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## CASE STUDY II—VIETNAM

As noted in chapter 9, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often enjoy certain advantages in flexibility and access when it comes to religious freedom advocacy. Pressure applied to a country via governmental mechanisms will sometimes be insufficient if NGOs are not simultaneously working creatively through channels of civil society in that nation to create the conditions needed to sustain religious freedom. Case study II illustrates these dynamics in Vietnam—specifically through the work of one religious freedom NGO, the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE).

IGE—a transparently faith-based NGO based in the U.S.—has from 2004 to 2008 sent its key staff to Vietnam six times, leading various delegations of American leaders. IGE has also hosted numerous delegations from Vietnam visiting the United States. In the past year, IGE has met with the prime minister of Vietnam and has met twice with its president. IGE was also the only international religious freedom NGO allowed access to the previously persecuted regions of the Central and Northwest Highlands, where hundreds of Protestant churches have been legally registered since IGE’s involvement.<sup>1</sup> IGE has also catalyzed several unprecedented conferences in Vietnam examining how to advance religious freedom and the rule of law.

The story of how IGE achieved this kind of access and impact demonstrates the value that NGOs can add to the cause of religious freedom advocacy.<sup>2</sup> IGE did not act in a vacuum—the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom, John Hanford, played an instrumental role in persistently and patiently working with the Vietnamese government to help effect changes. However, instead of examining government-to-government engagement, this chapter will highlight NGO engagement with a government to bring about systematic improvements in religious freedom.

## VIETNAM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Vietnam is a country in the middle of serious transition and strategic transformation. Intelligent and industrious, the Vietnamese people—both the government and citizens—have made the collective decision not only to participate in the world economy, but to join the global civil society as well.

Vietnam's economy, for example, grew at a rate of over eight percent from 2005 to 2008. This is a remarkable statistic considering that Vietnam's biggest trading partners are also former enemies (the Japanese, the French, the Americans, and the Chinese). As a result, the poverty rate has decreased from fifty-eight percent in 1993 to twenty percent in 2004, while per capita income has increased from \$170 to \$620 in the same time frame. As the World Bank states, "Vietnam is one of the best-performing developing economies in the world . . . It has the potential to be one of the great success stories in development."<sup>3</sup>

These trends and statistics indicate something beyond economic benchmarks. Most of all, they indicate a desire not to let the past—from previous military enemies to failed economic policies—influence the future. They also indicate a comprehensive and systematic desire to provide quickly the most basic of human rights—the right not to live in poverty—as the basis for civil society.

Vietnam has not, however, had a strong record on religious freedom. Its argument has been that it is difficult to be concerned about religious freedom when there is no bread on the table. The recent unprecedented progress in poverty reduction therefore helps create an opening to advance religious freedom as a critically important component in deepening and maturing Vietnamese civil society and integrating Vietnam into global civil society.

## U.S.-VIETNAM RELATIONS

Due to the war between the U.S. and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, relations were not normalized until 1995. Since that time, relations and trade have steadily improved and increased, but religious freedom remained a paramount concern for the American people. It was particularly difficult for Americans to see the ethnic minorities of the Central and Northwest Highlands—who had fought with the United States against North Vietnam during the war—being persecuted for their Christian faith.

By September 2004, the United States designated Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Washington did not, however, implement

any of the sanctions allowed by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Instead, the office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department and the National Security Council at the White House developed a “road map” through which the United States and Vietnam would work together to remove the CPC designation. This agreement, which was signed on May 5, 2005, laid out the necessary results that Vietnam had to achieve in order to be removed from the CPC list.

Vietnam was anxious to get off the list for two reasons. Beyond the international “black eye,” being on the list prevented Vietnam from establishing Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with the United States, which was needed for the Americans to support Vietnam’s ascension to the World Trade Organization. Compared to the United States, Vietnam has a population that is one-third of the size (85 million), living on one-thirtieth of the land. Almost thirty percent of the population is under the age of fourteen, and more than half of the population has been born since the fall of Saigon in 1975. The situation of young people with increasingly less land and less economic opportunity is something about which all governments are concerned.

As a function of the Communist Party’s 2003 directive, Vietnam began to reshape its approach toward religion in 2004 with the publishing of the governmental “Ordinance on Belief and Religion” on November 15. On February 1, 2005, Vietnam published “Instruction of the Prime Minister on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism,” and on March 1, 2005 the government published the “Government Decree on Guidance for Implementation of a Number of Articles of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion.”<sup>4</sup>

Vietnam also released forty-five prisoners of conscience in 2005 and 2006 while making it easier for churches legally to register, meet, and worship in the Central and Northwest Highlands. Vietnam also hosted the first conference in Southeast Asian history on religion and the rule of law in Hanoi in September 2006. This conference featured a comparative discussion and analysis of different approaches to the relationship between religion and state. (Its sequel in 2007 deepened the discussion, laying a framework for an eventual law on religious freedom.)

