

# Domestic Political Change and Ethnic Minorities – A Case Study of the Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia

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The study analyzes the impact of domestic political change on ethnic minorities through a case study of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. The study examines the major political developments and changes in Cambodia since the 1950s and their impact on the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in the country. Anti-Vietnamese sentiments have not only been regularly displayed by the Cambodian elite but also reflected in the policies of the Cambodian authorities. The roots of these attitudes and their effects on policies are explored in the study. The domestic political discourse in Cambodia has displayed anti-Vietnamese rhetoric directed not only at Vietnam but also at the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. The continuity and/or change in such discourse and its implications are explored in the study.

*Keywords:* Cambodia, ethnic Vietnamese, Vietnam, political change, ethnic minorities

The main aim of this study<sup>1</sup> is to analyse the impact of domestic political change in Cambodia<sup>2</sup> on the ethnic Vietnamese<sup>3</sup> in the country. Political developments in Cambodia since the 1950s and their impact on the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese are examined. The Cambodian elite has regularly displayed anti-Vietnamese sentiments. The study explores the roots of these attitudes and their effects on Cambodia's policies towards the ethnic Vietnamese. The anti-Vietnamese discourse in

Cambodia shows that the Cambodian elite's perceptions of Vietnam as a state influence attitudes towards the ethnic Vietnamese minority and these attitudes influence the policy-making relating to the minority. Discriminatory policies implemented by the Cambodian authorities and attacks instigated by such policies led to the virtual elimination of the Vietnamese minority in the 1970s, when some 420,000 Vietnamese were either expelled or had to flee to Vietnam. In the 1980s there was a trend that ethnic

Vietnamese returned to Cambodia. Politically motivated attacks on ethnic Vietnamese were carried out on a number of occasions in the 1990s and they posed a real threat to the Vietnamese community. The domestic political discourse in Cambodia has displayed anti-Vietnamese rhetoric directed not only at Vietnam but also at the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. This is in particular the case regarding some opposition parties. The study explores the continuity and/or change in the political discourse.

The methodological approach is qualitative. This is carried out through an analytical case study with a comparative dimension between different time periods. This methodological approach will allow for a deeper analysis of the research problem while at the same time addressing continuity and change over the studied period.

The empirical part of the study is structured chronologically. The analytical part of the study serves two main purposes. The first is to analyse the policies towards the Vietnamese minority in the context of the overall domestic developments as well as relevant aspects of relations with Vietnam. The second is to assess the impact of the anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia and the challenges posed for minority protection. In the context of the study, more emphasis is put on the analytical part as compared to the empirical part.

### **THE ETHNIC VIETNAMESE IN CAMBODIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE IN 1953<sup>4</sup>**

#### **The Sihanouk Years: 1953 to 1970**

After Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953, the Cambodian authorities attempted to regulate the activities of immigrant communities in the country, among them the ethnic Vietnamese. Cambodia compelled many to seek naturalisation to Cambodian citizenship. Cambodia's relations with the two Vietnamese states became an issue of growing concern as the war in Vietnam escalated in the 1960s and it gave rise to anti-Vietnamese sentiments. The

size of the Vietnamese community is difficult to ascertain due to different criteria used to classify ethnic groups, with official censuses using nationality as basis for classification, for example 217,774 Vietnamese in 1962. The most reliable estimate puts the number of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia at some 450,000 by the end of the 1960s out of total population of about 7,300,000 (Migozzi, 1973).

#### **The Khmer Republic: 1970 to 1975**

Following a deepening political crisis, Prince Norodom Sihanouk was removed as Head of State in March 1970 and the Khmer Republic was established. The removal took place in the midst of a propaganda campaign against the Vietnamese. In fact, criticism of Sihanouk was primarily centered on his alleged pro-Vietnamese stand. The verbal propaganda against the Vietnamese community soon turned into physical abuses and attacks throughout Cambodia. Vietnamese houses, boats, property, and religious shrines were attacked. The offices and residences in Phnom Penh of the diplomatic representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (North) and of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, formed in the Republic of Vietnam (ROV) (South), were sacked. The violence against the ethnic Vietnamese escalated when elements of the armed forces and the police joined in the attacks and the killings. This caused the deaths of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese.

Instead of protecting the Vietnamese, the new Cambodian authorities introduced a number of discriminatory measures. The Vietnamese were only allowed to move around between 7 and 11 AM making it impossible for them to attend schools and to work. The Vietnamese fishermen had their fishing licences withdrawn. Public and private organisations, as well as persons living in state owned houses were banned from employing Vietnamese staff. Furthermore, the authorities recommended that the Vietnamese language should not be used in public.

The ROV authorities intervened officially. The Cambodian authorities gradually became aware of the negative international repercussions of the attacks on the Vietnamese and this prompted a change of attitude. The Cambodian authorities called on people to actively protect the Vietnamese in the spirit of maintaining cordial links between the two people. An agreement was reached between the ROV and the Cambodian government on the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia on 27 May 1970.

