



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on July 12, 2012

Hillary in Hanoi: More Foreign Aid & Trade ... and More Lip Service on Human Rights

According to the spin of some media groups, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent visit to Vietnam was all about pressuring the communist regime on its atrocious human rights violations.

"Clinton raps Vietnam on rights, sees limits to ties," ran the headline of a July 10 [Reuters news story](#).

"Clinton chides Vietnam on protecting human rights," was the headline the Associate Press gave to its article that was run in many newspapers and websites worldwide.



However, there is little evidence that Secretary Clinton's mention of human rights during her Asia trip was anything more than a continuation of the placating rhetoric she has employed as the Obama administration's mouthpiece, while promoting ever greater economic aid and trade benefits to Vietnam. Her mild public criticism of Vietnam's incarceration of Internet bloggers barely qualifies as a "rap" or a "chide." Clinton said she had expressed concern to Vietnam's leaders about the upcoming trial of "the founders of the so-called Free Journalists Club." Using "so-called" in this context make it sound as if she's already taken sides in the matter in favor of the regime, which views publication of comments critical of the government as a criminal offense. And Clinton did not even mention the regime's ongoing persecution of Christians and Buddhists. Nor did she meet with, or request meetings with persecuted dissidents, as had been requested by many Vietnamese exiles and human rights groups.

In her remarks on July 10, following a meeting with Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh at Government Guest House in Hanoi, Secretary Clinton expressed appreciation for the "opportunity to reaffirm the growing and mutually beneficial partnership between our two nations," and affectionately recalled her first visit, in 2000, with her husband, then-President Bill Clinton.

"I fondly remember my first visit here in the year 2000," said Clinton, "and it's remarkable now on my third visit as Secretary of State to see all the changes and the that we've made together."

The "progress," though, is clearly lopsided, with the communist overlords of the country — officially known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam — and their corporate counterparts in the United States reaping enormous benefits from loans, credits, and subsidies paid for by the American taxpayers.

Clinton told reporters in her remarks:

When I visit with the American Chamber of Commerce and a number of both Vietnamese and American business leaders, we will look for ways to expand trade and investment. As the Minister and I were discussing, it has increased from practically nothing in 1995 to more than \$22 billion today. In fact, in just the two years that - between now and 2010, it's grown more than 40 percent.

So we're working on expanding it through a far-reaching, new regional trade agreement called the



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Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would lower trade barriers while raising standards on everything from labor conditions to environmental protection to intellectual property. Both of our countries will benefit. And in fact, economists expect that Vietnam would be among the countries under the Trans-Pacific Partnership to benefit the most. And we hope to finalize this agreement by the end of the year.

Clearly, the administration is putting business with Vietnam on the fast track. As *The New American* reported on June 28 ([“Pres. Obama Approves \\$126 Million Loan to Communist Vietnam for Satellite”](#)) President Obama recently instructed Secretary Clinton to authorize a nearly \$126 million Export-Import Bank loan to Vietnam for purchase of a telecommunications satellite, claiming that making the loan was “in the national interest of the United States.”

Obviously, Vietnam’s military-police state will benefit from the technology, and Lockheed Martin, the aerospace/defense contractor will benefit from the sale. But will the people of Vietnam and the region benefit, or will the people of the United States benefit? And will freedom benefit and grow?

Secretary Clinton implies that freedom will indeed be on the rise, since she and her Vietnamese counterparts intend to “keep talking candidly.” According to Clinton:

I also raised concerns about human rights, including the continued detention of activists, lawyers, and bloggers, for the peaceful expression of opinions and ideas. In particular, we are concerned about restrictions on free expression online and the upcoming trial of the founders of the so-called Free Journalists Club. The Foreign Minister and I agreed to keep talking candidly and to keep expanding our partnership.

Two years previously, Secretary Clinton was in Hanoi at the same Government Guest House making virtually the same remarks. On July 22, 2010, after meeting with Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem, she told the press:

My meetings today are very important to furthering our bilateral relationship. I think that Minister Khiem and I had candid and productive discussions on issues, as he said, ranging from trade and investment to health and education, to good governance, human rights...

“The Obama Administration,” Clinton continued, “is prepared to take the U.S.-Vietnam relationship to the next level on these issues and in new areas of cooperation.”

