officials themselves have admitted losing 2,000 killed since 1981. In addition, tribal leaders who worked in the Republic of South Vietnam's Ministry of Ethnic Minorities (which was established to obtain hill tribe cooperation) and those who had a long relationship with US advisers were arrested in 1975 and placed in reeducation camps. The hill tribes' autonomous political status was revoked. [redacted]

Security forces have been even more brutal in their treatment of the Catholic Church. They moved swiftly in 1975 to neutralize the southern Church, conducting mass arrests and executions. [redacted] at least 100 priests remain in reeducation camps. One of the most serious instances of police repression was the Vinh Son Church affair in 1976, when public security forces raided a church in Ho Chi Minh City and arrested dozens of priests and their followers for antiregime activity. [redacted]

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**The Heavy Hand of Security**

Vietnamese military actions have now been largely replaced by public security operations. Public security officials use several methods to blunt the effectiveness of the ethnic and religious groups:

- House arrest or imprisonment of potential opposition leaders.
- Control of the use of religious centers (Buddhist pagodas, Catholic churches) as meeting sites.
- Harassment and travel restrictions of low-level clergy and ethnic leaders.
- Media censorship, monopoly of publication facilities, and prior clearance of church sermons and other speeches. [redacted]

The regime severed the Church's international connections in the mid-1970s by expelling all foreign priests and the Vatican representative. Official Church news is now printed in the government-approved *Catholics and the Nation*, which replaced 12 Church-owned magazines. According to Catholic refugees, security cadre monitor sermons and schedule "volunteer" work or social projects to conflict with the few permissible masses. Catholic schools are under state control, Church social and educational programs have been ended or reduced, and most seminaries closed. Catholics cannot hold government or party jobs or attend the university. [redacted]

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All groups are subjected to such security harassment. For example, Cao Dai refugees state that police are constantly stationed on the once inviolate grounds of the Cao Dai Holy See. Of the 2,000 sect officials and monks living at the Holy See in 1975, refugees say only 50 to 100 remain. All but two buildings within the extensive grounds now house Communist Party cadre, while sect members living around the Holy See have been relocated to collective farms. [redacted]

Vietnamese clergy cannot travel or be transferred between parishes without official permission, and very few new priests have been ordained. The few seminary applicants approved by Hanoi face two years of labor service before beginning a four-year theology course and another two to three years of labor service afterward—with no guarantee of ordination. According to one refugee, priests from the more docile North Vietnamese parishes have been sent south. [redacted]

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Vietnamese media reports give a partial picture of continued Cao Dai resistance. In August 1978 security forces destroyed the Cao Dai underground (although another has been formed since then), and 19 mostly high-ranking Cao Dai officials were convicted in a public trial of plotting the overthrow of the government. Three were sentenced to death, another four to life imprisonment. The following year, another 37 sect members were arrested. Last April the government arrested Pham Ngoc Trang, in charge of the sect's worldwide propagation activities, for running a counterrevolutionary organization. Four months later another group was convicted in nearby Song Be Province, and two members were given the death sentence. [redacted]

Vietnamese Protestants receive similar treatment. According to diplomatic reports, 100 of the 500 Protestant churches in southern Vietnam are closed—as is the only Vietnamese Protestant theological seminary, at Nha Trang. Protestants in the Central Highlands have come under special government scrutiny because the regime suspects that the Montagnards, many converted by US missionaries, may be using the Protestant churches as bases to organize support for Fulro. [redacted]

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Security forces also have moved forcefully to undercut the Buddhist An Quang sect's influence. An Quang's mass organization was disbanded in 1975, and antiregime monks were imprisoned or fled into exile. The sect's most prominent leader, Tri Quang, has been under house arrest since the Communist takeover. Hundreds of monks were forced to return to secular life by threats of military conscription and by being forced to work for their meals rather than living on the food traditionally obtained by begging or contributions. Buddhist schools either have been closed or had their curriculums cleansed of "reactionary" subjects and teachers. By 1979, according to one refugee, over 600 monks remained in reeducation camps; 80 percent of Vietnam's pagodas were closed; and only one-third of the 3,000 monks and nuns who were members of the General Association of Young Monks in 1975 were still practicing. [redacted]

Buddhist resistance to these measures peaked in 1977, when An Quang unsuccessfully attempted to hold a congress of its Unified Buddhist Church and then, with members of at least one other sect, led antigovernment demonstrations. In the Mekong Delta town of Can Tho, over a dozen An Quang monks immolated themselves as their predecessors had during the previous decade. The regime reacted with mass arrests and even tighter controls on pagoda activities. [redacted]

Vietnam's ethnic minorities have received similar treatment. As Hanoi's relations with Beijing began to deteriorate in 1977, ethnic Chinese were given the choice of going either to China or the remote New Economic Zones. Between 1978 and 1980, 230,000 ethnic Chinese fled into China. Ethnic Chinese cadre were removed from party and government positions. Chinese families have difficulty obtaining higher education for their children, and Chinese schools have been closed. Chinese areas are placed under strict curfews, businessmen are constantly harassed, and youths are drafted into military labor units. For the smaller Cham and Khmer Krom minorities, leaders have been arrested and sent to reeducation camps, and their independent cultural and social organizations disbanded. Refugees state that the Cham, because of their Fulro connections, are closely watched by public security officials. [redacted]

