



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Religious Freedom and Democracy in Vietnam

SPEECH

Monday, 17 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<p>Date Monday, 17 August 2009 Page 104 Questioner Speaker Simpkins, Luke, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (7.46 pm)—This is not the first time I have spoken on matters of human rights in Vietnam and it will not be the last. I put forward this motion to again highlight the lack of freedoms in Vietnam. I have spoken before in the parliament about the repression of democracy, free speech, the internet and freedom of religion. In this motion I will speak of the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and his sacrifices and struggles for freedom of religion, for freedom of speech and for the sort of liberty that one day will allow Vietnam and the Vietnamese people to reach a great potential.

In January 2008 a European magazine chose the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do as one of the 15 champions of world democracy. This courageous and resilient man was born as Dang Phuc Tue on 27 November 1928 in Thai Binh province. He is the head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. He is also one of the best known and consequently most prominent dissidents in Vietnam. That prominence has not come cheaply, as freedom does not come cheaply when one opposes authoritarian regimes. Now 81, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do has been a monk since the age of 14. Originally from the north, at the age of 17 he saw his master summarily executed by a revolutionary people's tribunal. He was therefore able to see the standards of justice and control that the future Communist government of Vietnam would one day offer the whole of the country.

It should be remembered that Thich Quang Do's master was not a combatant but a holy man. It has been widely said that by witnessing and being disturbed by that experience, Thich Quang Do's resolve was strengthened and he was determined to pursue Buddhist teachings of nonviolence, tolerance and compassion. It is important to realise that before 1975 and the fall of the Republic of Vietnam the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam was the largest Buddhist organisation in South Vietnam. It had brought together Buddhists of the two major traditions, Theravada and Mahayana, and it was very active in peace and human rights, with links to international peace organisations. It was because of his profile in those cases that the Communist government of Vietnam saw the Unified Buddhist Church and its leadership as a threat to their absolute control. From 1975 the government planned and implemented persecution of the church and its members, including the seizure of property. This culminated in a forced unification into the government's Vietnam Buddhist Church.

The Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church at the time, the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, and his deputy, Thich Quang Do, spoke out against the government and its sponsored church. This resulted in their being arrested, internally exiled and even tortured. In 1977 Thich Quang Do was detained for 20 months, all in solitary confinement, for raising the issue of human rights. It was in 1982 that Thich Quang Do was sent to internal exile for 10 years. This punishment was imposed in reality because of the protests about the Communist government's ban on the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. It was in 1992 that he returned to Saigon, and in 1994 he wrote a confronting 44-page document that detailed the persecution and excesses by the Communist Party of Vietnam against the Unified Buddhist Church. He was arrested in 1994 for writing that document and then jailed for three years for his involvement in organising food relief for flood victims and distributing letters by the then Patriarch, Thich Huyen Quang. He was again released in 1998, whereupon he repeatedly raised human rights abuses in Vietnam. This resulted in him being regularly arrested and interrogated.

He was strongly nominated for the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize. Since June 2001, he has been under house arrest. In July 2008, on the death of the previous patriarch, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do assumed leadership of the free church. Much of his life has been spent in detention. Twenty-seven years of his life have involved jail or house arrest, all in the course of peaceful advocacy of human rights, democracy and of course religious freedom. Beyond his importance to the Buddhists inside and outside Vietnam, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do is an inspiration of courage, integrity and honour. He should be released immediately. Freedom of religion and freedom of speech and democracy should not be dreams but realities. We honour and applaud Thich Quang Do as a great human rights leader of our time.

To conclude, this evening I wear the lapel badges of the republic of Vietnam and of Viet Tan, the Vietnam Reform Party. It is a great honour to speak on behalf of Vietnamese Buddhists in my electorate.