Despite the new signals, the ethnic Vietnamese continued to flee from their homes and they sought refuge in 18 camps that were set up in some Cambodian towns—primarily in Phnom Penh—to cope with the flow of internal refugees. By May 1970, the number of people in the camps reached its peak at 90,000. From May to August 1970, these refugees were repatriated to the ROV. On August 13, the last camp was closed down in Phnom Penh. However, the exodus of ethnic Vietnamese from Cambodia continued and by the end of September 1970, a total of 197,378 Vietnamese had officially left for the ROV. According to the ROV authorities, 28 percent of the repatriated persons claimed to be Cambodian citizens. In fact, the ROV authorities estimated that 300,000 ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia prior to the exodus had Cambodian citizenship. In March 1971 the ROV officially estimated that approximately 250,000 ethnic Vietnamese had been repatriated from Cambodia (Pouvatchy, 1976).<sup>5</sup>

### **Democratic Kampuchea: 1975 to 1979**

After a long and bitter war, the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (RGNUC) dominated by the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) captured the capital Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975 and defeated the Khmer Republic. The CPK gradually took full control of political power in the country. The country was renamed Democratic Kampuchea (DK). The fate of the ethnic Vietnamese was one of renewed exodus as some 170,000 were expelled from

Cambodia in 1975. The ethnic Vietnamese could be estimated at about 200,000 by the mid-1970s thus only some 30,000 remained in the country and many of them died of starvation, diseases, or executions between 1975 and 1978. This implied that the Vietnamese minority had all but completely disappeared from Cambodia.<sup>6</sup> The CPK remained in power until it was overthrown through a military intervention launched by Vietnam on 25 December 1978.

### **People's Republic of Kampuchea/State of Cambodia: 1979 to 1992**

Following the fall of Phnom Penh in early January 1979, a new Cambodian administration was established and later gave the country the name People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The PRK/State of Cambodia (SOC)<sup>7</sup> period lasted de facto until the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in March 1992. It faced armed opposition from three groups—the overthrown DK also known as Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK), that is, the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif (FUNCINPEC). They formed the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) on 22 June 1982.<sup>8</sup>

The new order installed in Cambodia in early 1979 came about with extensive Vietnamese assistance and people who had sought refuge in Vietnam in the 1975-1978 period returned to Cambodia. This process involved not only ethnic Khmers but also ethnic Vietnamese, leading to the re-emergence of a Vietnamese minority in Cambodia. The later caused international concern as the ethnic Vietnamese were seen as part of a process of “vietnamisation” of the country. Whether the ethnic Vietnamese were returnees who had been forced out of Cambodia during the 1970s or new migrants, they were all perceived to be part of a larger Vietnamese scheme to gain influence and even to colonise Cambodia.

The ethnic Vietnamese settling down in Cambodia became one of the major issues in the discourse of the Cambodian groups opposed to the PRK/SOC and to the Vietnamese influence in the country. The Ambassador to the United Nations of DK<sup>9</sup> gave estimates of the number of Vietnamese settlers in 1979 – 300,000 – and in 1981 – 500,000. In 1984 the President of the CGDK, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, put the number at 600,000. In 1986 he claimed that 700,000 Vietnamese had settled in Cambodia. In 1988, Mr. Son Sann, Prime Minister within the CGDK, claimed that the number was between 800,000 and 1,000,000. In 1989 he claimed that there were 1,000,000 Vietnamese settlers in Cambodia.

In 1983, the official policies of the PRK towards Vietnamese residents were outlined in a publication from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (“Policy of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea,” 1983). The PRK estimated that by mid-1983 there were about 56,000 Vietnamese residents in Cambodia and they had returned after the PRK had authorised them to do so (“Policy of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea,” 1983, p. 7). The official policy of the PRK towards the Vietnamese sought to regulate the Vietnamese migration to Cambodia but not to prevent it.

There is a considerable discrepancy between the PRK’s claim of 56,000 ethnic Vietnamese in 1983 and the CGDK’s claim of 600,000 settlers in 1984. It can be noted that in 1984, Cambodia’s total population was estimated at approximately 7,200,000, that is, about the same level as at the end of the 1960s.

The scholarly literature does not produce any clear assessment of the figures or on the actual size of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Some researchers have simply quoted the CGDK claims or sought to justify these claims (Martin, 1984; Pouvatchy, 1984; “The Vietnamisation of Kampuchea,” 1984). Other researchers have made more modest estimates than the CGDK, but higher than the PRK figure of 1983. According to such estimates, the number of ethnic Vietnamese would have been in the range of 300,000 to 450,000, that

is, below or at about the same size as before the two exoduses of the 1970s (Chandler, 1993; Tarr, 1992; Vickery, 1986).

### **The United Nations Peacekeeping Operation: 1992 and 1993**

Following a peace process in the late 1980s and early 1990s that led to the signing of the Paris Agreements on Cambodia in October 1991, a peacekeeping operation was carried out by the United Nations in Cambodia from March 1992, that is, when the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) was formally established, to September 1993 when UNTAC’s mandate expired following the adoption of a new Cambodian constitution by the Constituent Assembly.<sup>10</sup>

From late June 1992, anti-Vietnamese sentiments seemed to be on the increase with representatives of PDK being the most vocal. However, representatives of the KPRLF expressed similar sentiments. As it seems, the intention was to put pressure on UNTAC to take action and to solve what these parties perceived to be a Vietnamese problem. From early July, the PDK began using the presence of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia in its criticism of the United Nations by claiming that UNTAC was neglecting an alleged massive illegal immigration of Vietnamese. The PDK claimed that 700,000 Vietnamese had obtained Cambodian identity cards. The anti-Vietnamese feelings seem to have been further reinforced by an influx of Vietnamese into Cambodia who were attracted by the economic liberalisation and by the arrival of thousands of well-paid UNTAC personnel and other foreigners.

