

Statement of Katie Duong  
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Before

US House of Representatives. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations.  
Hearing entitled *"The President's Visit to Vietnam: A Missed Opportunity to Advance Human Rights"* on June 22, 2016.

**CAODAISM: ESTABLISHMENT AND GOVERNMENT TAKEOVER**

Third Amnesty of God or Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ, also known as Caodaism or Cao Dai Religion, is an endogenous religion founded in South Vietnam in 1926. Caodaism calls for unity, love, justice, peace, freedom, democracy and respects for all faiths. Our faith also requires that we follow and obey our religion's code or rules, but the Vietnamese Communist Party has forced Caodaist disciples to follow its policies and to abandon our Religious Constitution established by God, including our laws, traditional rituals and our organizing bodies and institutions.

Prior to the fall of the Republic of Vietnam in April 1975, all religious activities of Caodaism were managed by three Councils: Popular Council, Sacerdotal Council and Superior Council. They had the power to make or modify religious laws/rules, and the combined power of the three Councils was equal to God's power. All laws/rules must be ratified by the three Councils, who then submit them to the Supreme Being for final approval -- all positions of Caodaist dignitaries must be approved by God and Divine Spirits through spiritist séances.

In 1979, the Communist regime disbanded the Sacerdotal Council of the Caodai Tayninh Holy See; dissolved all Cao Dai Religious Administrations from the central to local levels; and established the Governance Council (Hoi Dong Chuong Quan), an entity under the government's control. Forty of the forty-six religious properties belonging to the Tayninh Holy See were confiscated. Some of the properties were demolished, some were misused, and some were left vacant. The government appointed the Cao Dai Governance Council and Communist Party members to run all confiscated properties. In 1997, the government-created Governance Council modified Caodai's canonical laws and traditional rituals to allow them to take control of all religious activities of Cao Dai religion. We independent Cao Daiists call them the "Cao Dai 1997 Sect". Cao Dai followers who do not submit themselves to this sect are banned from practicing their religion.

I am a member of the Popular Council of Cao Dai Religion. We re-established the Popular Council of Cao Dai Religion in 2008 in order to eventually restore the true Cao Dai religion that was founded in 1926. We do not accept the leadership of Cao Dai 1997 Sect. We have been asking the government to let us elect our own leaders and restore our religion. Repression and persecution is the answer that we received.

**DIFFICULTIES FACED TODAY: KEY INCIDENTS SINCE 2015**

Below are some examples illustrating the ongoing persecution against independent Cao Dai followers.

### **Cao Dai Tayninh Holy See, Tay Ninh – May 2015**

More than 900 members of Cao Dai Popular Council signed a petition to the government to hold a general assembly meeting at the Cao Dai Holy See in Tay Ninh on May 27, 2015 for independent Cao Dai members to elect their own religious leaders. When these members gathered for the meeting, police officers and authorities barricaded the gates, blocking them from entering the temple's premises. The police attacked some members, arrested some others, and dispersed the rest. The meeting did not materialize because of so many interruptions and obstacles put in place by the government.

### **Cu Chi, Ho Chi Minh City – June 2015**

Cao Dai Popular Council members gathered to discuss the articles published in a Vietnamese state-run magazine related to the failed May 2015 meeting; the article described the meeting as an illegal act of rebels. The meeting was held at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Vo in Củ Chi County, HCMC. The People's Committee of Cu Chi County sent its agents to disband the meeting. Later that day, it delivered a "Notice on prohibition of illegal propaganda" to the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Vo.

### **Trang Bang, Tay Ninh – July 2015**

Cao Dai members gathered at the home of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Kim Thoi in Trang Bang District, Tay Ninh Province to attend the private ceremony to install the Divine Eye portrait at her home's altar. A Commune police officer in uniform came to the site to direct a mob assault against the attendants. They smashed the furniture and demolished the Divine Eye portrait.

### **Hoa Thanh, Tay Ninh – November 2015**

Cao Dai members gathered at the house of Mrs. Phạm Kim Anh in Hòa Thành District, Tây Ninh Province for the ceremony marking the final period of mourning for an adherent. Members of the Cao Dai 1997 Sect came to the site with the commune police. They used megaphones to order Cao Dai worshippers to leave the ceremony area. They then proceeded to overturn tables full of food, vandalize ceremony decorations and furniture, and damage part of the house. They also forced the homeowner to follow them to People's Committee office, where he was detained for several hours. The victim was let go only after many Cao Daiists showed up to demand his release.