Hanoi Hillary & Human Rights

What genuine improvements in the area of human rights have actually accrued in Vietnam as a result of the Obama/Clinton “candid” talk? Not much, if any, according to the monitors of human rights abuses, including the U.S. State Department’s own annual [“Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2011 — Vietnam.”](#)

The report, which did its best to soft-pedal Vietnam’s abuses, nevertheless reported:

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is an authoritarian state ruled by a single party, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) led by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and President Truong Tan Sang. The most recent National Assembly elections, held in May, were neither free nor fair, since the CPV’s Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), an umbrella group that monitors the country’s mass organizations, vetted all candidates. Security forces reported to [CPV] civilian authorities.

The Department Of State (DOS) report also notes that:



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Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of speech, including for members of the press, the government continued to use broad national security and anti-defamation provisions to restrict these freedoms. The law defines the crimes of “sabotaging the infrastructure of socialism,” “sowing divisions between religious and nonreligious people,” and “conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” as serious offenses against national security. It also expressly forbids “taking advantage of democratic freedoms and rights to violate the interests of the state and social organizations.”

The same DOS Vietnam report says:

The government continued to restrict speech that criticized individual government leaders; promoted political pluralism or multiparty democracy; or questioned policies on sensitive matters such as human rights, religious freedom...

What about freedom of the press? “The CPV, government, and party-controlled mass organizations controlled all print, broadcast, and electronic media,” the DOS report observes. “The government exercised oversight through the Ministry of Information and Communication, under the overall guidance of the CPV Propaganda and Education Commission. Private ownership of any media outlet continued to be prohibited.”

And freedom of expression on the Internet? “The government allows access to the Internet through a limited number of service providers (ISPs), all of which were state-owned, joint-stock companies,” says the State Department report. “The government forbids direct access to the Internet through foreign ISPs, requires domestic ISPs to store information transmitted on the Internet for at least 15 days, and requires ISPs to provide technical assistance and workspace to public security agents to allow them to monitor Internet activities. The government requires cyber cafes to register the personal information of their customers and store records of Internet sites visited by customers.”

Religious Persecution Continues: No Hope or Change

Secretary Clinton did not even mention religious freedom in her press remarks with Minister Minh, a significant oversight that could hardly have been accidental. Her own State Department acknowledges that Vietnam’s communist authorities continue their hostility toward all religions other than the official Marxist-Leninist sect of total devotion to the CPV and the state.

“There were continued reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country,” noted a September 13, 2011 [DOS report](#) on oppression of religious believers in Vietnam. “There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.”

This is not an insignificant admission. Team Obama, which rode into office on campaign promises of “Hope and Change,” admits that their one-party state partner in Hanoi has made “no change” in its persecution of religious believers, and there is little hope that the administration will make any credible effort to link continued aid and trade privileges with measurable change by Vietnam in this important area. In fact, in spite of Vietnam’s continuing blatant attacks on religious expression, Hillary Clinton gushes about the “changes and progress,” which she finds “remarkable.”

The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, a branch of the International Federation for Human Rights, issued a report in September 2010, two months after Secretary Clinton’s aforementioned 2010 trip to Hanoi, providing detailed accounts of the Vietnamese government’s systematic attacks on all human rights.



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Entitled Vietnam: From “Vision to Facts — Human Rights in Vietnam Under its Chairmanship of ASEAN, the report noted, for instance, the regime’s formal policies regarding religious persecution. It [reported](#):

Alongside government legislation, numerous Communist Party directives give strict measures for controlling religions . One key document, obtained by the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, is a 602-page training manual for security police and religious cadres published by the Institute of Public Security Science in Hanoi, with a print-run of one million copies entitled “On Religions and the Struggle against Activities Exploiting Religion.” This document gives detailed directives on the plans of the Ministry of Public Security and the Communist Party to “eradicate” all non-recognised religions that do not submit to the Communist Party’s control.

Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, a Roman Catholic priest, is one of the best-known victims of Vietnam’s policy of persecuting Christians (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The 66-year-old priest has suffered several strokes while serving more than 16 years in various prisons for his non-violent, peaceful activities.

Father Ly became a globally recognized symbol of resistance to totalitarianism when images from his 2007 kangaroo court proceedings went viral on the Internet. Photos of a Vietnamese security guard holding his hand over Father Ly’s mouth and a video of the Stalinesque show trial (see video below) dramatically underscored what critics of had been saying for decades about Vietnam’s brutal dictatorship.

As a result of worldwide pressure and his deteriorating health, Father Ly was released from prison to house arrest at his parish in Hue in March 2010. But on July 25, 2011, he was thrown back in prison.