In November of 2006, after President Bush’s state visit to Hanoi (while Vietnam was hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum), the United States lifted the CPC designation. In December, the United States granted Vietnam PNTR and fully supported Vietnam’s desire to join the WTO (which it did in January 2007).

## IGE ENGAGEMENT—GETTING STARTED

IGE practices what it calls “relational diplomacy,” which emphasizes patient cultivation of respectful relationships and practical agreements to work toward religious freedom in ways that are consistent with the local culture and rule of law. IGE likes to say that its job is to be a friend to the issue of religious freedom, a friend to the government of the particular country it is engaging, and a friend to the U.S. government—fashioning a win-win-win solution. In this sense, IGE practices a “Track 1.5” form of relational diplomacy. If “Track 1” diplomacy is government-to-government relations, and “Track 2” diplomacy is people-to-people, IGE operates in the middle.

In May of 2004, IGE hosted a senior leader from Vietnam who handled religious affairs in the south. Through that visit, IGE met the Vietnamese embassy staff. At the end of that experience, a senior Vietnamese diplomat remarked that IGE staff were the first Americans he had ever met who did not immediately “give me a list and tell me what to do.”<sup>5</sup> He confided that not all Vietnamese communists were atheists and that many worshipped their ancestors. A relationship was born.

In October 2004—just after the CPC designation by the U.S. government—IGE’s president Chris Seiple flew to Hanoi from Beijing, where he had just attended a conference on religion and the rule of law. He met with various Vietnamese leaders, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Parliament, and the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. After some frank discussions, they agreed that Seiple could return and visit the Central Highlands and also agreed on the possibility of doing a conference together on religion and the rule of law.

The government’s top priority at the time was social stability. For that, it needed jobs and a continuing increase in living standards. Outside relations, especially with the United States, were thus paramount. The government very much wanted Permanent Normal Trade Relations with the U.S. to be approved by Congress the following year, and they were hoping to mark the tenth anniversary of normalized U.S.-Vietnamese diplomatic relations with a U.S. visit by the prime minister. They were seeking to join the WTO. They had joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum in 1998 and would host the APEC summit in late 2006. In early 2006, the Communist Party Congress, which meets once every five years, would convene to celebrate and reconsider

the twentieth anniversary of *doi moi* (“renovation,” the Vietnamese *perestroika* that has slowly opened up the economy).

The common link among these trends and aspirations was the rule of law—that is, using laws instead of communist-style regulations to govern. There needed to be rule of law if there was to be the kind of economic advancement needed to produce jobs, to get normal trade relations with the U.S., to continue *doi moi*, to host a successful APEC summit, and most importantly, to join the WTO. In short, they needed international legitimacy if they were to achieve internal progress and stability. These conditions were conducive for IGE to make diplomatic inroads, because from the beginning it had articulated its agenda for religious freedom in terms of a rule-of-law progression that served the long-term self-interest of Vietnam.

### IGE ENGAGEMENT—DEEPENING THE RELATIONSHIP

In June of 2005, Seiple visited Hanoi again and then flew to Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces in the Central Highlands, where he met with provincial governors and other officials, as well as Protestant pastors who had suffered persecution in the past. This was the only visit to the Central Highlands by a Western NGO since the September 2004 CPC designation, and thus it positioned IGE as the only voice equipped to compare that on-the-ground reality with the stereotypes of Vietnam back in the United States.

From this trip emerged a commitment to sign a transparent and public agreement about how IGE would work in Vietnam going forward. The agreement was signed by IGE and the General-Secretary of the Vietnam-USA Society (VUS), a government-organized entity that was a member of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (an organization with cabinet-level status that had responsibility for Vietnamese civil society through its fifty-one member organizations).

Since the agreement was unprecedented, and because NGOs do not sign agreements with governments—the agreement was called a “Letter of Intent,” or “LOI.” The LOI placed religious freedom in the larger context of the bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam, and in the larger context of people-to-people initiatives:

VUS and IGE agree to cooperate in facilitating people-to-people diplomacy, through promoting experts’ dialogues and exchange in all fields—e.g.,

social, economic, political, cultural, etc., including religious freedom and human rights.