The former parties to the CGDK/NGC attempted to limit the number of ethnic Vietnamese who could take part in the planned general elections. This was most evident in the discussion prior to the adoption of the Electoral Law in 1992. The issue of who would be allowed to vote in the Cambodian general elections preoccupied the four Cambodian parties represented in the Supreme National Council (SNC).<sup>11</sup> On August 5, 1992 the

SNC adopted an electoral law drafted by UNTAC. The electoral law enfranchised any 18 year old person born in Cambodia with a mother or a father born in the country or, in the case of those born overseas, with a mother or a father born in Cambodia whose mother or father was also born in the country, that is, the grandparents also born in Cambodia. This constituted a revision of the provisions of the Paris Agreements on Cambodia, which stated that any 18 year old born in Cambodia or the child of a person born in Cambodia would be eligible to vote. The PDK opposed the electoral law primarily because it would allow ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia to vote. The intention of the law was to disenfranchise new Vietnamese settlers but not ethnic Vietnamese who lived in the country in the pre 1970 period.

The political rhetoric was not the only example of anti-Vietnamese activities in Cambodia. Already in April and May 1992, two armed attacks against ethnic Vietnamese in the province of Kompong Chhnang had caused seven deaths. Another attack took place on 21 July in the province of Kampot resulting in the death of eight ethnic Vietnamese. In October, armed attacks against ethnic Vietnamese in the province of Koh Kong led to further casualties. As did three other attacks on ethnic Vietnamese in October and November in Sihanoukville. Two attacks were reported in December, on the 16th in the province of Stung Treng and on the 27th in the province of Kompong Chhnang. After a period with no reported attacks in January and February 1993, there was a sharp increase in the number of attacks in March following an announcement by UNTAC, on 1 March, that it had discovered three Vietnamese men who had served with the Vietnamese forces in Cambodia and whom UNTAC therefore regarded as foreign forces. UNTAC requested Vietnam to take the three persons back as Vietnamese nationals. During the month of March, several attacks were carried out against ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. On 10 March, in a village in Siem Reap province an attack caused the death of 33 ethnic Vietnamese and 24 persons were wounded. Two more attacks

on ethnic Vietnamese were reported by UNTAC during the month of March. First, on 24 March in the province of Kompong Chhnang. Second, on 29 March at least four premises in Phnom Penh frequented by Vietnamese-speaking persons were attacked. These attacks caused a large number of ethnic Vietnamese to flee from Cambodia beginning in late March, and as of 28 April a total of 21,659 persons had entered Vietnam through the UNTAC checkpoints. Armed attacks against ethnic Vietnamese continued in April and in May. Even after the elections in late May attacks were reported in June.<sup>12</sup>

Following the elections in late May, the political parties represented in the Constituent Assembly established an Interim Joint Administration—Provisional National Government of Cambodia (PNGC)—to govern the country until a new Constitution was adopted and the Constituent Assembly transformed itself into a legislative assembly. On July 1 the Constituent Assembly gave a vote of confidence to the PNGC.

### **Developments After the Peacekeeping Operation**

The political developments did not put a halt to attacks causing deaths among the ethnic Vietnamese as they continued in July with attacks on the 6th, 8th, and 10th and an attack also in August. These attacks prompted official protests by Vietnam.

During the withdrawal process of UNTAC from August to December 1993, the new Constitution of Cambodia was adopted. A closer look at the Constitution shows that it does not contain any provisions providing human rights protection nor any duties and privileges of foreign nationals living in Cambodia. The constitution deals with the rights and duties of Cambodian citizens without making any reference to the ethnicity of such citizens.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the constitution in itself does not exclude any ethnic group from being Cambodian citizens. However, in late September 1993 it was reported that during debates in the National Assembly relating to who

should be regarded as Cambodian, members of the Assembly broadened the definition to include ethnic Chams and ethnic Chinese but excluded the ethnic Vietnamese. Thus, the status and the rights of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia continued to be a controversial issue.

From September 1993 to March 1994 no armed attacks against ethnic Vietnamese warranted an official Vietnamese protest. Then, in early April attacks resumed. Also in April 1994 a Cambodian-Vietnamese joint communiqué was issued at the end of the visit to Cambodia by Vietnam's Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet. The communiqué stated that a working group would be established to discuss and solve the issue of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia in line with Cambodia's law and international law. It also stated that the ethnic Vietnamese would be treated as other foreign nationals (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1994).

During the rest of 1994 the relations between the two governments focused on the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, first, in relation to attacks against ethnic Vietnamese with Vietnam protesting against killings of ethnic Vietnamese, and, second, in connection with the Law on Immigration adopted by the Cambodian National Assembly on 26 August.<sup>14</sup> The passing of the law raised Vietnamese fears that it would be used against the ethnic Vietnamese.