Secretary Clinton’s silence regarding Hanoi’s action spoke volumes. On July 26, 2011, Clinton’s State Department issued a perfunctory [press release](#) expressing “concern,” under the name of Heide Bronke Fulton, Acting Deputy Spokesperson, Office of the Spokesperson. The press release stated:

We are concerned by the Government of Vietnam’s decision to return long-time human rights defender Father Nguyen Van Ly to prison on July 25. We urge the Government of Vietnam to release him immediately. We welcomed the government’s decision last year to grant Father Ly humanitarian parole following a series of strokes while in solitary confinement. Father Ly suffers from a brain tumor and should continue to be allowed to seek medical treatment...

The tepidity of the statement together with the fact that Hillary Clinton did not issue it herself and that it did not even contain a quote from her or any high-level DOS official, signaled that this was not a priority issue with the administration, and certainly not anything that would hinder or derail relations with Vietnam. The message Hanoi’s ruling Communist Party Politburo undoubtedly took from this was that it had little to fear in the way of political or economic retribution from the United States, since the Obama administration was merely registering a token protest to pacify “right-wing” opposition and Vietnamese exiles.

The CPV Politburo would have good reason for making such an assumption, as experience has proven that their bad behavior goes unpunished, and, in fact, is even rewarded.

Thanks in good measure to the prestige accorded by the recognition and support it receives from the United States and other western nations, for instance, the Hanoi regime has been enjoying increased influence throughout Southeast Asia. In 2010, Vietnam assumed the rotating chairmanship of the tenation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a major diplomatic and public relations coup.



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The ASEAN Charter pledges member states to “the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government,” as well as “respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights ...” Vietnam’s chairmanship was an obvious mockery of the Charter claims and, apparently, gave Hanoi the impression it could act with even greater impunity.

The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights [reported](#) in September 2010 that conditions had worsened since Vietnam had taken over as chair of ASEAN.

“Human rights violations in Vietnam have continued unabated during its chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2010,” said the committee. “The Government has intensified [its] crackdown, in many cases violently, on freedoms of expression, assembly, association, religion and the press.”

Further evidence that Secretary Clinton’s “candid” talks have had little substantive impact on Hanoi’s leadership can be seen in the coverage of her visit by Vietnam’s official media, the only media allowed to report “news” for domestic consumption.

Nhan Dan Online, Vietnam’s official news agency, ran several lead stories on Secretary Clinton’s visit, none of which mentioned human rights or any comments by Clinton critical of Vietnam’s policies and practices in that regard.

Nhan Dan Online, which bills itself as “The Central Organ of the Communist Party of Vietnam, The Voice of the Party, State, and People of Vietnam,” carried stories about Clinton’s meetings with [Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung](#), Foreign Minister [Pham Binh Minh](#), and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam [Nguyen Phu Trong](#).

These stories stressed the Party’s propaganda line, that the United States “attaches importance to strengthening multi-faceted co-operation with Vietnam, including economic, trade and investment ties,” and said that Clinton had expressed the hope “that the two sides will continue efforts to upgrade their relationship to the level of a strategic partnership.”

Congressman Calls for Firing of US Ambassador to Vietnam

While Secretary Clinton spent plenty of time hobnobbing with CPV officials and provided them with copious photo ops for images that could be used for domestic and international propaganda (including [posing](#) with Communist Party Leader Trong beneath a bust of CPV founder Ho Chi Minh) she could not find time to meet with any of the victims of CPV oppression, or the representatives of groups pressing for religious and political freedom.

To those who might argue in Clinton’s defense that her failure to meet with the opposition was due simply to having a tight schedule, Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA) points to Ambassador David Shear, whom Wolf says “should be removed because he has repeatedly failed to advocate for human rights and speak out for the voiceless in Vietnam.”

On July 9, Rep. Wolf sent a letter to President Obama expressing his ire over Amb. Shear’s lack of action regarding Dr. Nguyen Quoc Quan, a U.S. citizen, who has been imprisoned since his arrival at Tan Son Nhat International Airport in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) on April 17, 2012, as well as Shear’s failure to meet with human rights leaders on July 4, Independence Day, something the Congressman says Amb. Shear had given his commitment to do.

“Sadly, his [Shear’s] sidelining of serious human rights issues in Vietnam is symptomatic of this administration’s overall approach to human rights and religious freedom,” says the letter from Rep.



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Wolf. “Time and again these issues are put on the back-burner — to the detriment of freedom-loving people the world over.”

Photo: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, left, is greeted by Vietnam's Communist Party's General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong at the party's head office in Hanoi, Vietnam,

July 10, 2012: AP Images



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