Vietnam Overview

Environment

A small but very heavily populated country, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is at the eastern end of South-East Asia and borders the People's Republic of China to the north, Laos to the west, Cambodia to the south-west, and the South China Sea to the east. Its elongated surface consists of mainly hills and densely forested mountains.

Peoples

Main languages: Vietnamese, Hoa (Chinese), Khmer, Tai, Hmong
Main religions: Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, indigenous syncretic religions, animism

Main minority groups: Tay 1.9% (1.47 million), Thai 1.7% (1.3 million), Muong 1.5% (1.1 million), Khmer Krom 1.4% (1 million), Hoa (Chinese) 1.1% (862,371), Nung 1.1% (856,412), Hmong 1% (787,604), others 4.1% (1999 Census)

The vast majority of Vietnam's population in the 1999 Census were ethnic Viet or Kinh (65.8 million, or 86.2% out of a total population of 76.3 million), and speak the Vietnamese language. Vietnam's population in 2005 was estimated to be 85 million. Most Kinh were followers of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism prior to the Indochina wars, though official figures indicate more than 80 per cent of them today have no religious affiliation.

Ethnic Kinh tended to be concentrated in about half of the country's territory, especially in coastal and low-lying areas, and have been engaged in intensive irrigated-rice cultivation and fishing, though that pattern is increasingly changing.

Most of the remaining 53 official ethnic groups (though not all of the country's minorities are part of this officially recognized list) inhabit the interior mountainous and highlands, though some, such as the Khmer Krom, Hoa and Lao, are concentrated in the cities or lowlands. Most of the other many remaining minorities tend to live in the mountains of the north, down the Truong Son mountain range, and in the central highlands. These include a huge diversity in terms of languages, origins, religions and even scripts used, and according to the 1999 Census represented 13.8 per cent of the country's population, or 10.5 million people.

The three largest minorities are the Tay, who belong to the central Tai-Kadai language group and are located in the north of Vietnam where their villages tend to be based at the feet of mountains with about 15-20 households each; the closely related Thai are believed to have arrived in Vietnam earlier than the Tay, and they are concentrated in the north-west and western parts of north Vietnam. The Muong also inhabit the mountainous region of northern Vietnam, and are generally found in Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa province. Their language is a Vietic language, closely related to Vietnamese.
The fourth largest minority are the Khmer Krom, and they are now thought to number more than 1.3 million people and are found concentrated in the south, in the delta region of the Mekong River. They are ethnic Khmer and are often considered to be indigenous, as they have inhabited the Mekong delta since before the arrival of the Vietnamese. Their language, Khmer, is part of the Mon-Khmer branch of Austroasiatic languages, and most of them are Buddhists.

One group of more than 30 minorities often lumped together are the Degar, sometimes referred to as Montagnards, a French term related to their presence in the highlands of Vietnam, though this was limited to the central highlands area. Except for their traditionally inhabiting highlands, these groups have in fact different cultures and their languages belong to two distinct family groups, the Malayo-Polynesian and Mon-Khmer. Their total numbers is subject to some debate, though they possibly number between 1 and 2 million people. Among the largest groups are the Jarai, Rhade and Bahnar.

There is some controversy as to the size of the Chinese minority in Vietnam: official figures tend to float around the 1 million figure, but outside sources tend to suggest a higher number. Not all Chinese (known as Hoa) are officially recognized by the government of Vietnam: the Hoa category excludes the San Diu (mountain Chinese) and the Ngai. Most Hoa are descended from Chinese settlers who came from the Guangdong province from about the eighteenth century, and it is for this reason that most of them today speak Cantonese, though there is also a large group who speak Teochew.

There are a number of religious minorities, including significant Catholic and Protestant minorities, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, which both originated in the Mekong River delta during the nineteenth century (both native and distinct Buddhist sects), as well as Sunni and Bashi Muslims in the south and among the Chams (with perhaps 15 per cent of the Chams still adherents of Hinduism). The latter's language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family, and they are generally thought to be descendants of the ancient kingdom of Champa.

History

Chinese dominated the region from the first century BCE until the tenth century CE, and left an indelible mark on Vietnamese culture, language and society. Much of Vietnamese history is an account of expansion from the Red River delta to the Mekong delta, an advance not completed until the late eighteenth century. Fighting with the kingdom of Champa, which occupied what is now central Vietnam, continued for 900 years until the Chams, a Malay-Polynesian people, were subjugated in the late seventeenth century. Following the defeat of Champa, the Vietnamese pursued military campaigns against the kingdom of the Khmer (Cambodia) in the Mekong delta, including what is now Ho Chi Minh City. While the defeat of Champa brought a virtual end to a distinct Cham society in Vietnam, ethnic Khmer retain an important presence in the delta area.