The first attack during the period took place in May in Kompong Chhnang Province. The second attack occurred in the same province on 3 July. A third attack occurred on 15 July in Pursat Province. A fourth attack took place on 26 July in Kampot Province. Yet another attack occurred on 5 September in Kandal Province. The next lethal attack occurred on 20 October in Kompong Chhnang Province. The last attack with deadly outcome in 1994 took place on 7 December in Kandal Province.

The visit by Cambodia's First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh to Vietnam in January 1995 gave the two countries an opportunity to discuss the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese at the highest political level. They agreed to hold a

meeting of experts to discuss the issue. Cambodia pledged that the Law on Immigration would not be aimed at confining or deporting Vietnamese nationals. Cambodia also stated that it would do its utmost, in conformity with Cambodian regulations and within its capacity, to ensure the safety of the Vietnamese in Cambodia (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1995a, 1995b).

The first meeting of the expert-level working groups on the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia was held in Phnom Penh on 29 and 30 March. It was reported that the two sides had "frank, friendly discussions" and they achieved "some results" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1995c). The second meeting was held in Hanoi on 28 and 29 July and an agreement was reached on measures to settle the number of Vietnamese refugees in Chrey Thom in Kandal Province. It was also decided to continue the discussions on other issues. Then on 28 October, Cambodia announced that ethnic Vietnamese staying temporarily at Chrey Thom were being sent back to their provinces within Cambodia.

In early April 1996, Vietnam's Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet made an official visit to Cambodia. In the press communiqué issued in connection with the visit the problems concerning Vietnamese residents in Cambodia was subject to attention and it was agreed that the expert groups would hold their third meeting in Phnom Penh as soon as possible. If the meeting was eventually held it was not publicised.

In May 1996, attacks on ethnic Vietnamese re-occurred and Vietnam protested against the killing of 14 ethnic Vietnamese in Pursat Province. Then in early August Vietnam announced that 50 Vietnamese nationals living in Cambodia had returned to Vietnam following the massacre of 25 Vietnamese by the PDK. On 10 October the Vietnamese Embassy in Phnom Penh protested against the killing of two Vietnamese nationals in the province of Kompong Chhnang.

On 9 October 1996 Cambodia's Law on Nationality was promulgated. The Law specifies the criteria for Cambodian citizenship as well as the requirements to be met by foreigners in

order to obtain Cambodian citizenship, that is, naturalisation.<sup>15</sup> Vietnam did not officially publicise any concern about how the law would be applied with regard to the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.

During the last five months of 1996 and into 1997, relations between the two countries improved through mutual visits. In November 1996, it was reported that Cambodia had taken steps to issue temporary residence permits to ethnic Vietnamese who had entered the country before 1993. During this period the most important visit took place in late February 1997 when Vietnam's Foreign Minister Mr. Nguyen Manh Cam visited Cambodia. It was agreed that talks aimed at finding appropriate measures to solve issues relating to the Vietnamese nationals in Cambodia would continue.

The situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia remained problematic and in late May 1997 the Vietnamese Embassy in Cambodia officially protested to the Cambodian authorities about PDK attacks on ethnic Vietnamese. Four attacks had taken place the first on 22 April. The second and third took place on 27 April in Ratanakiri Province. The fourth attack also took place in Ratanakiri Province in May. Further, evidence of anti-Vietnamese feelings was a bomb attack against the memorial monument for Vietnamese Volunteer Soldiers in Sihanoukville.

The demise of First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh in July 1997 and the election of Ung Huot to the post did lead to a period of improved bilateral relations. During the second half of 1997 and the first quarter of 1998 there was no Vietnamese reaction to attacks on ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.

Then in April, the PDK claimed that it had killed 45 and wounded many ethnic Vietnamese in Kompong Chhnang Province. Further evidence of the precarious situation of the ethnic Vietnamese were anti-Vietnamese statements made by the opposition during the election campaign ahead of the general elections held on 26 July 1998. The political tensions between

the leading Cambodian parties following the elections and the difficult process in forming a coalition government were marked by anti-Vietnamese actions. First, there was an attack on the Vietnam-Cambodian Friendship Monument in Phnom Penh in late August. Second, in two incidents on 3 and 4 September three ethnic Vietnamese were killed, five wounded and 10 abducted in Phnom Penh.

The formation of a new coalition in Cambodia on 25 November ushered in a period with a more stable political situation and a decline in actions directed at ethnic Vietnamese. It is also noteworthy that in Prime Minister Hun Sen's presentation to the Cambodian National Assembly of the platform of the new coalition government on 30 November 1998, it was stated that the Government "absolutely prevents racial discrimination, which is an activity violating laws and against human rights" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1998).

The period from December 1998 to July 1999 saw several high-level meetings and the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese was addressed during these meetings. Despite these high-level meetings and their preoccupation with the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia attacks against the Vietnamese were reported to have taken place in February and March 1999 in the Phnom Penh area.

In early 2000 there were renewed displays of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia with three demonstrations carried out by Cambodian students in January 2000. Two demonstrations were carried out against the border agreements between Cambodia and Vietnam signed in the 1980s, while the third demonstration outside the Vietnamese embassy, demanded that the Embassy repatriate Vietnamese nationals from Cambodia. In March monks, nuns, and students staged demonstrations in front of Chak Angre Leu Pagoda and in front of the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh urging the Cambodian government to expel Vietnamese living in the area of the pagoda.

