Growing Coffee and Brewing Conflict:
Economic Reform and Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam

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Paper Presented at the International Studies Association Convention
22 - 25 March, 2006
San Diego, Ca.

Draft: Please do not cite without permission

Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between competing and often contradictory polices in developing countries, and the impact such policies have on bridging the north-south divide. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000's many developing countries adopted "globalization friendly", export-oriented economic reform policies, frequently under the rubric of poverty reduction. Ethnic minorities in developing countries frequently remain locked in poverty, however, often due to a web of social policies. The conflict that occurs when ethnic minorities react to these social policies often offsets the potential gains from the economic reform policies.

This contradiction between the economic and social policies is illustrated through a case study of the Vietnamese government's drive for increased coffee production in the Central Highlands during the 1990s and early 2000's. The Hanoi regime has, on the one hand, largely abandoned its socialist economic policies construed during and shortly after the war years, in favor of market-driven, export-oriented economic reforms promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The government has simultaneously held on tightly to decades-old attitudes and policies for ethnic minorities concerning political dissent, religious expression, and the need for assimilation into the dominant Vietnamese culture. These social policies have resulted in increasing levels of conflict between the government of Vietnam and ethnic minorities. The conflict has largely offset economic gains originally designed for improving life in the Central Highlands.

The paper explores the causes and consequences of Vietnam's contrasting economic and social policies. The primary aim is to disentangle the complicated relationship between the government's new economic reform policies and the established social policies. In doing so, the paper explores possible solutions which to the Vietnamese government to continue its stated goal of improving the livelihoods of its poorest members, while bettering the relationship between the government and the country's ethnic minorities.

The year 2006 marks the 20th anniversary of the Vietnamese government's decision to bridge the North-South divide. It was in 1986, when Vietnam was in the grip of extreme poverty and battered by several years of environmental disasters, that the Vietnamese Communist Party issued its proclamation for "doi moi" or economic renovation at the 6th Party Congress. Over the following two decades Vietnam began to transform their economy, bringing many millions of its citizens out of poverty. Yet it did so while simultaneously holding on tightly to decades-old attitudes and policies for ethnic minorities concerning political dissent, religious expression, and the need to assimilate into the dominant Vietnamese culture. The result has been a seemingly contradictory story of overall strong economic growth combined with serious social conflict.

This paper seeks to understand how the Vietnamese government successfully pursued one set of policy initiatives while seeming to fail in another. In the economic realm Vietnam is widely viewed by many outsiders as one of the true "success" stories of the South, a country that has transformed an economy that was mired in poverty. Vietnam is concurrently critiqued as a country that has generally dealt unsuccessfully with the issue of ethnic minorities within its borders. The government has been accused of violating the human rights of many of its own citizens, depriving them of the fundamental religious, social, and cultural rights. How can a country that has sought so determinedly to reform its economic direction concurrently be so seemingly unaware of the need for change on the social front?

These opposing tendencies resulted in one of the largest internal rebellions in Vietnam since the end of the war for reunification in 1975. In 2001 and again in 2004, large uprisings

occurred in several Central highland border provinces. The uprisings mainly involved several poor ethnic minority groups that had long lived on the margins of Vietnamese society. The groups complained that the Vietnamese government was systematically taking away their ancestral land and giving it to the ethnic majority Kinh population to grow coffee and other export crops. They also accused the government of depriving them of religious freedom and abusing their human rights. Several hundred fled to neighboring Cambodia, where some of them eventually filed for refugee status in the United States. Western human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, claimed that Vietnam was a violator of human rights and religious freedom. The human rights groups put out bulletins calling on Vietnam to change its drastically policy toward its ethnic minority population. Sporadic protests continued over the next three years in several provinces in Vietnam's Central Highlands, culminating in additional riots in 2004. International condemnation again followed, leading the United States to eventually put Vietnam on its "watch list" of countries that abuse religious freedom.

Why would the Vietnamese government, whose top priority was the long-term economic development of its country in order to bridge the North-South gap, risk that goal by forcefully subduing a relatively small number of ethnic minorities in its hinterlands? What would motivate Vietnam to invite international condemnation and the possibilities of economic or political retribution for its policies against its own people? How could a government which had been such a good "learner" on the topic of economic reform, be such a bad one when it came to dealing with social policies of its own people?

This paper posits that the reality in Vietnam is much more complicated than the simple sound bites make it appear. It was the confluence of many ongoing economic and social forces that helped precipitate conflict in the Highlands. A history of distrust and lack of assimilation of

Vietnam's ethnic minorities, the Vietnamese government's suspicion of outside cultural forces and its perceived need to control those forces, widely disparate views of land tenure and productivity, were all set in the context of the government's goal of rapid economic growth, and dominant ethnic Kinh-centered economic reforms and government incentives. All these forces combined with a global coffee price spike of the mid 1990s, followed by a steep drop in prices in the early part of the new decade. The result virtually guaranteed confrontation in the highlands. This paper examines these forces and explores how the conflation of these forces produced ongoing conflict in the Central highland border provinces in 2001 and again in 2004.