*Principles of Cooperation*

We will work together through consensus, mutually respecting:

- One another's cultural and historical context
- The rule of law and each country's legal system
- The need for timely consultation.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the LOI called for three confidence-building steps to deepen trust. The first step took place from February 24 to March 4, 2006, when IGE hosted a delegation of Vietnamese religious and government leaders in Washington. For the first time in Vietnam's diplomatic history, the Vietnamese government allowed an outside party, IGE, to select the religious representatives in the delegation. The group engaged in off-the-record discussions with key U.S. leaders at the State Department and the National Security Council, and on Capitol Hill about Vietnam's religious freedom situation. The delegation also participated in the first academic conference of its kind on religious freedom and U.S.-Vietnam relations (cosponsored by IGE, Georgetown University, and George Washington University).

The second step took place on June 5–15, 2006, when Vietnam hosted a delegation of U.S. scholars and evangelical Protestant leaders in Vietnam. The delegation visited four provinces in Vietnam's Central and Northwest Highlands, building relationships, highlighting recent progress, and addressing ongoing problems. It was the first time that a large group of pastors from the United States had ever met their fellow pastors in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, as relationships deepened and tangible progress was made on the ground, Seiple had the opportunity to testify before the U.S. Senate Finance Committee on July 12, 2006, where he advocated lifting the CPC designation and articulated expectations the U.S. government should have as a result.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that the United States should honor Vietnam's good faith effort in religious freedom, lift CPC, and then establish PNTR.

These two particular actions send the strong signal that we both *respect* the efforts made thus far by the Vietnamese government to establish the rule of law (especially the protection of religious freedom), and that we *expect* the government of Vietnam to continue creating the rule-of-law structure necessary to promote religious freedom and free trade in a sustainable manner.

If such efforts do not continue at a reasonable pace, the U.S. should be ready to quickly reinstate CPC designation, possibly with sanctions.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, he privately and repeatedly advocated this position with the State Department and the National Security Council.

The LOI's third step took place in September 2006 when IGE co-convened with the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences an international conference on "Religion and the Rule of Law in Southeast Asia" in Hanoi. (Other conference cosponsors included Emory University and Brigham Young University.) This conference offered a regional forum for scholars and lawyers to discuss religion, culture, national security, and law. The conference was also attended by an IGE-sponsored delegation of American church pastors who had spent the previous week meeting with Vietnamese pastors from the country's most persecuted regions.

### IGE ENGAGEMENT—ESTABLISHING THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

At the conference's conclusion, IGE signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with VUS further to promote religious freedom together. This MOU established an annual conference series on religion and rule of law in Southeast Asia, partnerships between Vietnamese and American communities to promote socioeconomic development, exchanges of analysis on religious discrimination reports, and dialogue between governmental and religious representatives on Vietnam's legal framework for religious freedom.

Since these three steps, IGE has deepened and expanded its relationship with Vietnam. For example, in June 2007, Vietnam's President Nguyen Minh Triet made his landmark visit to the United States, the first by a Vietnamese head of state since 1975. IGE and a small group of religious leaders met with President Triet in Washington, D.C., providing a rare opportunity to speak openly with the president about issues of religious freedom. (IGE was the only NGO to meet with President Triet during his thirty-six hours in D.C.)

In November 2007, the second annual conference on religion and the rule of law took place in Hanoi. At the conclusion of the conference, IGE signed a protocol (or subagreement) that provides guidance for further implementing the socioeconomic development work of Glocal Ventures, Inc. (GVI)—a church-based development NGO of Northwood Church in Dallas, Texas, that has been operating in the northwest region of Vietnam for over ten years.<sup>9</sup>

During this same trip, IGE and its delegation deepened the top-down dialogue on religious freedom through meetings with President Triet, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Committee on Religious Affairs. The delegation also traveled to Lao Cai province in the northwest, where it met with registered and unregistered church leaders as well as government leaders at the commune, district, and provincial levels.

In early December 2007, Seiple again testified before Congress, this time before the House of Representatives, about why the United States should grant normal trade relations with Vietnam. In June 2008, IGE helped organize the prime minister's visit to Washington, D.C., and in October 2008 IGE traveled to the Central Highlands again to celebrate publicly the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Protestant church in Gia Lai Province.

## CONCLUSION

As was noted in chapter 9,

[NGOs] maintain a significant amount of autonomy in the strategies and methodologies they employ to advocate for religious freedom, unconstrained by many of the political and bureaucratic limitations of national or international bodies. This autonomy allows them to speak more frankly, act more quickly, and innovate more freely than can international bodies and governments.