### Cessation of Attacks in the 2000s

After these incidents, there was a decline in the attacks on the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. In fact there have been no publicised reactions by Vietnam regarding negative aspects of the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia except for a fire that destroyed houses and which affected the Vietnamese in the Cambodian capital in late 2001 (Amer, 2006).

Reports from high-level meetings between Cambodia and Vietnam have either made general references or no references to the ethnic Vietnamese issue since the early 2000s. This can be seen in reports from recent high-level meetings. For example, during a visit to Vietnam by Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni in September 2012, Vietnam's Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, in a meeting with the King, "suggested Cambodia... creating favourable conditions for Vietnamese to have a stable life in the country" (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012b, par. 12). In connection with the visit to Vietnam by the President of the Cambodian National Assembly, Heng Samrin, in July 2012, Vietnam's Prime Minister, proposed that the Cambodian National Assembly "continue facilitating overseas Vietnamese living and working in Cambodia" (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012a, par. 11). In the joint statement issued in connection with the visit in December 2011 to Cambodia by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, it is stated that the "two sides decided to continue to create favourable conditions and treat each other's residents as equally as other foreign citizens" (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011b, par. 9). In addition, the joint statement included the following: "The Vietnamese side highly valued and thanked the Government and people of Cambodia for their legal conditions for the Vietnamese people living in Cambodia" (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011b, par. 10). Activities of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have also been highlighted by Vietnam. For example,

in 2011 it was reported that the first congress of the Association of Overseas Vietnamese (OVA) in Cambodia (AOVC) for the 2011-2011 term had been convened in Phnom Penh in early March (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011a). One of the most informative Vietnamese reports was issued in connection with a visit to Cambodia, in March 2009, by a Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister and also Chairman of the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, Nguyen Thanh Son. In a meeting with Cambodian Home Affairs Secretary, Prum Sokha, the later, reportedly, "promised that the Cambodian Government would consider and speed up the process to grant legal status for the overseas Vietnamese" (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009, par. 4). In addition, he was quoted as saying: "The Cambodian Government has been flexibly enforcing the 1994 Migration Law and the 1996 Nationality Law with regard to the Vietnamese in Cambodia, thus providing better living conditions for them" (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009, par. 4).

The parliamentary elections of July 2003 did not seem to have been marked by the same level of anti-Vietnamese rhetoric by opposition parties as the earlier elections although it was still apparent. Also, there were anti-Vietnamese activities targeting the ethnic Vietnamese in the country, but not deadly attacks against ethnic Vietnamese.<sup>16</sup> This seems to have prevailed in the aftermath of the elections despite the deep differences between the main Cambodian political parties before a new coalition government was agreed upon between the CPP and FUNCINPEC in the summer of 2004. The 2008 national elections—which resulted in the CCP further strengthening its dominance by capturing 90 of the seats 123 seats in the National Assembly up from 73 in 2003—appeared to have been less prevalent in anti-Vietnamese rhetoric than in earlier elections.<sup>17</sup> However, this did not imply that prejudices against the ethnic Vietnamese have disappeared in Cambodian society or that all members of the Vietnamese community perceive that discrimination against them have ceased.<sup>18</sup>

### **Analysing Cambodian Attitudes and Policies Towards the Ethnic Vietnamese**

The situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia cannot be studied in a distinctly domestic context. Consequently, the observations made in the following analysis will attempt to grasp the interaction between the domestic context and the inter-state context, that is, relations with Vietnam in order to show the complexity that shapes Cambodia's attitudes and policies towards the ethnic Vietnamese.

Armed attacks against ethnic Vietnamese in the 1990s were often attributed to the PDK, who, until the group's gradual fragmentation and eventual demise in the late 1990s, articulated the most extreme form of anti-Vietnamese propaganda coupled with armed attacks against the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Some political parties also expressed anti-Vietnamese sentiments during the electoral campaigns in 1993, 1998, and 2003, for example, FUNCINPEC in all three elections and Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) in the later two. This contributed to further fuelling such opinions among the population in general. The rhetoric relating to the 'yuon', a pejorative relating to all Vietnamese,<sup>19</sup> as a source of most problems and shortcomings in Cambodia was in evidence in the campaign leading of the general elections in 1998<sup>20</sup> and it appears also in 2003.<sup>21</sup>

The controversy regarding the status and rights of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodian society today can basically be attributed to anti-Vietnamese sentiments among Cambodian politicians. These are in no way new features in Cambodian domestic politics. Since independence in 1953 the policies towards the ethnic Vietnamese have been more (Khmer Republic and DK 1970-1978) or less (the Sihanouk years 1953-1970) discriminatory. Only the PRK/SOC period was characterised by non-discriminatory policies.

