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Highland minorities

Profile

There are two categories of what are sometimes referred to as 'highlanders': those minorities and indigenous peoples concentrated in the central highlands of Vietnam, and those found in the country's north highlands, located beyond the Red River to the north. Both are made up of a large number of quite distinct ethnic groups and have migrated into today's Vietnam at various points in history. The former are collectively sometimes known as Degar, or Montagnards, a term which is a carry-over from the French colonial period. The latter are sometimes known by the Vietnamese word for highlanders but that term technically could be said to apply to both categories.

The highlands of northern Vietnam are inhabited primarily by speakers of the Austroasiatic family of languages, and especially from the Tai-Kadai and Vietic groups of languages such as Tay, Thai, Muong, Dzao and Nung. The Thai, for instance, are differentiated as Black Thai, White Thai and Red Thai, according to the distinctive clothing worn by the women of respective groups. The Thai have a complex social and political organization and a valley-based principality called a *muong* that goes beyond the village level. Because of the great distances to markets, subsistence farming is the norm. Highlanders in the north are in the main closer culturally to the lowland Vietnamese than those in the south, though relations between the two were historically no better than in the south.

The Montagnards can be subdivided into (at least) 30 or so different ethnic groups speaking different languages belonging mainly to the Austronesian language family (such as the Gia Rai, Ede, Rag Lai and Cham), and Mon-Khmer language groups (including the Ba Na, Bru-Van Kieu, Gie Trieng, M'Nong, Xe Dang and X Tieng). Many consider these populations to be indigenous, having preceded the arrival of the ethnic Kinh, and most of their societies are matrilineal. Some of the Montagnard groups, such as the Ede and Bahnar, include a significant number of Catholic or Protestant believers. The main groups in this category are the Jarai, Rhade, Bahnar, Koho, M'Nong and Stieng.

The exact numbers of these two categories are a matter of some dispute: the Montagnards of the central highlands probably number between 1 and 2 million, whereas the groups from the northern highlands are more numerous, with several of the largest minorities such as the Tay, Tai, Muong and Nung each exceeding or in the vicinity of 1 million.

Historical context

Most of the minority populations in the northern and central highlands of Vietnam are descended from various groups who settled in the region long before the arrival of the ethnic Kinh. Many of the highland groups, for example, are thought to have arrived over 2,000 years ago, and at one point to have occupied much of the south of Indochina.

During the pre-colonial period, ethnic minorities living in the highland areas maintained autonomy from the Vietnamese state, which did not consider them a threat. However, the highland population in both the north and the south was economically exploited by the ethnic Kinh. During the colonial period, the highland areas were targets of French missionary education and commercial activities. The French played the Kinh and ethnic minorities off against one another, sometimes supporting Kinh settlement in highland areas, at other times prohibiting such settlement and encouraging local administration by highlanders.

The reaction of highland groups to the French was also mixed. Because of the economic exploitation there were a number of revolts, including a revolt by the Jarai that lasted until the late 1930s. At the same time, many hill tribe

populations supported the French for the protection they gave them from the Kinh. Montagnards, especially in the south, fought alongside French and, later, US forces during successive Indochinese wars, though at the same time some also fought against them.

In order to win support from the ethnic groups in the northern and central highland regions, French colonial authorities established before 1954 autonomous zones for the Muong and Thai in the north-western mountains and the central highlands as the 'Pays Montagnard du Sud', administered directly under Emperor Bao Dai. While Ho Chi Minh made a number of commitments promising autonomy for these minorities, the policies until independence were very much in a state of flux.

South Vietnamese authorities, however, embarked on what would later also be continued in a different form by Vietnam's Communist government: after 1955, South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diêm launched the first programmes to resettle members of the Kinh to 'land development centres' in the central highlands - in effect appropriating the traditional lands of the highland groups and handing them over mainly to members of the majority ethnic group, as well as to thousands of ethnic minority refugees from the north. These policies were eventually suspended, to try to assuage some of the highland groups who had resisted violently. North Vietnam also began its own resettlement programme during its first Five Year Plan (1961-65), setting up 'New Economic Zones' in northern highland provinces. By 1975, an estimated 1 million people, mainly ethnic Kinh, were relocated into areas previously the domain of various highland minorities.

