

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam was founded 60 years ago in 1964 in order to gather Buddhist associations and sects into one organization. Before that, Vietnamese Buddhism did not have a strict organizational structure. The political situation brought the Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism to unite and join under one charter into one church, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

After April 30, 1975, the Church was confiscated by the Vietnamese authorities. To demand religious freedom, twelve Buddhist monks and nuns at Duoc Su Temple immolated themselves. The leadership of the UBCV asked for an impartial investigation and sent a letter demanding the exercise of religious freedom, but the authorities responded with the arrest warrant of six leading members, including Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Thich Thien Minh. The Most Venerable Thich Thien Minh was beaten to death in prison. That was the start of four decades of persecution and suppression of the UBCV by the Vietnamese authorities, which continues until today. For more than 40 years, the UBCV, under the leadership of the Patriarchs Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do, has been calling for freedom of religion and legal status for the UBCV.

The charter of the UBCV consists of a bicameral system: a Supreme Patriarch with its leadership office of the Patriarch and an executive body of the Dharma Institute. Connecting the two branches is a Bicameral Council of monks and nuns for the election of leadership. The Dharma Institute consists of several departments and offices. I am the Director of Communications and run the Office of External Affairs.

According to tradition of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the annual Great Prayers Ceremony is to commemorate spirits of great teachers of the past, saints, and ancestors who constitute the sacred soul of Vietnam as a nation. The Ceremony also gives prayers to soldiers who sacrificed and people who lost their

lives to war and natural disasters. The Senior Most Venerable Thich Nhat Ban, President of the Dharma Institute was prevented from presiding over the Ceremony when provincial authorities and police stopped him from going. As there was no isolation order, preventing him from traveling was a violation of the law and an infringement of the freedom of religion and his human rights. After 3 hours of interrogation, the authorities lock down his Paramita Temple and blocked him inside. Since this happened three years ago, he has not been allowed to attend any UBCV functions.

The Buddhist Youth Organizations (BYOs) in Phu Vang District, Thua Thien-Hue Province, were prevented by the authorities from attending the same ceremony. Local police and authorities threatened the BYO leaders and youth members not to attend. These children, as young as 7 years old, recounted stories of hiding in bushes and running away from the police so they can attend their weekly activities. In 2020, central Vietnam was pounded by consecutive tropical storms and typhoons, which brought widespread flooding and landslides to the region. At least 1.5 million people were affected by flooding and 235 people died. International donations were coming in from governments and NGOs to help offset this economic and humanitarian disaster.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), responding to a call from the Most Venerable President of its Executive Council, raised fund toward the humanitarian effort. The UBCV Relief Team worked to deliver aid to those who have been most affected by the disaster from the hard-hit provinces of Central Vietnam. The UBCV volunteers distributed vouchers to the storm victims for picking up relief packages at the Long Quang Monastery. However, the local authorities confiscated the relief vouchers and prohibited the storm victims to come to the Monastery on the ground that the UBCV was an “illegal Church” and receiving aid from the UBCV was against the law.

Not unlike many other countries, Vietnam does not have law prohibiting individuals or organizations from giving emergency aid. Thus, the prohibition of aid by the UBCV is a discrimination based on religion and a violation of the freedom of religion and belief. Other than the obvious humanitarian grounds, almsgiving is also a legitimate religious activity by a Church formally organized 60 years ago and historically dated back two thousand years in Vietnam.

On the morning of September 18, 2022, ten (10) uniformed police came to Paramita Temple to demand, without cause, identification papers and departure of two leaders of the Buddhist Youth Organization (BYO) who were recording a teaching by the Most Venerable Thich Nhat Ban. It was to be presented at the UBCV's US Chapter Annual Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah. The police surrounded the temple and verbally harassed the Most Venerable Master, even after the two BYO leaders were forced to leave.

The police proceeded to destroy items in the residence of the Most Venerable. One policeman threatened to stab the senior religious leader with a knife. The Most Venerable was able to leave a voice message that, "As long as Vietnamese Buddhism still exists, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam will continue on, and I will survive."

The forced expulsion, church invasion, verbal harassment, physical intimidation, and murderous threats by Vietnam's police clearly constitute a blatant violation of the freedom of religion and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights that Vietnam has signed. This was not the first time that the Most Venerable Master was persecuted by Vietnam's police. In 2021, they accused that his New Year's Letter, a traditional annual blessing to the Church's followers, was anti-Party and anti-State and pressured him to nullify it.

On April 19, 2023, the Vietnamese police in Thua Thien Hue province detained without cause Mr. Le Cong Cau, Secretary General of the UBCV. He was subjected

to several hours of interrogation by several police officers regarding seven religious texts produced last year by the UBCV. These included messages from the Patriarch and the Chair of the Dharma Institute to Buddhists on religious occasions.

The same detention and interrogation were carried out with the Most Venerable Thich Chi Vien, Supreme Patriarch of the UBCV, by Khanh Hoa provincial police regarding the content of these messages, which were deemed “reactionary” by the authorities. He and the Secretary General were forced to disclose and sign statements regarding the messages’ distribution and responsible personnel. By stepping up cracking down on the UBCV’s chain of communication, the authorities aim to eliminate the UBCV.

The UBCV believed that if its religious messages are controlled, monitored, accused of being “reactionary”, there is no freedom of speech. If its leaders are subjected to isolation, interrogation, coercion and harassment, there is no freedom of religion. The members of UBCV were prevented from participating in the funeral of our last Patriarch, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do. His will was changed, and his ashes were disposed in the ocean, contrary to his wish. Our current Patriarch is being isolated in his temple and his disciples are not allowed to visit him.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam welcomed Vietnam’s placement on the State Department’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. As victim of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, the UBCV affirms that Vietnam meets the standard for designation as a Country of Particular Concern.

The UBCV today is an independent religious organization in a totalitarian dictatorship. Under brutal coercion, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam is

still the voice of Vietnamese people who believe in the Buddha's teachings, in the Buddhist tradition, and in the goal of serving the Dharma, the people, and the country of Vietnam.