First, it is necessary to define a few terms. The "North" is defined in this paper as embodied in the countries of North America and Western Europe, seen especially in the second half of the 20th century as greatly prospering relatively to the "South," which includes most countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. While Japan, and other Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore could be considered part of the economic "North," these Asian countries may still be included, for reasons outlined below, in at least some aspects, part of the North-South divide.

The "North-South divide," as defined in this paper, includes multiple components. It includes the actual economic division between the North and the South, expressed in per-capita GDP terms. It also includes the philosophic and cultural divisions that often exists between the "North" and "South". While there may not remain a large economic division between some Asian countries and North America and Western Europe, there remains a large cultural division resulting from the very dissimilar historical circumstance in which these cultures emerged. The dominant ethnic Kinh majority in Vietnam, heavily influenced by Confucianism and other Asian cultural elements, has a very different outlook on society than the Enlightenment-influenced

nations of North America and Western Europe. This philosophic and cultural aspect of the "North-South divide" must be sufficiently addressed when dealing with the significant differences between Vietnam and the "North."

1. "Doi Moi:" Economic Renovation in Vietnam

The most widely known of the forces that helped bring about the conflict in Vietnam's Central Highlands was its goal of rapid economic growth. Though very proud of its several thousand year old culture, Vietnam also felt the strong sting of foreign rule for much of that history. Long periods of Chinese domination or influence were followed by French colonization in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. During World War II Vietnam was occupied by the Japanese and endured five years of harsh rule. After the Japanese were defeated, Ho Chi Minh, a long-time revolutionary leader, declared Vietnam's independence from outside dominance on September 2, 1945. But it was not to be. The French returned to Vietnam, and the Viet Minh fought for another nine years before the French were forced to concede defeat in the northern half of the country. While the French were pulling out it was the American's turn to become intertwined in Vietnam's history. Believing it was "keeping the world safe for democracy" the United States set off to defeat the communist movement in Vietnam. Over the course of the following two decades the Viet Minh continued to fight against what it perceived to be continuing foreign intrusion, until April 1975 when the United States and its Southern Vietnamese ally were defeated, and Vietnam became reunited.

Reunification did not bring hoped for prosperity, however. The combination of a U.S.-led economic embargo against Vietnam, poor government economic planning, and a succession of poor harvests due to climatic and natural disasters, forced many millions of Vietnamese to face

starvation in the 1980s. At that time Vietnam was considered one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of per-capita income.

It was in the mid-1980s that the Vietnamese government decided to act. In spite of the strong socialist orientation to which the government ascribed, the ruling Communist Party enacted policies that dealt with the economic realities rather than the philosophic rhetoric. Known as "*doi moi*," or "renovation," the government sought to reform the ailing economy. This was done in stages, beginning with the agricultural sector, which accounted for the vast majority of the population in Vietnam. The government abandoned the collective agricultural system that had been in place in the north since 1954 and which it had tried to implement in the south after 1975. The cooperative agricultural system was completely abandoned in favor of "household production." State farms and party officials were ordered to return land that had been illegally or arbitrarily appropriated from peasants. Individual households were allowed to make autonomous decisions regarding where agricultural resources should be invested and what should be produced. Quotas to the government were reduced or eliminated. Price controls on rice were lifted, causing its value to jump ten-fold. Peasants were given long term tenure for their land as cooperative land was redistributed into the direct control of individual families. Families were not allowed to own land outright but they had the incentive of ten to fifteen year leases with assurances for additional land tenure.[1]

The results of these changes were both dramatic and immediate. In the late 1980s Vietnam imported approximately 750,000 tons of rice annually. By the early 1990s Vietnam was able to

[1]David Dollar, speech given on *Economic Reform in Vietnam*, (Washington: The Asia Society), 23 January, 1992.

export 1.4 million tons of rice, making it the third largest rice exporter in the world.[2] Previously unresponsive farmers were challenged by the prospect of earning a decent wage for their labor. There was an immediate increase of 20 percent in food production.

The Vietnamese government also opened up other areas of the country's economy, stimulating economic growth and foreign investment in Vietnam. In 1998 a new foreign investment code, described as one of the most liberal investment codes in all of Asia,[3] became the cornerstone of a new foreign economic policy for Vietnam. Provisions were indeed generous. It allowed for 100 percent foreign enterprise ownership, complete repatriation of profits, a two-year moratorium on taxes for joint ventures, tax exemptions for certain imports and guarantees against expropriation and nationalization of invested capital.[4]

The results of these and subsequent economic changes were also dramatic. Between 1990 and 2005 there was a dramatic rise in foreign investment in Vietnam. Foreign investors, mainly from the surrounding Asian countries like Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, came flooding in to look for investment opportunities. The North, represented by France, the United States, and Australia, also began moving offices into Vietnam.