The extreme policies implemented during the Khmer Republic and the DK years led to massacres of ethnic Vietnamese and the exodus of some 420,000 people to Vietnam leading to the de facto elimination of the Vietnamese minority in

Cambodia. Seen in the perspective of the dramatic effects of anti-Vietnamese policies in the 1970s, the repeated armed attacks on ethnic Vietnamese during the 1990s—in most cases attributed to the PDK—presented an evident and real threat to the Vietnamese community at large. This does not imply that all ethnic Vietnamese have been directly targeted in one or more attacks. However, with the number of ethnic Vietnamese casualties in their hundreds and with attacks taking place in both rural and urban areas, the threat was real. Furthermore, there is no indication that a differentiation was made between newly arrived Vietnamese and those who have lived in the country for a longer time.<sup>22</sup>

The anti-Vietnamese stand displayed by generations of Cambodian politicians seems to transcend ideological differences since royalists, conservatives, liberals, and communists either have been or are currently displaying anti-Vietnamese sentiments.<sup>23</sup>

A disturbing pattern of behaviour has emerged within Cambodian society. First, the Cambodian authorities officially display their discontents about the relations with Vietnam and then popular anti-Vietnamese sentiments are manifested in the form of demonstrations and/or attacks on ethnic Vietnamese. There also seems to have been a connection between the occurrence of anti-Vietnamese actions and political tension between Cambodian political parties in the run-up and in the aftermath of general elections as exemplified in both 1993 and 1998. The 2003 elections were also characterised as anti-Vietnamese rhetoric and activities directed at the ethnic Vietnamese although no deadly attacks took place.

In addition, the ethnic Vietnamese have routinely been accused of refusing to integrate into Cambodian society. Traditionally, there has been more Sino-Khmer than Viet-Khmer intermarriages (Migozzi, 1973). From the Cambodian viewpoint this is evidence that the Vietnamese refuse to fully integrate into Cambodian society. However, in view of the widespread anti-Vietnamese feelings in Cambodia there must be reluctance among the Khmers to

marry ethnic Vietnamese, which in turn reinforces the non-integration of the Vietnamese.

An additional source of negative sentiments against the ethnic Vietnamese is the Vietnamese migration to Cambodia during periods of strong foreign influence, for example during the PRK/SOC years with extensive Vietnamese influence. Even during the peacekeeping period it can be argued that the migration took place when Cambodia was under strong “foreign” influence. This contributes to reinforce the perception of the Vietnamese as representing something alien and to identifying the Vietnamese community with foreign interests and influence in Cambodia. The link between foreign influence and Vietnamese migration has not passed unnoticed by those opposing the presence of the ethnic Vietnamese and it has provided an additional factor to be used in the anti-Vietnamese rhetoric.

Anti-Vietnamese sentiments are widespread among members of the Cambodian elite as expressed in the political debate and media. It seems that such sentiments are not limited to this social stratum, as evidenced by the attacks on ethnic Vietnamese also by ordinary people in many areas of the country in 1970. However, anti-Vietnamese statements made by the Cambodian authorities and politicians should not be seen as responding to pressure from below, since the events in 1970 were instigated by the anti-Vietnamese rhetoric of the authorities.

Several studies suggest that anti-Vietnamese sentiments have traditionally been stronger in urban than in rural areas (Comte, 1976; Goldblum, 1974; Tarr, 1992). It is of course difficult to make such generalisations but the findings should be taken seriously. One explanation of the differences along the urban and rural divide could be that the propagation of anti-Vietnamese opinions was more thorough in urban areas.

Relations between Cambodia and Vietnam are of great relevance for the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Strained bilateral relations can, as exemplified by recent history, have very negative repercussions on the ethnic Vietnamese. Indeed, even during periods with

fairly good relations and when efforts are being made to resolve outstanding issues of dispute, there seems to be room for inflammatory statements from high-ranking Cambodians, which can spark anti-Vietnamese manifestations from the public. This is exemplified by the then King Norodom Sihanouk’s accusations against Vietnam in 1994 and the ensuing anti-Vietnamese demonstration in Phnom Penh and by the increase in the number of attacks against ethnic Vietnamese following the accusations made by the then First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh against Vietnam during the first half of 1996.<sup>24</sup> It can therefore be argued that for the well-being of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, relations between the two countries have to be very good. The bilateral relations have yet to reach that stage but regular efforts at governmental and parliamentary levels have led to generally correct bilateral relations. However, a core disputed issue such as the borders between the two countries remains unsettled. A positive development relating to the land border was the agreement under the Supplementary Treaty on 10 October 2005. The official bilateral relationship has remained broadly stable during the 2000s.<sup>25</sup>

The ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have been an issue on the agenda at high-level meetings between the two countries. Vietnam’s ambition has been to ensure that the Vietnamese are not being discriminated in Cambodia and assurances to that effect have been forthcoming from the Cambodian side. Nevertheless, to give the ethnic Vietnamese full security and protection would be impossible, as the Cambodian authorities cannot fully guarantee the safety of the population at large. With a mutual understanding pertaining to the non-discrimination of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, it should at least be possible for the two countries to fully cooperate in controlling illegal migration across the border.

Interestingly enough, in the talks between Vietnam and Cambodia in the post-UNTAC period, both sides agreed on the notion that the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia are to be regarded as Vietnamese citizens. For example Vietnam

referred to the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia as Vietnamese citizens, Vietnamese nationals, Vietnamese residents, and Overseas Vietnamese, all four terms refer to people which are citizens of Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> This bilateral understanding does not fully address all aspects of the issue. First, political parties opposing the PRK/SOC alleged that a large number of ethnic Vietnamese had been given Cambodian identification papers and were thus naturalised Cambodians. The understanding between the two governments suggests that this process has been reversed so as to regard those persons as Vietnamese citizens again. Or could it be that the CGDK accusations were unfounded or that the naturalisation process involved only a negligible number of persons? Second, an undisclosed but considerable number of the ethnic Vietnamese who lived in Cambodia in the pre 1970s were Cambodian citizens. The present understanding between the two countries presumes that none or only a small number of them have returned to Cambodia. If, on the other hand, a large number of them have returned, the two countries will have to resolve the issue of how to handle their status and their Cambodian citizenship.

