Khemaran Dinh Intolerance in Our Midst

Understanding Religious Intolerance

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April 25, 2016

The Modern Killing Fields:

Khmer Krom Buddhists targeted for ethnic cleansing in the Mekong Delta



A parade demonstration amasses from out and around a Khmer Krom Buddhist school into the streets of a Soc Trang provincial town in Southern Vietnam. The streaming flow of orange-robed monks make their way from the provincial roads to meet up with the rest of the demonstrators. They wield flags of Buddhism, signs, and loudspeakers chanting for religious freedom and basic human rights. They ask the government to “lift restrictions on the number of days allowed for certain Khmer religious festivals and to allow Khmer Buddhist leaders--not government appointees--to make decisions regarding ordinations of monks and the content of religious studies curricula offered at pagoda schools(On the Margins). The protest goes on peacefully for half of the day, but their actions have not gone unnoticed. To the Vietnamese government, this is an act of betrayal to the fatherland. The traitors must be dealt with, but rather than blunt street clashes, it must be done quietly. A few days later, after careful planning, the temples of the suspected monks are surrounded by government officials. They advise the monks to stay calm before they charge in to make the arbitrary arrests of the leaders of the demonstration. They are taken by force with unknown charges. The monks are restrained and herded into vans destined for the jail. 20 monks were arrest out of the 200 demonstrators. The government-appointed Buddhist officials sent the order for these monks to be defrocked, or stripped of their robes and thereby dismissing him from the monkhood, a decision traditionally made by the sangha, or community of monks within the temple. Some are release to return to their home villages under house arrest, others receive years-long prison sentences under minor charges such as disrupting traffic. Demonstrations like these come few and far between fueled by simmering discontentment with government land grabbing of religious oppression of ethnic Khmer Krom people. Like the demonstration in Soc Trang, most of the protests are little noticed as southern Vietnam has no independent media and communications are bugged ([On](https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/01/21/margins/rights-abuses-ethnic-khmer-vietnams-mekong-delta) the Margins). Although Vietnam has many other Buddhists, the ethnic Khmer Krom Buddhists are they only Buddhist group to be defrocked.

Interestingly enough, a year later in 2008, the UN designated the international religion day to be celebrated in Vietnam as they celebrate Visak, the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. This theme is “Buddhist contribution to building a just, democratic and civil society” (Religious Freedom Denied). The hypocrisy was denounced by many human rights groups for Vietnam to host an international holiday when they have hundreds of political and religious prisoners and continuously suppress religions of all kinds. It comes a year after the Soc Trang demonstration in which 5 monks were convicted for their participation. Why has the UN designated Visak to be celebrated here of all places when it was only just removed from the US blacklist of religious intolerant countries. Why are the ethnic Khmer Krom people specifically targeted in the defrocking of their religious leaders? To answer these questions, we must understand the political context and agenda of the Vietnamese communist party.

Since 2007, Vietnamese authorities have cracked down harder on incidents of protests against the government. There has also been large increases in the availability of technologies that allow virtually anyone access to internet communications. The open-access web has been the network of communications that document and share once isolated incidents with the entire world. Oppression of the ethnic Khmer Krom people who’ve live in the Mekong delta region traditionally has a long history since the region was seized by France and ceded by colonial occupation in the 20th century. The Khmer Krom population is traditionally Theravada Buddhist and it is from which they draw their national identity and heritage. Theravadan Buddhism is the foundation of their ethnic identity and distinct culture. Demonstrations by monks and landless farmers led to more restricted and monitored movements, banning of publications and bugging of telecommunications. Vietnam, however, is a majority of ethnic Kinh people who descended from China in the 15th century. Vietnam is also a communist one party state. In this essay we will breakdown the communist ideology to understand it as the foundational justification for the marginalization of the Khmer Krom as it serves to eradicate their ethnic identity and homogenize the population to conformity in one national identity. Amongst all human rights violations perpetrated by Vietnam, religious intolerance is the most destructive. It serves the purpose to disenfranchise the Khmer people and ethnically cleanse the population by destroying the social framework of a people. The influence of communism in the region has penetrated neighboring Cambodia, and if continued, this influence will be the death of a nation.

Today’s 1 million Khmer Krom call their ancestral homeland Kampuchea Krom and have lived there since 4000BC. “Kampuchea” meaning Cambodia and “Krom” meaning lower, or “lower Cambodia”. During the height of the Khmer empire, its territory encompassed nearly the entirety of Southeast Asia. Its decline has given land to today’s neighboring countries: Thailand, Laos, Burma and Vietnam. Since 1600s Cambodia has struggled with invasion from its Siam or ethnic Thai and Vietnamese Kinh neighbors. In 1858 the Cambodian king appealed to French Emperor Napoleon III for assistance against the invaders and the French had come to colonize the entire region under one protectorate historically known as “French Cochin China”. When the French colony was abandoned in 1949, France ceded Kampuchea Krom to Vietnam instead of giving it back to Cambodia under the Law n° 49-733 modifying the status of French Cochin China. The Khmer Krom people have lived under the Vietnam’s jurisdiction ever since (UNPO).

The Khmer Krom, like most other Cambodians identity with Theravada Buddhist traditions. Theravada Buddhism is an integral part of their culture. For this reason it is also the center of attacks against this minority. From it, the Khmer people meet, educate, and hold ceremony and celebrations. Many see this form of Buddhism as the foundation of their distinct culture, religious traditions, and ethnic identity. In rural villages with little to do, temples, or wats, are often where village folk spend their time. Even in America, the Cambodian diaspora remains centered around the wats ([On](https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/01/21/margins/rights-abuses-ethnic-khmer-vietnams-mekong-delta#ce6e6a) the Margins).