#### **A More Subtle Approach: Co-Option and Absorption**

As it stepped up its public security operations, Hanoi began to infiltrate or co-opt the leaders of the ethnic and religious groups and now is using this approach increasingly. The Cao Dai's top 25 "dignitaries"—who were sent to reeducation camps in 1975—have been gradually replaced by others more amenable to the regime. According to refugee reports, Truong Ngoc Anh—one of the top leaders in the Cao Dai's Tay Ninh faction, a National Assembly delegate, and a member of the party-supported Fatherland Front Committee—is being pushed by the regime as the coming Cao Dai leader. Hanoi also supports collaborationist clergy within the Catholic Church, and the Church's only official mass organization—the National Liaison Committee of Patriotic and Peace-Loving Catholics—is a party front group. [redacted]

Among the Buddhists, the regime has mobilized support from pro-Hanoi monks both in and out of the An Quang sect, gradually placing them in leadership positions or using them to staff new progovernment organizations such as the Patriotic Buddhists' Liaison Committee. In November 1981 Hanoi sponsored a National Council on the Unification of Buddhism in Hanoi in an attempt to unify all Buddhists under a single government-controlled organization. Unification was finally achieved in January 1983, when the Unified Buddhist Association—the North Vietnamese front organization created in 1959—was dissolved and the Vietnam Buddhist Church proclaimed the "only Buddhist organization representing Vietnamese Buddhism." [redacted] the majority of Buddhists continue to support the "unofficial" Buddhist organizations. [redacted]

Hanoi at the same time is slowly altering the ethnic composition of tribal areas by settling tens of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese there and encouraging hill tribesmen to abandon practices and traditions that distinguish them from the ethnic Vietnamese. According to press reports, normally nomadic hill tribesmen are being settled in permanent villages. Vietnamese is used as the language of instruction in Highlands schools, and Montagnards are urged to dress in

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Vietnamese style. Many of these policies are implemented by party members of hill tribe origin. Communist Montagnards hold substantive positions at the district and provincial levels, and some are at the national level. [redacted]

is now handled by only 200 public security personnel in the Ministry of the Interior's office in Ho Chi Minh City. [redacted]

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Along the northern border, there is no active resistance to the regime. Hanoi's present leaders began their drive for power in these areas and developed good relations with the local population. Northern tribesmen now staff local militia units and man party and government positions at the district and province levels. However, Hanoi's policy of moving ethnic Vietnamese to the border areas indicates that the tribesmen still may not be completely trusted. [redacted]

Several other factors, when added to Hanoi's repressive policies, work against any significant progress by religious or ethnic groups. All of the groups, except the Buddhists, are minorities that cannot attract widespread support; many are traditionally hostile toward ethnic Vietnamese. In addition, several of the groups—the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, for example—are mutually antagonistic, greatly reducing the chances of forming a united front. Guerrilla organizations suffer from severe supply shortages. [redacted]

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[redacted] Fulro guerrillas have difficulty obtaining food and must dedicate four days each week to growing crops. Finally, the resistance groups have no havens in adjoining countries. [redacted]

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Under Hanoi's rule, the Cham have lost many of the privileges that distinguished them from their ethnic Vietnamese neighbors. Refugees claim that Cham is no longer the language of instruction in school. The position of mufti has been abolished, as has the Muslim Association. Importation of Korans is prohibited and none are produced locally. Cham are no longer allowed to go abroad for either Koranic study or to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. However, most mosques remain open and Cham worshipers are subject to less public security harassment than groups such as the Montagnards. [redacted]

Nevertheless, we do not expect Hanoi to ease up on its policies for fear there could be a resurgence in active political or military resistance in the south. Popular discontent with Communist rule there remains strong, and passive resistance to government policies is common. In the past several years, for example, Hanoi was forced to back off from a socialization program that had resulted in a dangerous drop in industrial and agricultural production.<sup>2</sup> Hanoi may also fear that such resistance could over time spread to the north. According to refugee reports, southern goods are already being sold in the north, and black markets—rife in the south—are growing in Hanoi. [redacted]

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Even the Khmer Krom, so useful to Hanoi in Kampuchea, have not escaped the regime's assimilationist policies. The minority's Theravada Buddhist organizations—major repositories of Khmer Krom cultural identity and the centers of political and social influence—have been either disbanded or brought under state supervision. Land has been collectivized, and, according to refugees, Khmer Krom peasants were forcibly removed from some areas along the Kampuchean border during the mid-1970s and replaced by ethnic Vietnamese. [redacted]

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**Continued Regime Pressure Likely**

We doubt that any of the religious or ethnic groups poses a significant short- or long-term challenge to Hanoi. The leadership's tactics have clearly been successful—the 20 divisions stationed south of Da Nang in late 1975 have been reduced to one (in the Central Highlands). [redacted]

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[redacted] moreover, work against "counterreactionaries"

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[redacted] Beijing is trying to aid the northern hill tribes, which straddle the Sino-Vietnamese border. Vietnamese newspapers periodically carry stories about the capture of Chinese agents operating in the northern mountains. [redacted]

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Ethnic minorities will thus remain under pressure to conform to Vietnamese norms while religious organizations will increasingly be controlled by the state. Over the next few years, we look for continued resettlement of ethnic Vietnamese in tribal areas. Ethnic Chinese—unless there is a radical change in Sino-Vietnamese relations—probably will be subjected to increasing bureaucratic harassment designed to encourage them to choose emigration or assimilation. And we expect Hanoi to strictly limit the number of seminarians and newly ordained clergy. [redacted]

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We doubt that foreign assistance to resistance groups will become a significant factor in antiregime activity in Vietnam. China already has a sizable investment in the Kampuchean resistance and has shown no inclination to offer substantial assistance to any group other than the hill tribes. Furthermore, we doubt that these isolated self-centered groups, which are penetrated by the Vietnamese security apparatus and lack the infrastructure and havens necessary to mount an effective resistance, would be able to use any increase in foreign support effectively. [redacted]

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