The line of argumentation pursued in this context is based on notion that those ethnic Vietnamese who can legitimately claim to be Cambodian citizens should be recognised as such. It should not be understood as claiming that only ethnic Vietnamese from the pre 1970s can legitimately claim to be Cambodian citizens.<sup>27</sup>

Of considerable relevance in the context of the question of nationality is the case study carried out by Nguyen and Sperfeldt (2012) on the ethnic Vietnamese in Kampong Chhnang Province during the period 2008-2012. They observed that Cambodia does not consider the ethnic Vietnamese to be Cambodian nationals. They noted that Vietnam does not consider them to be Vietnamese nationals but the avenue of naturalization exists (Nguyen & Sperfeldt, 2012). The two authors cautiously raise the question “whether or not members of the focal group are to be considered stateless” (Nguyen & Sperfeldt,

2012, p. 96). In fact, to reduce and prevent statelessness in relations to the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia is a key aspect of the recommendations made by the two authors (Nguyen & Sperfeldt, 2012).

## CONCLUSIONS

The direct threat against the ethnic Vietnamese that was very much in evidence during the 1990s seems to have diminished in the 2000s. This may be attributed to the policies of Cambodian coalition government set up after the 1998 elections with its stated resolve to combat racial discrimination in Cambodian society. This displayed a more active approach by the Cambodian government to protect ethnic minorities; and since the ethnic Vietnamese have been the target of many attacks they will gain the most from such an approach. These policies have had positive repercussions on the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. It may well have contributed to the reduction in the upsurges in popular resentment against the ethnic Vietnamese. The stated position against racial discrimination can also be seen as an endorsement by the Cambodian government of the notion that all minorities are part of the Cambodian society. However, it was not sufficient that the Cambodian coalition government stood up against racial discrimination; it was also important that the opposition parties’ refrain from anti-Vietnamese rhetoric aimed at the ethnic Vietnamese in the country. There are indications that the 2003 election campaign was less anti-Vietnamese, but as observed above, opposition parties used anti-Vietnamese rhetoric and there were anti-Vietnamese activities as well (Albritton, 2004). It is noteworthy that in 2003, Sam Rainsy, the leader of the SRP, forcefully rejected accusations that he was anti-Vietnamese.<sup>28</sup> It is also essential that when criticising Vietnam, both the government and opposition do not link the Vietnamese minority to the Vietnamese state in particular when relations are tense between the two countries.

In view of Cambodia's overall development needs, all quarters of the population must be mobilised in a coordinated effort. Anti-Vietnamese rhetoric would have the opposite effect by pitting Khmers against ethnic Vietnamese, thus dividing Cambodian society. In this context the Cambodian elite can play a central and crucial role by propagating in favour of inter-ethnic harmony and against racial discrimination. The trend from the late 1990s as expressed in the stance taken by the Cambodian governments, in the opposition's reaction to the grenade attacks against ethnic Vietnamese in early 1999, as well as in Sam Rainsy's publicised stand that he is not anti-Vietnamese are indications that the members of the political elite in Cambodia can take a stance against attacks on ethnic Vietnamese. This was an important development and raises hopes for enhanced inter-ethnic harmony in Cambodia and for a more secure environment for the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodian society. The challenge will be to reinforce such policies and attitudes and to implement them in practice to the extent that discrimination against the ethnic Vietnamese is not politically tolerated and will be considerably reduced in Cambodian society. In addition, policies aiming at better integrating the ethnic Vietnamese society would be another needed step and as part of a proper resolution of the issue of citizenship would be essential.

By way of conclusion, it will be argued that any progress made will be put to further tests in times of domestic political competition and tension such as in connection with future elections and also in the event of renewed tension in relations between Cambodia and Vietnam. In addition, the question of citizenship of the ethnic Vietnamese needs to be addressed. The current situation of de-facto statelessness adds to the vulnerability of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia and also denies the ethnic Vietnamese both the rights and duties that are associated with citizenship.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>This study draws on earlier research focused on the ethnic Vietnamese minority in Cambodia see Amer (1994b, 2006). It also draws on relevant sections of studies dealing with relations between Cambodia and Vietnam (see Amer, 1997; 2010).

<sup>2</sup>The term Cambodia will be used throughout the study, unless there is a need to differentiate between different Cambodian governments or political parties.

<sup>3</sup>The term "Ethnic Vietnamese" refers to the largest ethnic group in Vietnam, that is, the "Kinh" and not to ethnic minorities in that country. This definition is derived from Decision No. 121 – TCTK/PPCD on the "Nomenclature of Vietnamese ethnic groups" issued by the General Department of Statistics on 2 March 1979 (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1985, pp. 45-41).