The expansion of Vietnam led to greater regionalism in politics. This resulted in the division of the country at roughly the 18th parallel (the line that divided North from South Vietnam from 1954 to 1976). This division continued from 1620 until 1802 when the southern emperor Gia Long, with the aid of the French, reunified the country. Sixty years later, the French began to wrest political control from the Vietnamese. The present borders of Vietnam were defined by French military action between 1858 and 1883. Except for a period of Japanese occupation during the Second World War, French colonial rule continued until defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Vietnam suffered enormous devastation and loss of life during the three Indochina wars. The first, lasting from the late 1940s until 1954, ended with independence from the French. The country was then divided into the Republic of Vietnam (South) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North). During the American phase of the second Indochinese war, which lasted from the mid-1960s until the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, the country's infrastructure was virtually destroyed. The victory of North over South Vietnam in 1975 reunified the country. The third Indochinese war saw Vietnam invade Cambodia in 1978 and the Chinese invade northern Vietnam the following year. These events caused the massive departure of ethnic Chinese ‘boat people' in the 1980s.

The general policy of the Vietnamese government towards most minorities, and especially those who were perceived as having sided with American forces, was aggressive and even in some cases brutal until the 1990s: Vietnamese was
the almost exclusive language of education; expropriation of land and resources occurred, combined with the
resettlement of ethnic Kinh in traditional minority regions and the forced movement of indigenous and minorities away
from traditional villages to permanent settlements. During the same period, the creation of ‘New Economic Zones' led
to an influx of mainly ethnic Kinh into these zones, usually with the official support of the government, in the central
highlands and close to the border with China.

After 1985, the adoption of the more liberal Doi Moi policies softened the treatment of minorities, with some official
recognition and use of minority languages in schools, and - at least in terms of the attitude of officials and the
recognition minorities - some improvement has been made.

Despite the limited economic liberalization which ensued, the human rights situation has not changed significantly
overall. Though there are rights enshrined in Vietnam's Constitution, these are hampered by a number of numerous
duties and the absence of constitutional and administrative courts and an independent judiciary.

Governance

Despite considerable economic gains in recent years, the country as a whole remains one of Asia's poorest. The 1990s
in particular saw a huge reductions in poverty: from 58 per cent in 1993 to 29 per cent in 2002. A number of reports
point out, however, that ethnic minorities continue to suffer disproportionately from poverty, accounting by some
estimates for 29 per cent of the poor but only 14 per cent of the population. The move towards a free market (Doi Moi)
in the late 1980s was not matched by greater political freedom. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) does not
tolerate dissent. Freedom of movement, expression and association remain tightly constricted.

At first glance the constitution of Vietnam is highly receptive to, and recognizes, minority communities, and
particularly those in the highlands. Numerous provisions refer to the need to prioritize educational and development
programmes so as to assist minorities. Most of these constitutional provisions remain for the most part vague
aspirations, and in most matters where the rights of minorities might have a significant impact - the language of
education and employment for civil service positions in the regions where minorities are most numerous, and the right
to own or use traditional land and resources, for example - the constitution is silent. Finally, the exercise of these rights
seems to be further restrained by provisions in the constitution as well as other legislation which suggest these rights
must comply with 'the interests and policies of the state'. In the context of Vietnam, this often appears to be closely
connected to the interests of the ethnic Kinh.

Despite some movement to liberalize the economy, Vietnam remains a one-party state under the firm control of the
Communist Party of Vietnam. It continues to suppress political dissent, and independent non-governmental
organizations (NGOs) are not permitted to operate freely in the country. Despite the stated commitments towards
respecting and assisting minorities, there are continued discriminatory policies which tend to favour the ethnic Kinh (in
terms of language, access to jobs, land ownership, etc.) which cannot be addressed directly or effectively by minorities
because of a lack of legal measures to protect their rights and the absence of an independent judiciary. This
periodically leads to minority demonstrations and even violence against authorities or ethnic Kinh.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Despite a number of positive government initiatives to try to respond to the needs of, and disadvantages and
difficulties faced by, minorities and indigenous peoples (such as the creation of a Ministerial-level Committee for
Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Area Affairs and the establishment of a Minority Peoples Educational Research
Centre), these efforts continue to pale in comparison to the negative. As recently as 2006 a series of reports from
lending, development and human rights organizations confirmed that most minorities, and especially those in the north
and the highlands, are not benefiting as much as the ethnic Kinh: on the contrary, the gap between the two is
increasing. It is partially for these reasons that an Ethnic Minorities Working Group in Vietnam (EMWG) was set up in
2002 by NGOs and other development agencies, to try to better understand and improve on their efforts in the country.

Still, the current development policies tend to result in minorities and indigenous peoples losing access to traditional
land and resources. They face being forced to relocate and seeing others (often ethnic Kinh) being resettled on their
The approach of the government could be described as one of ‘dissonant goodwill’: while there is undoubtedly, for historical and political reasons, a general receptiveness towards incorporating minorities and indigenous peoples into Vietnamese society, and trying to support these communities through various measures, many of these measures are inappropriate and are not sufficient to counterbalance the negative impacts of other, more short-sighted policies. Land and development policies in particular, accompanied by what could be described as expropriation of traditional land and resources, are completely inadequate as they take the latter away from minorities and indigenous peoples and reallocate them to mainly ethnic Kinh - with the assistance of international lending and development organizations.