Over the course of the following decade the Vietnamese government also made dramatic changes to their banking laws, privatized many hundreds of companies in their state sector, and moved forward on monetary and fiscal reform. Vietnam also became much an active participant

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[2]Murray Hiebert, "The Tilling Fields," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 148 (10 May, 1990): 32.

[3]Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy Since 1975*, (Bangkok: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 216, as quoted in "When War and Trade Don't Mix," *The Economist* 305 (19 December, 1987): 25.

[4]Indochina Project Staff, Vietnam's Quest for Foreign Investment--A Bold Move." *Indochina Issues* 80 (March 1988).

in regional bodies, including ASEAN, APEC, AFTA, and APEC. At the global level Vietnam sought access to the WTO, with a hope to become full members in 2006. In these various international fora, Vietnam showed it was serious in bridging the economic portion of the North-South divide.

2. Coffee Exports and Doi Moi

A key aspect of Vietnam's initial drive to reform its economy was to encourage exports of its agricultural products. In the late 1980s Vietnam moved from established agricultural cooperatives toward a household responsibility system that gave individual farmers the right to keep some of their own economic production.[5] In conjunction with other economic reforms, including reduction of import duties on agricultural products (such as fertilizers), cash and export crops rapidly became a mainstay of Vietnam's agricultural economy. Vietnam gave farmers subsidized loans and improved agricultural extension support through, in some cases, providing seedlings, fertilizer, irrigation, and agronomic support. [6]

The result of these reforms in much of the agricultural sector was dramatic. Vietnam went from being a net rice importer to being the third largest exporter of rice in the world in the course of five years. The export of coffee was another area where Vietnam thrust itself on the world's commodity markets. The average price of coffee was at an all-time high in the mid-1990s, in part because a series of poor production years in Brazil. Coffee production in Vietnam averaged 15 percent growth through the 1990s, with total production rising from approximately 20,000 tons in pre-economic reform 1985, to 245,000 tons one decade later and 900,000 tons by 2001

[5]World Bank Vietnam, *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam Coffee Sector Report*, June 2004, 3

[6]Ibid.

(see Table 1, below).[7]

Over 90 percent of these 900,000 tons produced was exported overseas. Thus, in the course of barely over a decade Vietnam moved from a relatively obscure player in the international coffee market to being the third largest coffee producer in the world. Naturally, this exponential increase in tonnage of coffee exports required a great expansion of cultivated land dedicated to coffee production, from less than 45,000 hectares in 1985 to over 500,000 hectares in 2001, the peak of Vietnam's coffee growing years.[8] Much of this land was in the Central Highland's province of Dak Lak. Here, the combination of a good environment and growing conditions, together with the government's perception that the area was under-populated, led the government to encourage the Kinh ethnic majority farmers from the lowlands to move to the Central Highlands to start coffee production. The government further encouraged this internal

Table 1 Official Coffee Acreage, Yields, and Exports in Vietnam

Year	*Total Area (ha)*	*Productive Area (ha)*	*Avg. Yield (tons/ha)*	*Total Production (tons)*	*Export (tons) Value (US$ mln)*	*Average Export Price (US$/ton)*	
1985	44,600	19,800	1.03	20,400	23,500	n/a	n/a
1990	135,500	92,300	1.00	92,000	68,700	59.2	861
1995	205,000	135,000	1.81	245,000	222,900	533.5	2,393
2000	533,000	385,000	1.87	720,000	705,300	464.3	658
2003	450,000	420,000	1.71	720,000	693,863	446.6	644

Source: World Bank Vietnam, *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam Coffee Sector Report*, June 2004, 5.

[7]Ibid., 5.

[8]Ibid., 3.

migration with the development of special "New Economic Zones,"[9] areas designated by the government to encourage economic development of less-developed or less populated areas of Vietnam. To date, over one million ethnic Kinh have moved into the Central Highlands in response to the government's economic incentives.[10]

3. The Kinh and Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam

All of these changes had profound effects on Kinh--ethnic minority relations. The "Kinh" ethnic majority comprise approximately 85 percent of the population in Vietnam.[11] The remaining 15 percent of the population, today approximately 12 million people, are made up of 53 ethnic minority groups. Called "national minorities" in Vietnam, the various groups span the entire country of Vietnam but are especially focused in two areas: the northwest and the Central Highlands. The history of the relations between the Kinh majority and the many ethnic minorities is largely a tale of division and lack of trust, but interspersed with occasional periods of common resistence to foreign enemies.

During Imperial rule from the palace in Hue, the mountainous non-Kinh groups were considered by the majority to be "primitives," and those employed by the state were not to marry them, lest familiarity led to the "danger of polluting superior Vietnamese way."[12] Some of the

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[9]Ibid., 4.

[10] http://www.urban-renaissance.org/urbanren/index.cfm?DSP=content&ContentID=10057, accessed 28 December 2004.

[11]Jean Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A Historical Overview," *Ethnohistory* 47:2, 333.