Similar policies were put into place for the central highlands after reunification in 1975, with perhaps as many as 3 million moving into the area. The ethnic Kinh today represent around two-thirds of the population of the central highlands. In addition, efforts to end swidden agriculture and to sedentarize minorities meant the relocation of hundreds of thousands to the valleys to grow rice and other cash-oriented crops. Frustration at the loss of traditional lands, restrictions on the religious practices of some minorities, threats to the maintenance of their languages and cultures, as well as poor access to education and health all combined to spark large-scale demonstrations by some central highland minorities in 2001. There were further demonstrations in 2004 over land rights and freedom of religion issues, as well as over the migration of large numbers of majority Kinh. The 2004 demonstrations were much more violent than in 2001, with the People's Committee building in one commune destroyed, as well as some Kinh migrants' houses and farms. On both occasions, the government clamped down on all outside access to the central highlands.

While the economy of Vietnam has grown rapidly in recent years, the areas in which ethnic minorities predominate have benefited the least, and for the most part they remain the poorest people in Vietnam. Mainly the Chinese population in the urban areas of southern Vietnam seem to have benefited somewhat from Vietnam's more open economy.

Current issues

The Vietnamese government continues to follow a contradictory policy towards the minority and indigenous groups from the highland regions. On the one hand, it conveys a message that it recognizes the importance of these groups and wishes to address their specific needs, yet on the other hand, a number of the policies and programmes it puts in place have considerable negative impacts on them.

After the 2001 protests by thousands of highland groups, a number of announcements and changes were made to address some of the grievances. Among these was a 2004 prime ministerial decision to allocate land to the country's minorities and assist them in areas such as housing. However, other announcements indicate that aspects of policy detrimental to highland groups have not been abandoned. In March 2007, another prime ministerial decision on resettlement declared the aim of completely eliminating all swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture activities of minorities by 2010. While it is too early to conclude how effective or even desirable such moves away from swidden agriculture are, early studies suggest mixed results: a 2006 report examining a remote upland village in north-central Vietnam where swidden agriculture was severely curtailed, concluded that the move towards wet-rice cultivation resulted in a lower rice production yield, and thus a lower level of food security. There was an increase in forest cover, but this was accompanied by greater use of lower areas for wet-rice cultivation and a reduction in the landscape

mosaic resulting from swidden agriculture (some reports indicate that slash-and-burn agriculture supports greater biodiversity than the binary system of forest and permanently cultivated fields).

Minority and indigenous groups continue to be displaced away from their ancestral lands in the name of development. In the highlands in the north for example, 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. Two initial resettlement projects in 2003, initially described as successful, appear not to have been so, as the families involved were moved far away to higher ground, without access to a river, where their traditional farming and cultural practices are extremely difficult to maintain.

There are also continuing reports of mainly Protestant Montagnards being harassed or punished, or having property confiscated or being discriminated against because of their religion or for holding unsanctioned church services or material. Most of this is done by local officials and does not reflect government policy: indeed, a 2004 'Ordinance on Religion' and the 2005 Prime Minister's 'Special Instructions on Protestantism' appear to show a willingness - at least on the part of central authorities - to give non-Buddhist minorities some greater leeway in religious matters. However, according to the Montagnard Foundation in 2007, the Vietnamese government has continued to prevent human rights monitors from having unhindered access to the central highlands. Over 350 Montagnard prisoners of conscience remain in prison under brutal conditions.

The educational and language policies of Vietnamese authorities, in particular the degree to which minority languages are used as medium of instruction or as working languages for government offices in areas where the larger minorities are concentrated in the highlands, remain unchanged. They are seriously hampering the employment and educational opportunities of highland minorities, as well as the maintenance of their cultures.

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