



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Vietnam : Khmer Krom

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Profile

The Khmer Krom (literally, the 'Khmer from Below' (the Mekong)) mainly inhabit the Mekong delta region in the south-west of Vietnam. They are one of the largest minorities in Vietnam, numbering over 1.26 million, and are the remnants of the society that existed prior to the take-over of the Mekong delta by the Vietnamese in the eighteenth century. Their language, Khmer, is part of the larger Mon-Khmer language family and most are adherents of the Khmer style of Theravada Buddhism, which contains elements of Hinduism and ancestor-spirit worship, whereas most Vietnamese are Mahayana Buddhists.

Historical context

From the ninth century the Khmer Empire - also known as the kingdom of Kambuja - expanded its territory to occupy parts of the ancient Champa domains and eventually to rule much of the territory now making up the state of modern Vietnam.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, a few Vietnamese settlers began to move down into the southern parts of Vietnam and eventually started to occupy parts of the Mekong delta region. By the end of that century, the Nguyen rulers of Hue were able to detach the region from weak Cambodian control and administer it directly. The establishment of French colonial control in the area from the mid-nineteenth century confirmed the detachment of the Mekong delta from the rest of Cambodia, as it was recognized as part of the colony of Cochinchina (the southern part of Vietnam).

Despite the population of the Mekong delta still being largely made up of ethnic Khmer, this state of affairs was confirmed when independence was granted to French Indochina in 1954, and the region was included in the new state of South Vietnam. There was an attempt in the 1970s by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia to re-conquer parts of the delta region still predominantly inhabited by Khmer Krom people in a pre-emptive move to avoid a Vietnamese attack, but this failed and precipitated an invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese army.

After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, policies applied to the Khmer, despite the stated constitutional provisions seemingly favouring minorities, would in practice see them increasingly disadvantaged. The loss of much private property until the start of a movement towards market liberalization in the 1980s impacted on the Khmer as well as many other segments of society. What had until 1975 been their agricultural lands were collectivized, but the process of re-privatization is deemed by some to be more favourable to members of the ethnic majority. The years that followed 1975 also saw also a huge resettlement effort in the delta

region, which brought in an influx of largely Kinh Vietnamese into the traditional lands of the Khmer. Some of the traditional Khmer Krom lands were thus redirected towards new economic activities such as shrimp farming, and this process continues to this day.

From 1975 the government moved towards a Vietnamese language-only policy, with the result that Khmer was largely not used by government departments in the Mekong delta: thus disadvantaging the ethnic Khmer in access to these positions, and denying any kind of advantage in having fluency in Khmer. Many Khmer Krom started to move into Cambodia in search of better employment opportunities, which they felt no longer existed in Vietnam, though there are some indications since the 1990s that the Khmer Krom are benefiting from the increasingly liberalized markets, at least to a greater extent than many other minorities.

Current issues

The Khmer Krom continue to be denied a number of rights in practice, despite apparent goodwill towards minorities on the part of the Vietnamese government and the existing favourable constitutional framework. Education is not provided in the medium of Khmer though there should be a form of education that would permit the acquisition of functional bilingualism in both Khmer and Vietnamese, and the Khmer language is not used in service provision by state authorities even where the Khmer Krom are the majority.

Some economic development projects by authorities still result in expropriation of Khmer land, usually carried out in a discriminatory fashion, mainly benefiting ethnic Kinh, or pushed through without appropriate compensation. In December 2016, a Khmer Krom community in Travin province in the Mekong Delta was also struggling against appropriation by local authorities of temple lands after claims that the community had sold the land to a developer. These and other tactics have been used in the past to drive the Khmer Krom out of their territories in the delta.

The Khmer Krom, who are mainly Theravada Buddhists, continue to experience violations in freedom of religion. Thach N Thach, president of the US-based advocacy group Khmer Kampuchea- Krom Federation, claimed Khmer Krom Buddhist monks are forced to learn communist ideology in state-sanctioned temples and that the government insisted on approving all religious teachings beforehand.

Members of the Khmer Krom minority also point out the desperate condition of many of their members who do not have access to clean water and basic health care, suggesting a wider discriminatory attitude towards their plight. However, the government has taken a restrictive approach to Khmer Krom pushing for their rights. Khmer Krom human rights defenders have been sentenced on bogus charges, including 'abusing democratic rights.

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