[12]Gerald C. Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands*, 1954-1976. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 154, as quoted in Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 339.

groups, such as the Hmong, had fled China's southern Yunnan province in past decades or centuries because of famine or strife, and had found the Annamite mountain highlands a safe and secluded place to build a new life.[13] There was therefore relatively little contact between the minority groups and the Kinh majority for much of their respective histories.

During the French colonial period the occupying rulers used an ad hoc "divide-and-rule" policy toward the minority groups.[14] Under this policy, the French played off relations between the Kinh majority and the ethnic minority ("Montagnards," meaning "mountain people," as they were generically called by the French) to French advantage. When the French chose to negotiate with Kinh nationalists, the ethnic minority groups' interests would be denied, while if the interests of the Montagnard's were considered, the French would encourage the political fragmentation of Vietnam.[15] Because of their remoteness, much of the relationship between the indigenous groups and the French also came down to local French administrators and their relationships with both the Kinh officials and the local Montagnard leaders or elders.[16]

Christian missions deeply affected the Montagnards and their relationship with the Kinh. With the French colonial rule in place throughout Vietnam, by the late 1880s French Catholic missionaries worked especially to establish Christian settlements in northwest Vietnam. The Haut-Tonkin vicariate was established in 1895 and within fifteen years had established 115

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[13]Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 341.

[14]Oscar Salemink, "Primitive Partisans: French Strategy and the Construction of Montagard Ethnic Identiy in Indochina," *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism*, 1930-1957. Hans Antlov and Stein Stonneson, eds., London: Curzon, 1995, 262, as quoted in Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 345.

[15]Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 346.

[16]Ibid., 347.

Christian settlements in the mid- and high regions in its jurisdiction.[17]

Evangelical protestant missions were introduced in Vietnam in 1911 by the American-based Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA).[18] Though the CMA worked with the lowland Kinh, it was the ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands with which they had the most relative success. By 1975, out of the 200,000 evangelicals in Vietnam, approximately one-third of them were ethnic minorities from the Central Highlands.[19]

During the "French War" (1945-1954) and the "American War" (1960-1975), many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and in the northwest sided with the foreign troops in opposition to Vietnamese nationalism. The history of distrust between the Kinh majority and the Central highlanders, combined with ideological and religious opposition to communism, brought much bad blood between the two groups.

During the French campaign to reassert authority over Indochina after World War II, the French succeeded in allying with several of the ethnic minority groups throughout the northwest, including the White Tai, Black Tai, and various Hmong groups. This was in part because the French strategically created an autonomous Tai Federation to garner their support.[20] This autonomy would later be claimed by some ethnic groups as proof that the French saw the Montagnards as a separate political entity from the lowland Kinh. One document in particular, a 1951 edict signed by the French-installed Emperor Bao Dai, is often cited as establishing special

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[17]Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 348.

[18]James F. Lewis, "Christianity and Human Rights in Vietnam: The Case of the Ethnic Minorities (1975-2004)," Paper presented at *Christianity and Human Rights Conference*, Samford University, November 2004, 3.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 350.

status for the indigenous minorities of the Central Highlands.

> Known as the statut particulier, the edict guaranteed the highlanders all the rights of Vietnamese citizens as well as the right to "free evolution of these populations in the respect of their traditions and of their customs." Highland chiefs, whether hereditary or selected by native populations, would retain their titles and decision-making powers and customary tribal law would be retained. Article 7 guaranteed that "The rights acquired by the natives over landed property are guaranteed them in entirety."[21]

Regardless of French objectives in relation to the Montagnard's future autonomy, by the time of their defeat at Dinh Binh Phu, much of the pro-French support had vanished. This was in part due to the poor political decision-making by the French, who quickly alienated some of the groups within the Federated Tai through forced relocation and by giving the White Tai a dominant position within the Federation.[22]

It was not just the French, however, who made promises of autonomy to the ethnic minorities. Both the newly victorious Viet Minh and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (the "Viet Cong") promised autonomy to the highlanders as a bid to persuade them to join the North's cause against the emerging conflict against South Vietnam and the United States. Ho Chi Minh, the new president of Vietnam, announced plans for several autonomous zones to be set up in the Northern Highlands. The NLF called for the establishment of autonomous regions in minority areas.[23]

The United States sensed a natural ally in the ethnic minorities during the Second

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[21]Human Rights Watch, "Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts over Land and Religion in Vietnam's Central Highlands," http://199.173.149.140/reports/2002/vietnam/index.htm#TopOfPage accessed 4 January, 2006.

[22]Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 350.

[23]Repression of Montagnards, *Human Rights Watch*, accessed 4 January, 2006.