<sup>4</sup>For a more extensive empirical overview of the period 1953-1993, see Amer (1994b, pp. 210-238). Unless otherwise stated, information relating to that period is derived from Amer (1994b). For a more extensive empirical overview of the period 1994 to the early 2000s, see Amer (2006, pp. 388-409). Unless otherwise stated, information in relating to that period is derived from Amer (2006). For relevant references used see Amer (1994, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Pouvatchy expressed some reservations regarding the Vietnamese figure of 300,000 ethnic Vietnamese with Cambodian citizenship which he found to be rather on the high side. He also noted that the Cambodian authorities "seemed" to have encouraged Cambodian citizens of Vietnamese ethnicity to leave the country (Pouvatchy, 1976, p. 343).

<sup>6</sup>In 1978 Vietnam requested assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to cope with 341,400 refugees who had arrived from Cambodia since 1975. Among these refugees there were 170,300 ethnic Vietnamese (Grant, 1979, p. 98).

<sup>7</sup>On 30 April 1989 the PRK officially changed its name to the SOC.

<sup>8</sup>The CGDK changed its name to National Government of Cambodia (NGC) in February 1990.

<sup>9</sup>The overthrown government in Cambodia, DK, was allowed to continue to represent Cambodia in the General Assembly from 1979 and throughout the 1980s for details see Amer (1990; 1994a, pp. 89-108).

<sup>10</sup>For an overview and assessment of the United Nations' peacekeeping operation and the post-electoral evolution up to the withdrawal of UNTAC see Amer (1993, pp. 211-231; 1995).

<sup>11</sup>At a meeting held in Jakarta on 9 and 10 September 1990. The four warring Cambodian parties decided to create a SNC with 12 members, six from SOC and two from each of the other three parties – FUNCINPEC, the KPNLF, and the PDK.

<sup>12</sup>For more details on the attacks on ethnic Vietnamese during the peacekeeping period see Amer (1994b, pp. 222-228).

<sup>13</sup>For the full text of the "Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia", see British Broadcasting Corporation (1993).

<sup>14</sup>For the full text of the law see Law on immigration (1998, pp. 113-129).

<sup>15</sup>For the full text of the law see Law on nationality (1998, pp. 169-178). The text is also reproduced in Nguyen and Sperfeldt (2012, pp. 128-131).

<sup>16</sup>On the 2003 elections and anti-Vietnamese activities see Albritton (2004, p. 106).

<sup>17</sup>In her analysis of developments in Cambodia in 2008, Hughes (2009) did not highlight the dimension of anti-Vietnamese rhetoric during the 2008 National elections campaign. She also did not mention any upsurge in anti-Vietnamese activities.

<sup>18</sup>The perceptions of some Ethnic Vietnamese and the sense of being discriminated were highlighted in an article by Myers (2002), in the report by Nguyen and Sperfeldt (2012), and in an article by Seiff and Channyda (2013). It is also acknowledged in a study by Ehrentraut (2011, p. 79) although his article is mainly devoted to other dimensions than the perceptions of the ethnic Vietnamese.

<sup>19</sup>The argument here is not that the term *Yvon* in itself is necessarily discriminatory but rather the way it is used in the political rhetoric and the fact that the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have been under repeated attacks since 1953 (Amer, 2010, pp. 102, 112). See also discussion in Albritton (2004, p. 106)

<sup>20</sup>For a detailed analysis of how prominently anti-Vietnam and anti-Vietnamese views were propagated by the two main opposition parties in the campaign leading up to the 1998 general elections, see Hughes (2007, pp. 45-68).

<sup>21</sup>Albritton (2004, p. 106) discussed both the election campaign of 2003 and generally the use of such rhetoric by Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy.

<sup>22</sup>Didier Bertrand had made an attempt to divide the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia into different categories and one of the major criteria he used is the length of stay in Cambodia. He argued that the majority (*la plupart*) of the Vietnamese born in Cambodia claimed to be "Vietnamese of Cambodia" (*Vietnamiens du Cambodge*) and that they perceive themselves as belonging to the Khmer people.

This category of Vietnamese seems to be those who were living in Cambodia prior to 1970 and who have since then returned as well as their decedents. Bertrand observed that following their forced exodus they returned to Cambodia as soon as it was possible. He also argued that they do not have family links in Vietnam (Bertrand, 1998, pp. 30-32).

<sup>23</sup>Didier Bertrand made a similar observation relating to the use of anti-Vietnamese rhetoric for political purposes by Cambodian politicians throughout the political spectrum, that is, royalists, republicans, and the Khmer Rouge (*royalistes, républicains et les Khmers Rouge*) (Bertrand, 1998, p. 39).

<sup>24</sup>For details see Amer (1997, pp. 82-91; 2006, pp. 394-396).

<sup>25</sup>On developments relating to border issues see Amer and Nguyen (2009: 54-59). On overall relations see Amer (2010) and Thayer (2012).

<sup>26</sup>For more details see Amer (2006, pp. 392-400).

<sup>27</sup>The issue of citizenship is analysed in details by Nguyen and Sperfeldt (2012) and by Ehrentraut (2011).

<sup>28</sup>See Amer (2006, p. 405) based on examination of information on the website of the SRP (<http://www.samrainsyparty.org>). For an interesting analysis of the policies of the SRP during the 1990s see Hughes (2001, pp. 45-71).

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