In addition, the development approach of the government is arguably tainted by a Kinh bias, in the sense that ethnic groups in Vietnam are seen in a hierarchy of development with the Kinh at the top and others ranked according to their similarity to the Kinh. Government policies frequently aim towards ‘developing' or ‘modernizing' the minorities to become more like the Kinh.

Frustration over the discriminatory impact of these policies in terms of employment, the loss of traditional land and resources and the influx of ethnic Kinh has recently led to growing frustration and demonstrations, and even violence in minority and indigenous regions. In 2004, thousands of Degar took to the streets of Daklak and Gia Lai to protest against the authorities' confiscation of their land and what was perceived as restrictions on their freedom of religion.

Vietnam's Millennium Development Goals are also nowhere near as generous in practice as they appear to be on paper. While officially there is a right to be instructed in minority languages under the constitution, and ‘bilingual educational' is in place in at least some of the main minority and indigenous languages, this is in fact completely misleading. ‘Bilingual education' in Vietnam is bilingual in name only: it usually only involves teaching a minority language as a subject - not using it as medium of instruction - and only for the first few years of education.

The language policies of the government, by privileging Vietnamese to the almost total exclusion of minority and indigenous languages beyond token bilingualism, are seriously disadvantaging minorities and indigenous groups, especially the larger, more territorially concentrated ones. Large numbers of minority and indigenous children, for example, continue to drop out of school early because their initial years of education are almost entirely in a language they do not understand well. Those minority and indigenous children who persevere tend to be disadvantaged by not having their languages as a medium of instruction. Eventually, those who remain after the first years of education are taught exclusively in Vietnamese, by which point their knowledge of their own language is rather poor. The relatively small number of minority and indigenous children who finish school are fairly fluent in Vietnamese, but must still compete for government positions with native speakers of Vietnamese - and remain disadvantaged in this regard - because minority and indigenous languages are not a language of state service and employment, even in regions where minority or indigenous groups are a clear majority.

International donor agencies in their development strategies, such as the 2002 World Bank Vietnam Country Development Strategy, almost totally ignore the consequences of the country's quasi-exclusive language policies, while at the same time acknowledging that much more needs to be done to redress the growing severe poverty being observed for many minorities and indigenous peoples. While the Chinese minority has been doing relatively well in the new economic climate, the situation of groups such as the Ba-na, Gia-rai, E-de and Co-ho in the central highlands, and the Hmong and Muong in the northern mountains, has seriously deteriorated.

There also continue to be reports of discriminatory conduct by local officials, even of beatings, harassment and torture of non-Buddhist minorities, especially in the case of non-authorized religious activities. Certain minorities tend also to be singled out and are seen as suspect, especially evangelical Protestant groups who fought against the Communists during the Vietnam War, such as the Hmong.

The Vietnamese government maintains far-reaching control of religious activities and organizations through the process of recognition and registration, with unregistered religious activity illegal. In its May 2007 report the US Commission on International Religious Freedom cited continued arrests of individuals because of their religious activities and continued severe religious freedom restrictions targeting some ethnic minority Protestants and Buddhists, Vietnamese Mennonites, Hao Hoa Buddhists, and monks and nuns associated with the Unified Buddhist Church of
Vietnam (UBCV). The Commission did recognize positive religious freedom developments in Vietnam, as the government released prominent religious prisoners, introduced some legal reforms, facilitated the legal recognition of religious communities, and, except for isolated cases, ended large-scale forced renunciations of faith. However, the Commission observed that since Vietnam joined the WTO, positive religious freedom trends have, for the most part, stalled, and Vietnam has initiated a severe crackdown on many religious leaders who previously were the leading advocates for religious freedom in that country.

There are continued reports of harassment and detention of ethnic minorities such as Montagnard and Hmong Christians and Khmer Buddhists. New ordinances and decrees adopted since 2005 still require advance notification and permission for most religious activities.

Election results in 2002 saw ethnic minorities holding 17.3 per cent of seats in the National Assembly seats, a percentage slightly higher than their official share of the country's population (14 per cent), though some minorities at lower levels of representation, especially those who do not belong to the Tay or Hoa and who are concentrated in the mountainous north or central highlands, remain largely unrepresented.

After the fall of Saigon, Montagnard (or Degar) guerrillas continued a separatist campaign in Vietnam's Central Highlands until the early 1990s, when they disbanded, put down their arms and took up Christianity. Vietnamese authorities have declared the form of evangelical Christianity followed by many Montagnard a political movement, not a religion, and made it illegal. According to the Montagnard Foundation, in 2007 Vietnam has continued to prevent human rights monitors from having unhindered access to the central highlands. Over 350 Montagnard prisoners of conscience remain in Vietnamese prisoners under brutal conditions.

Minority and indigenous groups continue to be displaced away from their ancestral lands in the name of development in Vietnam. In the highlands in the north, the International Rivers Network reports that close to 100,000 people belonging to 13 indigenous groups may be resettled under a programme which began in December 2005 and is expected to be completed by 2015 (1,000 families had been moved by the end of 2006) in order to make place for the Son La Hydropower Project, which is the largest dam project ever built in Vietnam.

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