Indochina War, also known as the “American War.” The Ho Chi Minh trail ran through much of the Central Highlands territory where a large percentage of the local population was ethnic minority. The United States considered it essential, therefore, to seek the support of the ethnic minorities to help slow down or eliminate the movement of wartime supplies to the South. The U.S. “recruited highlanders for village defense units and reconnaissance teams to gather intelligence about North Vietnamese infiltration into the highlands and conduct propaganda in support of the Diêm regime.”[24] In 1961, “the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established the "Village Defense" programs in Darlac (the former name of Dak Lak), followed by the "Mountain Scout" program (often called the Commando program). Highlanders were also trained by U.S. Special Forces Detachment A-35 to conduct paramilitary operations.”[25] The combination of the long-held suspicion of the ethnic minorities to the Kinh majority, combined with the Evangelical Protestant religious aversion to North Vietnam’s communist ideology, made a U.S. - Montagnard alliance a natural one. For ten years the United States was able to exploit this alliance in their effort to win the war in Indochina.

After the American War ended in 1975 and the country was reunified, selective memories dominated the leadership’s attitude toward the ethnic minorities. The victorious Kinh-dominated communist leadership recalled the history of the ethnic minorities alliance with the French and the Americans. It forgot, however, the calls it had made concerning ethnic minority autonomy. The traditional Kinh ethnocentric feelings of superiority to the ethnic minorities, combined with the wartime alliances, often made life very difficult for these groups in the new Vietnamese society. As one researcher summarized the post-war period for the minorities:

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

> It soon became apparent that the oft-promised autonomy for the highlanders was only a propaganda ploy. Worse still, Hanoi immediately began implementing plans to resettle large numbers of Vietnamese in upland "economic zones." There also were announcements in rhetoric reminiscent of the Diêm era about programs to settle the "nomadic" mountain people in "sedentary villages." At the same time all of the highland leaders from the ministry and those who had been active in provincial administrations and programs were captured and incarcerated either in jails or "reeducation camps." Those leaders who managed to elude captivity along with young highlanders from the Army, the Special Forces, and other paramilitary groups, fled into the forest where they organized a resistance movement.[26]

That resistence movement, FULRO, (the French acronym for the *United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races*) was a small, but ongoing ethnic minority resistence to the dominant Vietnamese state. Based in Cambodia, FULRO operated out of the loosely controlled territory in western Cambodia adjacent to the Vietnamese highland provinces. FULRO became a thorn in the flesh for the Vietnamese government during the 1980s. The group was eventually overcome by regional politics when the Cambodian government, seeking better relations with Vietnam in the mid 1980s, no longer allowed FULRO territorial access. The group largely disbanded and made its way to North Carolina as refugees.

As the years went on and the Vietnamese government consolidated control over the highlands, the government's policy became one of parochialism and ethnocentrism. Following the Soviet ethnological and economic paradigm, the Vietnamese authorities attempted to assimilate the many ethnic minority groups into the dominant Kinh culture.[27] Ethnic minority boarding schools were established to help further this process. While these schools provided education to the "best and the brightest," and led to some ethnic minorities gaining leadership

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[26]Gerald Cannon Hickey. *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, p. xxi., cited in "Repression of Montagnards," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed 4 January, 2006.

[27]Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State," 360.

positions at the district and provincial levels, it also led to force the dominant Kinh culture on the many ethnic minorities. In several visits with the head of an ethnic minority boarding school in the late 1990s, this writer felt the distinct tension between the school as a training ground in Kinh assimilation versus the school as a vehicle for ethnic advancement.[28]

4. Evangelical Christianity in the Central Highlands

The lingering distrust of the ethnic minorities by the Vietnamese government was further exacerbated in the 1980s and 1990s by the influence of religious conversion among some of the prominent highland groups. Among the Hmong in four northern provinces, numbers of evangelical Christians rose from a "handful" in 1989 to an estimated 150,000-200,000 by 2000.[29] This number represented approximately one-fifth of all Hmong living in this northern region. Evangelical Christianity also spread in the Central Highlands among the Mnong, Gia-rai, Ba-Na, and Stieng ethnic groups. According to one sympathetic source, Christianity increased among the Ê-Çê alone from 15,000 in 1975 to 150,000 in 2000.[30]

The causes of this rapid increase in evangelical Christianity were multifaceted. First, the general lessening of government control on the economy also led to fewer restrictions on the ethnic minority population. This allowed there to be greatly increased access to outsiders, including evangelical Christian missionaries. Ethnic minority groups who had emigrated to the United States and Canada in the 1970s and 1980s and converted to Christianity in their newfound

[28]As a Co-director of an international development agency in Vietnam, I made frequent visits to the Hoa Binh Ethnic Minority Boarding School between 1998 and 2002.

[29]Lewis, "Christianity and Human Rights in Vietnam," 3.

