

Short Statement – read at the 3rd Regional Consultation Meeting, 23 January 2015

We, the Association of Con Dau Parishioners, Friendship Association of Former Political and Religious Prisoners, Oppressed Petitioners' Solidarity Movement, United Workers Farmers Association, and Vietnamese Women for Human Rights, represent independent Vietnamese civil society organizations. We have been excluded from the APF/ACSC activities. Vietnam's national delegation does not represent civil society. It is comprised of government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) set up by the government to suppress genuine CSOs in Vietnam and infiltrate ASEAN's community of CSOs.

Vietnam is a one-party state. The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) controls the government and suppresses the development of civil society and dissenting voices. Those who organize or participate in genuine CSOs are subject to arrest and imprisonment, sometimes without trial and sometimes after conviction for such "crimes" as "injuring the national unity," "abusing democratic freedoms", and "propaganda against the state." Imprisoned civil society activists, including some of us who are signers of this statement, have been subjected to imprisonment and/or torture. Even after we are released from prison many of us frequently remain under house arrest or close surveillance by government agents.

An important part of the repressive apparatus is the establishment of an official network of GONGOs under the umbrella of the "Fatherland Front", which is used by the VCP to regulate all aspects of society, to suppress independent activities, and to divert international assistance and co-operation into official channels so as to further suppress civil society. "Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations" (VUFO) belongs to the Fatherland Front and acts as the standing agency of the Government's Committee for Foreign Non-Governmental Organization Affairs (COMINGO). Its leadership are appointed by VCP and are VCP members. It is an extension of Vietnam's repressive government.

As Vietnamese civil society activists and organizations we wish to work with organizations and activists in other ASEAN countries for freedom, democracy, peace, justice, and other shared objectives. Unfortunately, most of us have been prevented from leaving the country in order to attend regional civil society conferences such as APF/ACSC. The few of us who managed to get out of the country to attend such events have faced government retaliation upon return.

An even bigger obstacle to our participation is that the government's official network has inserted itself into the APF/ACSC process and is now occupying the positions through organizations such as Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation and VUFO. They have no right to represent Vietnamese civil society.

We understand that ASEAN civil society has a proud history of exposing and resisting the suppression of civil society by former governments of Burma/Myanmar and Indonesia and of working in solidarity with genuine and independent civil society movements in those countries. We ask that you extend the same co-operation and solidarity to true civil society activists and organizations in Vietnam. We ask that you recognize us and other genuinely independent organizations inside Vietnam as the true representatives of civil society, incorporate our inputs into the Joint Statement and provide us remote access during the conference in April. Finally, we ask that the APF/ACSC take a strong stand in favor of multiparty democracy for all ASEAN countries and for the elimination of the laws the government uses to persecute us, including "injuring the national unity", "propaganda against the state", and "abusing democratic freedoms."

Thank you for your consideration of these requests. We look forward to working with you on behalf of ASEAN and its people.