The experience of IGE in engaging Vietnam from 2004 to 2008 provides real-world illustrations of how these dynamics can operate. To be sure, the sticks and carrots that were used by government entities to try to influence Vietnam were important. Neither governmental nor nongovernmental approaches ever operate in isolation. In this case, synergies developed that created opportunities for IGE to help harness Vietnam's enlightened self-interest on behalf of religious freedom progress. Further, IGE's transparent faith-based identity, which could have been a liability in dealing with Communist officials in Vietnam, proved not to be an obstacle because IGE engaged via relational, "Track 1.5" diplomacy that engendered trust and respect.

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## CONCLUSION

This guidebook has been written by practitioners working in the field of international religious freedom advocacy. They represent the variety of opportunities available to would-be advocates, from drafting press releases for a small NGO to lobbying at the highest levels of international power. The book has covered the work of international bodies, U.S. government entities, and NGOs as they work together to advance religious freedom around the world.

But in reality, religious freedom advocacy is rarely as simple as carrying out the mission of an NGO, or utilizing a complaint mechanism of the UN, or lobbying a congressional representative. Though all of these actions are important, none can occur in isolation, and none can guarantee that a repressive government will enact long-term, sustainable change in its religion policies. To see that kind of change occur, the mechanisms described must be used in concert with one another over a period of time, by advocates who are creative, innovative, committed, and sensitive to the subtleties of international affairs. Timing of advocacy actions is important, ideally coinciding with momentum already in place in foreign governments. To meet these conditions, advocates must not only be earnest but also well informed and able to contextualize and empathize. They must understand not only how a government restricts religious freedom but also why. In today's world of religiously motivated terror, shifting economic power, and unprecedented movement of ideas, people, and goods, the reasons for repression are varied and complex, as are their solutions.

This trend will not change in the near future, as religiously based conflicts continue to arise. In these situations, religious freedom abuses often go beyond individual rights, as the repression of a religious community or the forceful application of religious dogma onto a minority group can transform a religious dispute into a larger political conflict and lead to widespread destabilization. As sociologist Peter L. Berger wrote in *The Desecularization of*

*the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, “the assumption we live in a secularized world is false. . . . The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was.” Consequently, religious persecution against believers and nonbelievers alike will be a recurring problem in the twenty-first century.

Examples of these complexities abound, as this text has already shown in the case studies for Turkmenistan and Vietnam. Other examples arise from around the world:

- Western European countries, traditionally among the freest in the world, are violating religious freedom as they deal with an influx of Muslim immigrants. Some citizens and policymakers see these immigrants as a threat not only to national identity but potentially to national security, making displays of religiosity (such as the headscarf for Muslim women) extremely provocative. Countries’ commitments to freedom are being tested in new ways, resulting in laws banning religious garments or inflammatory religious rhetoric.
- China has a contentious history with the majority-Muslim population of its western province of Xinjiang. Most Xinjiang Muslims belong to minority ethnic groups, such as Hui, Uighur, Tajik, and Kazakh. The province is home to a separatist movement that wants independence from China and has resorted to terrorist tactics in the past. The region also borders Central Asian states with their own terrorist networks, and Chinese authorities fear the influx of radical groups and ideologies across its borders. Stability in this region is not only important to combat the threat of terror and secession, but also to secure access to China’s oil-rich western neighbors, a high priority in China’s growing, energy-hungry economy. Even if the central government loosened its grip on Xinjiang’s Muslims, the region is so remote and undeveloped that policies would still be logistically difficult to implement, and local officials’ biases dictate local politics, raising the question of how policies would exacerbate existing tensions.
- Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province (NWFP) is a study in contradictions. Its population is overwhelmingly conservative Muslim; it borders Afghanistan and Pakistan’s lawless tribal areas; it is the birthplace of the Taliban and al Qaeda and is believed to be the hiding place of Osama bin Laden; and until recently it was governed by a conservative Islamist political party. Despite these conditions, the region has a history of religious tolerance with few incidents of violence against religious minorities. Even under Islamist rule, Christian minorities were protected, new churches built, and interfaith dialogues hosted. However, the region’s religious minorities face a deeper, more subtle

discrimination in the form of economic and educational disempowerment. Advocates' efforts to improve religious minorities' conditions are hindered by inhospitable terrain, depressed economic conditions, strong anti-Western sentiment, security risks, and the region's importance in the global war against terrorists.

In the examples above, considerations of security, economy, and identity seem to clash with the ideal of religious freedom, and one would encounter similarly complex motivations behind repressive policies in other repressive countries. Advocates must therefore act carefully and respectfully, understanding countries' concerns while subtly introducing alternative policies that better help them achieve their goals while protecting religious freedom. This work is the challenge that faces religious freedom advocates in a complex and changing world.