[30]Ibid., 5.

countries sponsored persons to come back to their homeland to spread their newfound faith among their ethnic brothers and sisters. Second, the U.S. based Far East Broadcasting Company broadcast evangelical Christian programs in 26 languages from a 250,000 watt radio station in the Philippines.[31] These broadcasts seemed to be quite effective in their goal of converting members of ethnic minorities to evangelical Christianity. And, third, as anthropologist Oscar Salemink notes, it is the very fact that evangelical Christianity has an oppositional quality to the government which attracts some minority groups to its message.[32]

The Vietnamese government prided itself on its policy of religious toleration within the context of the ruling Communist state. It had increasingly allowed both Catholic and Protestant Christian faiths to operate in Vietnam under the umbrella of the Committee on Religious Affairs. Religious Freedom was guaranteed under Article 70 of the 1992 Constitution, which states that

> [A citizen] can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law. The places of worship of all faiths and religions are protected by the law. No one can violate freedom of belief and of religion; nor can anyone misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and State policies.[33]

The Vietnamese government was clearly uneasy about what it considered to be this increasing "foreign" influence, however. The government recalled the close alliance of several evangelical groups during the American War with the American, anti-communist effort. Always

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[31]http://rightweb.irc-online.org/groupwatch/febc.php#P4230_903647, accessed February 24, 2005.

[32]Oscar Salemink, "The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands," in D. McCaskill and K. Kampe (eds.), *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1997, as quoted in UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, "Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands," Writenet Paper No. 05/2001, January 2002, p. 17.

[33]Quoted in "Foreign Religious Organizations in Vietnam: Law and Practice," *Fund for Reconciliation and Development Background Paper*, September 2004.

wary of plots to destabilize its legitimacy among the Central highland ethnic minorities, the government was very suspicious of the rapid rise in evangelical Christianity. From the Communist Party perspective, the threat of a rapidly increasing evangelical Christian population was its potential to draw the allegiance of the new converts away from the state. Rightly or wrongly perceived, the government felt the evangelical Christian influence was an outside, non-Vietnamese influence, that had the potential for causing disharmony in the country. Christianity itself was not in itself a particular threat to the Vietnamese authorities, as long as it could be controlled and maintained by authorities. The problem was that evangelical Christianity was being spread very quickly among an already "suspect" population group.

From the government's perspective, then, it was necessary to contain the rapid spread of the evangelical Christian faith among ethnic minorities. In 1991 a national directive was issued to control any activity "using religion to sabotage national independence, oppose the State, sabotage the policy of uniting the whole people, undermining the healthy culture of our nation or prevent the faithful from carrying out their civic duties."[34] Throughout the 1990s groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported a continuing campaign of harassment by government authorities. This was as the same time that religious freedom in the country as a whole, especially among the Kinh majority, was considered to be improving by most outside observers.

5. The Economic and Religious Cauldron Explodes

The confluence of these factors – the Vietnamese government's desire for rapid economic

[34]Quoted in *United Nations Economic and Social Council: Commission on Human Rights*, 1999, p. 16.

growth combined with economic reforms and government incentives for the Kinh majority to grow coffee in the "unpopulated" Central Highlands, a global coffee price spike of the mid 1990s, a history of distrust and lack of assimilation of Vietnam's ethnic minorities, and the government's suspicion of outside religious forces becoming dominant in the Central Highlands -- all came together in a violent way in February 2001. In the first several days of February, several demonstrations occurred in multiple provincial capitals and towns of Gia Lai, Buon Ma Thout, and Dac Lac, involving many thousands of Jarai, Ede, and other ethnic minorities.[35] Crowds of people demonstrated before the provincial headquarters of the Communist Party and the government, as well as in front of private homes of provincial Party officials, sometimes chasing and mistreating representatives of political agencies.[36] The demonstrators accused the authorities of allowing the Kinh Vietnamese to take over the ancestral lands belonging to their ethnic groups.[37] Others accused the government officials of breaking up church services and seizure of church properties by the provincial authorities[38]

A second wave of demonstrations by ethnic minorities occurred in the Central Highlands in 2004. These demonstrations, again involving many thousands of people, took place in at least thirty separate locations in Gia Lai, Dak Lak and Dak Nong provinces. The demonstrators again expressed their concern over the theft of land by the Kinh ethnic majority, and of intensifying

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[35]UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, "Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands," Writenet Paper No. 05/2001, January 2002, 19.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Huw Watkin, "Land Shortage Brings Vietnam to the Boil," *The Australian*, March 31, 2001.

[38]David Brunnstrom, "Vietnam Launches Clampdown after Ethnic Unrest in Central Highlands, *Reuters*, February 6, 2001.

religious persecution.[39]

The Vietnamese government went to great lengths to quiet the story about the uprising and subsequent repression. Though this researcher was present in Vietnam during the 2001 demonstrations there was very little mention in the state-controlled media about events transpiring in the Central Highlands. When it was mentioned, the government initially spoke of "extremist elements" bent on creating trouble.[40] The story was not aired on Vietnam's national television until late March 2001.[41] When it later appeared in other articles in the Vietnamese media there were interviews with people who had participated, but later admitted their wrongdoing. These interviews were conducted within the context of the need for Vietnam's ethnic/national solidarity and the benefits of development under Communist Party leadership.[42]

6. Government Responses to the Unrest

Vietnamese public security in the highlands swiftly tried to take control of the situation by clamping down on the opposition movements. According to Human Rights Watch, Vietnamese authorities in the Central Highlands forced Montagnards to "voluntarily" sign papers pledging to withdraw petitions opposing government confiscation of their land and forced

[39]Lewis, "Christianity and Human Rights in Vietnam," 7.

