

## Vietnam's bishops criticize new religion law

In bold words, Vietnam's bishops criticize new religion law They call on the communist government to have an accurate view of religions In bold words, Vietnam's bishops criticize new religion law



Vietnamese bishops have told high ranking communist officials they are critical of a new religion law that is to take effect next year while also finding fault with the government's belligerence toward religions.

In a formal statement, the bishops criticized the Law on Belief and Religion because it "continues to strengthen asking-and-granting mechanism."

The bishops' statement said the law replaces words "asking permission" and "giving permission" with "registering, informing, proposing," which still request "religions to inform government authorities about their activities that authorities may or may not approve."

"This mechanism shows that religious freedom is really not considered a human right but a grace that needs permission (from the government)," said the statement signed by Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Chi Linh, head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam and Bishop Peter Nguyen Van Kham, its secretary general.

"It is the mechanism itself to legalize the government's intervention in religions' internal issues and its tight control over religious activities," they said.

The bishops' statement was addressed to Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, chairwoman of the National Assembly, and 500 assembly members who are attending their month-long meeting in Hanoi. Most of them are Communist Party members.

In their statement, the bishops criticized the government's views of religions and religious organizations. "The government views pure religions with political aspects and regards them as antagonistic forces," the statement said.

The bishops stated that vague and abstract phrases such as "division of the nation and religions" and "infringement of national defense, security, social order" are repeated many times in the law. Such phrases they said, "are easily abused to shift responsibility onto and condemn religious organizations when the government is dissatisfied."

The law was ratified by the National Assembly last November and is set to take effect Jan. 1, 2018. It is the first ever law on religions since the country was reunified under communist rule in 1975.

### **Controlling all religious activities**

In their statement, the bishops also said the government uses manpower and spends much money monitoring, probing and controlling all religious activities, while trying to use religious organizations as its tools.

The bishops pointed out that at state-run education centers, Catholicism is expressed with prejudice and hostility that create a wrong impression about the Catholic Church among the young generation. They also warned the government that such activities that will lose religions' real characters and divide followers.

They said charitable, educational and health care work done by religions is undervalued and even banned.

The bishops said religions, as well as the Catholic Church "always journey with the nation because they promote spiritual values in people, educate followers to respect justice and rights, do charity and respect human dignity." Those activities aim to develop the nation's fine traditions and build a society of justice, democracy and civilization, they added.

### **'Journeying' with the nation**

The statement said, "the nation" is different from "political regimes that change by time." Journeying with the nation means "journeying with people including the poor and marginalized that form the Vietnamese people and their cultural and spiritual heritages," they added.

The government has called on religions to journey with "the nation" that it intentionally refers to the communist rule.

"The national assembly needs to have a more active vision on religions and religious organizations," the bishops said. "A proper vision on religion will be a premise of respecting people's true religious freedom."

The bishops hoped the national assembly would welcome their frank and honest criticism that comes from their patriotism and responsibility toward history.

They also hoped that the government would create conditions for religions to actively participate in building the country with prosperity, democracy and happiness.

The Catholic Church serves 7 million Catholics in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government currently recognizes 39 religious organizations from 13 religions, with 24 million followers.

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