### **Go Dau, Tay Ninh – November 2015**

Cao Dai members gathered at the household of Mrs. Cao Thi Chinh, in Go Dau District, Tay Ninh Province to attend the rite of installing the Divine Eye portrait at her home's altar. The Cao Dai 1997 Sect sent its members and thugs to interrupt the ceremony. They destroyed furniture and decorations, trashed the food, confiscated phones and cameras of attendants, and ordered them to end the rituals.

### **Binh Duong, Tay Ninh – March 2016**

Cao Dai member Duong Xuan Luong (who has been under warrant arrest since 2008) received a threat from the police that he would be arrested anytime unless he cooperated with the government and stopped advocacy for religious freedom. The threat was real and imminent because he had been imprisoned before for 30 months. He had to flee to Thailand for safety and is seeking refugee status with the United Nations. He is my father. As U.S. citizen, I sponsored him and my mother to come to the United States. However, only my mother could leave Vietnam to join me. The Vietnamese government refused to issue my father a passport or any travel document in order to go through the immigrant visa process.

## **Vinh Long, Tien Giang, Long An – Vietnam – May 2016**

Seven members from Cao Dai Popular Council in 3 provinces were threatened by the government authorities and ordered to stop all contact and cooperation with Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang, President and CEO of BPSOS, or they will be arrested. The government officers falsely accused that Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang aims to overthrow the Vietnamese government, and therefore whoever connected with him will be arrested. These Cao Dai members attended the Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Southeast Asia in Bangkok, Thailand last September and/or participated in training sessions on how to report violations of religious freedom to the United Nations. Both activities were organized by BPSOS.

### **ONGOING PERSECUTION**

Cao Dai members who do not submit themselves to the government-controlled Cao Dai 1997 Sect face the following forms of persecution:

- Loss of freedom of movement: Prominent Cao Dai members such as Tran Quoc Tien, Vo Van Quang, Tran Ngoc Suong, Nguyen Xuan Mai, Nguyen Van Thiet, and Luong Thi No have been placed under travel ban.
- Impending arrest: At least one Cao Dai follower, my own father, has not been able to stay in any one place for long due to personal safety since an arrest warrant was issued against him in 2008. He had to get out of Vietnam and currently seeks refugee status in Thailand.
- Threats to livelihood: Local authorities have used different ploys and obstacles to negatively affect the businesses, employment and income-earning activities of Cao Dai practitioners deemed to be non-compliant to the Cao Dai 1997 Sect.
- Harassment: Many Cao Dai followers receive multiple “invitations to work” with the commune police officers, which practically constitutes arbitrary short-term detention, and are monitored by the police on a daily basis regarding what they do, where they go, and who they meet.

### **PLAN OF ACTIONS AND REQUEST FOR SUPPORT**

As Cao Dai followers, we wish to retain our independence from government control and be able to practice our religion as we see fit. To do so, we aim to hold a Popular Meeting to elect our leaders and to reform our own religious organization. In order to achieve this ultimate goal, we need freedoms of movement, assembly and association. We also need freedoms of speech and information, and the right to retain and practice our unique culture and traditions. These are rights stated in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and further enshrined in the many legally binding treaty bodies to which Vietnam is a party. Freedom of religion includes these other rights and the Vietnamese government must not only allow us to exercise these rights but promote and protect them.

In pursuit of our goal, we are seeking support from independent religious communities and civil society organizations in Vietnam to pressure the government to uphold its binding human rights obligations and not interfere with our Popular Meeting to elect our own leaders.

We are also seeking international support, especially from the U.S. government. With expanding bilateral relations with Vietnam, the U.S. government has solid ground to demand that the Vietnamese government live up to its obligations to respecting and protecting human rights, including our right to religious freedom.

We ask civil society around the world to endorse and support our efforts to re-establish the organizational structure of our religion as established in 1926, and to raise their voice of concern to the Vietnamese government on our behalf so that we can enjoy freedom of religion in the near future.

Thank you for your time and support. We, independent Cao Dai followers, urgently need and highly appreciate it.

Sincerely,

On behalf of

The Popular Council of Cao Dai Religion in Vietnam – Washington DC June 22, 2016.