[40]Viet Nam News Agency, 8 February 2001.

[41]The Nation [Bangkok], 29 March 2001, as quoted in UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, "Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands," Writenet Paper No. 05/2001, January 2002, p. 19.

[42]UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, "Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands," Writenet Paper No. 05/2001, January 2002, p. 21.

villagers to "swear Brotherhood" to Vietnam with local party cadres.[43] "Authorities would point to various villagers in attendance, requiring them to stand and repeat after the officials: 'I abandon the custom of following the religion of Jesus, which is a religion of the French and the Americans. I pledge to follow the road of Uncle Ho, which is the best road.'"[44] Churches were destroyed, local police beat some church leaders, land was confiscated, local officials imposed restrictions on freedom of movement of ethnic minority Christians, and police officers regularly monitored the activities of Christian families in their homes, thus preventing them from freely observing their religion in their homes.[45] By all accounts the situation for ethnic minority Christians in particular became worse after the demonstrations.

Human rights organizations collected testimony from many individuals documenting this repression. These reports, as well as findings from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, formed the basis of a 2004 United States Department of State decision to list Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern for Religious Freedom" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This designation meant that the United States could, among other things, delay of cancel scientific or cultural exchanges, deny official visits, withdraw development assistance, or prohibit US financial institutions from making loans in excess of $10,000,000.[46]

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[43]"Vietnam: New Documents Reveal Escalating Repression," *Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*, http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/vietnam/montagnards/, accessed 06 March, 2005.

[44]"Vietnam: Independent Investigation of Easter Week Atrocities Needed Now," A *Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*, http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/05/27/vietna8625_txt.htm, accessed 28 December, 2005.

[45]"Vietnam: New Documents," Human Rights Watch, accessed 06 March, 2005.

[46]"Vietnam as a 'Country of Particular Concern': What Effect on US-Vietnam Relations?" http://www.ffrd.org/Vietnam%20as%20a%20CPC%20for%20FRD1.htm, accessed 28 December, 2005.

The irony of this is that at the very time of the events of 2001 and 2004 the Vietnamese government was on a concerted effort to improve the economic situation of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. One result of the efforts of the economic reforms pursued under *doi moi* was an increasing gap between the rich and poor in Vietnamese society. The government was concerned that the number of those in poverty, though greatly reduced overall from 1986, was still great, especially in rural and mountainous areas. In the early years of the new millennium a special effort was begun to try to address the difficult economic situation in these areas, especially targeting ethnic minorities, in the northwest and the Central Highlands of Vietnam. As part of this effort the government announced its intention for close cooperation with international lending institutions including the World Bank, and developed a "Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy" (CPRGS).[47] Among the goals of the CPRGS were to reduce the proportion of poor households by two fights by 2005 and by three fifths by 2010 relative to the year 2000, create new jobs for the rural workforce, improve the quality of and access to education, reduce the child mortality rate and child malnutrition rate, and "ensure the entitlement of individual and collective land use rights to ethnic minorities and mountainous people."[48] Though goals like this can easily be propaganda tools made by governments eager to grease the international aid wheels, in the case of Vietnam there was praise by outside aid agencies for the government's commitment to truly work towards understanding and addressing the causes of poverty among the poorest citizens of Vietnam. This included a specific goal of hunger eradication in all of Vietnam, which was seen as a model for developing countries working to

[47]Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *The Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS)*, Hanoi, November 2003).

[48]Ibid., 30.

improve the livelihoods of its most vulnerable citizens.

A different set of Western organizations has given Vietnam praise, rather than scorn, for its actions in the economic sphere. As an example, in one 2002 study on indigenous peoples/ethnic minorities and poverty reduction in Vietnam, the Asian Development Bank repeatedly praises Vietnam for its commitment and achievements to poverty reduction.[49] The tone is similar to other World Bank and International Monetary Fund studies, which complement Vietnam for its success in trying to address the problem of rural poverty among ethnic minority groups.

7. Can Vietnam Grow Coffee without Brewing Conflict?

Clearly the Vietnamese government is making a concerted effort at bridging the North-South divide, both within its borders, and in the global arena. But the Vietnamese government has the difficult task of bridging the multifaceted nature of the divide. For the North it is not enough for Vietnam to bridge just the economic divide. The World Bank and other Northern-based economic institutions have generally given Vietnam high marks for its economic reform efforts. The Vietnamese government have largely acquiesced to the liberal economic demands of these institutions in the hope that higher living standards for the majority of people will mean more domestic and international political legitimacy. The freeing up of the marketplace and the encouragement for export-oriented goods has resulted in the government gaining some political "space."

