

Testimony on Vietnam
for the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Convener: Senator Sam Brownback
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Engagement

I have been traveling back to Vietnam on a yearly basis since 1988. It is a country that I have grown to love. I have deep respect for the ingenuity of its people but I have been deeply concerned with what appears to be a deteriorating approach to human rights by the Vietnamese government.

I will limit my comments to the harassment of Christians, but the various expressions of Buddhism have also come under government oppression. The northwest provinces and the Central Highlands have produced the worst offences. Beatings, imprisonments, disappearances, and murders have all been recorded in great detail. Pastors are not allowed to obtain passports. They are unable to travel freely. In every way imaginable, they are treated as second-class citizens.

Local police harass worshipers on Sundays. The church is unable to print and then circulate literature on its activities. The training of pastors, and specifically the number of pastors who will be trained in any one year, is carefully regulated by the government. Both Catholics and Protestants have been detained, beaten, and imprisoned.

In short, the record of the Vietnamese government is terrible in terms of religious freedom, and this record has been carefully documented, with a great deal of clarity. The actions (or the inactions) of this government violate every international covenant since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The government, unfortunately, seems to be in total denial. A strict discipline within that government assures that all of the “talking points” on this issue are repeated verbatim.

What to do? There are really only two options. The first option is that the United States government could designate Vietnam as a country of particular concern. The testimony this day will, I am sure, provide ample evidence of violations of religious freedom in Vietnam that can fairly be described as “egregious,” one of the key thresholds for sanctions designation under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. Such a designation, with whatever sanctions to follow, together with the inclusion on the “list” of the worst offenders in global history, would certainly show resolve on our part. We would feel better, knowing that we had done our duty, regardless of any potential blowback on those who, in the difficult places of our world, we are called to serve. We could justify any sanctions, given the words and the intent of IRFA. In short, we could raise the specter of punishment in the hopes that this would change bad behavior. That would make us feel better but it could have a disastrous effect on our long-term hopes for the people of Vietnam.

Like most countries that have lived through a period of colonization, the Vietnamese know how to resist. History is very clear on this, especially to those of us who fought in the Vietnam War. That war was frustrating. Over these last 15 years I have had occasion to negotiate specific issues that I felt were clearly in the interest of the Vietnamese and, at times, those negotiations have been equally frustrating. The Vietnamese have a long-term view of history, an exceptionally strong corporate will, and a unique national identity. We can certainly apply the pressure available under the IRFA, but Vietnam will most certainly dig in its heels. Additionally, we will play straight into the hands of the hardliners in the Vietnamese government. In short, pressure and power will not advance our overall foreign policy goals (and I am including human rights in those goals) with the Vietnamese government. We, too, need to take a longer view.

I recommend the following. We need a road map in Vietnam for human rights in general and, more specifically, religious freedom. A space has to be created for this issue to be discussed, a space that does not have the sword of sanctions hanging overhead. A third party should be enlisted to facilitate these discussions. Moderate voices need to be identified within the Vietnamese government as well as the religious communities, individuals that have the trust of their constituencies, individuals who can speak credibly for those constituencies.

A common “win-win” point of vested self-interest needs to be discovered against which the issue of religious freedom can be evaluated and our entire bilateral relationship can be judged. The pragmatics of this issue need to be mutually discovered and applied, especially the positive role that religious freedom plays with national security.

Finally, religious freedom advocates and the business community cannot be working at cross-purposes. If Vietnam is to be a sound business investment, the best of human rights—including predictable rule of law, internal security, international perceptions and a universal sense of human dignity—all need to be articulated concepts and practical realities for business leaders and human rights activist alike.

Much has taken place over the last 30 years to bring closure to a difficult historic event. It wasn't easy and it wasn't fast. Let's not give back any ground. No one is saying that the future is going to be easy. The hard work ahead of us, however, has to be done together. We all should be looking for a sustainable solution, and that will never happen if we attempt to impose one, alone, from the outside.