At the same time the Vietnamese government has had difficulties dealing with the North-

[49]Environment and Social Safeguard Division, *Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction: Viet Nam*, Manilla, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, June 2002.

South divide on the social, cultural, and political level. A different set of Northern institutions, notably human rights organizations and governments (notably the United States) have pushed the Vietnamese government to adopt more liberal social and religious policies regarding its treatment of ethnic minorities and its definition and practice of religious freedom.

The fact that the Vietnamese government has had a long history of seeking how best to integrate ethnic minorities within its boundaries makes a compelling case that the issue lies deeper than Vietnam's current socialist government. Governments in Vietnam attempted to forcibly assimilate ethnic minorities into the dominant Kinh culture long before the country was re-unified under the banner of communism in 1975.

It can therefore be suggested that culture ultimately trumps economics in the divide between Vietnam and the North. The current government has largely rejected its communist economic leanings advocated by many Party Congresses over the past 50 years. It has replaced these policies with liberal economic policies encouraged by certain northern economic institutions. In doing so Vietnam has largely been seen as a "success" story by these institutions in attempting to bridge this economic portion of the "North-South" divide.

The Vietnamese government has had much more difficulty, however, acceding to other Northern institutions' demands to adopt the "Northern" idea of a liberal political and social culture which accepts diversity of religious and social thought. It has, rather, held steadfast to its historic impulse to emphasize a single, dominant culture in which the traditional Kinh culture is defined as the "norm" and other cultures are defined as necessarily fitting within that norm. From the North, this aspect of bridging the "North-South" divide has been viewed as a failure.

What is often left out of the discussion within the North, however, is its own shortcomings in dealing with the multifaceted nature of the North-South divide. Northern

organizations exhibit a bi-polar tendency on Vietnam's economic and social policies. The large international aid agencies, notably the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, are generally silent on the topic of the perceived lack of tolerance of ethnic minority rights and that other Northern organizations stress. The concern that these Northern economic institutions expresses in their documents focuses almost exclusively on the need for the Vietnamese government to adopt liberal economic features. There is rarely a word said about the potential impact of these policies on the social and religious front, or the need to take historical cultural understandings into consideration when applying economic change.

On the other hand, the human rights organizations unanimously tend to condemn Vietnam's relative poor record on human rights of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and in the country's northwest provinces. Yet they say little about how Northern government's encouragement of liberal economic policies have contributed to the worsening of tensions in these areas, nor how the Vietnamese government has recently gone to great lengths to attempt to bridge the growing economic divide between the largely city-based Kinh and the predominantly rural ethnic minorities within its own borders..

If Vietnam and the North are truly going to move forward in bridging the North-South divide in all its complexity, several things much happen. The North must take a much more humble approach to its own successes, both on the economic and cultural fronts. On the economic front the North must acknowledge the many times when it has not followed its own liberal economic advice. It would be wise for the North to admit that domestic political pressure often trumps its ideological mantra of "free trade." In recent Vietnamese-American trade

disputes, including that of catfish,[50] this was certainly the case.

Likewise, the North would be wise to take a more humble attitude toward its own success at encouraging liberal cultural and social policies. It was only a few decades ago that many states in the United States practiced official forms of racism and denied religious freedom to some of their own citizens. The movement towards addressing these inequities was a long and complicated road. To expect a country such as Vietnam, coming from a vastly differing philosophic paradigm, to change in the course of one or two decades, is expecting the impossible.

The North would also do well to examine the way in which conflicts are best resolved in the Vietnamese context. Dramatic confrontation with ultimatums given may sometimes work in the North. But the face-saving emphasis of Confucian cultures, the strong desire for uniformity, and the long tradition of using quiet, third party negotiations for achieving results clashes with this Northern approach to conflict resolution.

The North would also do well to examine how other Asian countries have fared in dealing with issues of social and religious freedom. Japan, the country that led the way, has largely been able to avoid the question because of the very small percentage of ethnic minorities in its midst. Those minorities that exist there, however, have been largely forced to live in the shadow of Japan's economic success. Rampant discrimination and exclusion have rather been the norm. The situation is largely the same in South Korea. Similar stories of cultural dominance exist in other Southeast Asian countries trying to bridge the North-South divide, including Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. To expect Vietnam to be exempt from these strong cultural influences is to defy history, not only of Vietnam but of the surrounding Southeast Asian

[50]For a brief summary of this example, see "Case of the Ghostly Catfish," *The Economist,* 12 December, 2002. http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=1494115 (accessed 27 December, 2005).

territory.

Vietnam has now been engaged in bridging the North-South divide for over two decades. It has begun to successfully bridge the economic aspect of that divide, in part because it has managed to grow coffee so well. It has not done nearly as well in bridging the North-South cultural and social divide. It is this divide, which was brewing long before the coffee was grown, which needs much further understanding from both sides of the North-South divide.

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