Communist ideology is centered on one thing: the state. In communist governance, all actions go to benefit the whole. People and state aren’t seen as separate entities. People are merely human capital, a resource, expendable for the greater good of the nation. In this framework, individual rights are subject to discretion if they stand as obstacle the benefit of the nation. Independents and interest groups are seen as a threat to the motherland and are silenced. “From the Vietnamese government's perspective, religious groups that seek to operate independently of government-authorized committees and manage their own affairs undermine the party's authority. Vietnamese authorities respond harshly to demands for religious independence, particularly in regions such as southern Vietnam where religion has historically been perceived as linked to political movements or foreign powers that challenge the Communist Party's sway over popular allegiance” ([On the Margins). Vietnam](https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/01/21/margins/rights-abuses-ethnic-khmer-vietnams-mekong-delta#ce6e6a)…………….vietnam) states “all ethnic groups have, from time immemorial, coexisted peacefully without racial conflicts and discrimination. All ethnic groups in Vietnam, regardless of their size, language, culture, history and level of development, have enjoyed the same rights in all aspects of life." Although the Vietnam’s latest revision of their constitution states that all people have the right to freedom of belief and religion, that all religions are equal before the law and the state must respect and protect freedom of belief and religion (U.S. Department of State). This is however surrounded by language that undermines these rights, such as that of Decree 92, a 2004 ordinance on the rights of religion and belief naming a number bounds that religious affairs may not infringe upon. The constitution opens the door for the government to arbitrarily define what constitutes a violation by later stating that "No one can violate freedom of belief and of religion; nor can anyone misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and State policies” (Benge). In the end, communism works in theory, yet fails in practice. There is no consistency written in Vietnam’s laws. The lack of legal clarity gives the impression that Vietnam has formal laws and masks the fact that the law can at any moment become meaningless.

Decree 92 prescribes a multi-stage process in order to receive national recognition as a religious organization. To operate openly, an unrecognized religious organization must first register its places of worship, its clerics, and its activities in each local administrative area in which it operates by filing information about its structure, leadership, and activities. At every stage of the registration and recognition application process, the law specifies time limits for an official response, which can be up to 45 days, depending on the scope of the request. Although the law requires government authorities to explain formally any denial in writing, the denial may be for any reason, given the significant discretion the law gives to those authorities. There is no mechanism for appeal. Decree 92 and the Law on Land stipulate that recognized religious organizations are permitted to acquire a land-use certificate as legal entities, but they must receive a grant of the land by the respective provincial people’s committee, which also has the authority to approve or disapprove the construction of new religious facilities (U.S. Department of State). If the organization is so lucky to jump through all of these hoop they are strongly encouraged to register under the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, or VBS, which is the only Buddhist organization nationally recognized by Vietnam. It is the shell organization that succeeded the outlawed Unified or United Buddhist Sangha. However, “some Khmer Krom Buddhists say they would like to be able to manage and conduct their religious activities under their own monastic code, rather than being required by Vietnamese law--like all religions in Vietnam--to come under the oversight of a government-appointed committee. For Buddhists, this is the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha Executive Council, an organization dominated by government-appointed Mahayana Buddhist officials. It is the VBS--and not Khmer Theravada Buddhist leaders--that makes decisions regarding ordinations, religious ceremonies, and the content of religious studies curricula offered at pagoda schools” ([On](https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/01/21/margins/rights-abuses-ethnic-khmer-vietnams-mekong-delta) the Margins).

### The VBS, the state-backed Buddhist administration furthermore has authority over even those unregistered under its network. The VBS has used its authority to call upon the ultimatum for Buddhist monks: defrocking, or “the decision to force a Buddhist monk to give up his saffron or burgundy robes, thereby dismissing him from the monkhood, is traditionally made by the Buddhist community of monks (*sangha*), and not government officials” (On the Margins). Once forcibly defrocked some are placed under house arrest and returned to their villages. Higher level monks are targeted and are more likely to face long-term imprisonment for arbitrary charges. In prison these monks are susceptible to inhumane treatment and dehumanizing torture aimed at gathering intelligence or breaking the will of these monks. Once broken, these prisoners are meant to cut a deal and now work for the government. Sometimes they are sent back to their home monasteries as spies or agents meant to cause a disruption to the monk community. In other situations unsuspecting young boys are recruited to be robed agents. In other cases, troublemakers are recruited, robed, shaved, and sent to fulfill their mission. Some have their loved ones held hostage to ensure they follow through with their mission.

In face of all of these tactics the government must always maintain a position of ignorance and denial. This is so as not to lose face among their own people, but also to the international community, whom Vietnam depends heavily on for commercial trade. Despite countless known cases, the Vietnamese Embassy states that “There is no political prisoners or [imprisoned] monks in Vietnam. There are only people who violate Vietnamese law” (Sarada)



From left: Kim Moul and Danh Tol with other monks defrocked and imprisoned. August 2, 2007

Meet Venerables Kim Moul and Danh Tol, two monks arrested in 2007 as a result of their participation in the Soc Trang demonstration demanding an end to Khmer Krom Buddhist oppression. After an enormous journey and the authority of UN-sanctioned international refugee statuses, they now they live under the protection of the United States government. They’ve previously settled in Sweden, but have now moved to the US where they can work more closely with the Khmer Krom Federation, human rights group named for its desire to secede from Vietnam. They are currently the presiding monks of a Khmer Krom wat where they base their human rights office (Khmer Krom)

On June 4 2013, Ven. Tol presented before the U.S. Subcommittee on Vietnamese Relations the brutality he endured during his imprisonment by the Vietnamese authorities. Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey moves the discussion on religious affairs by raising his concerns of registering religious groups in Vietnam. “As we all know the Vietnamese government sets up parallel fake bodies… they outlaw the Unified Buddhist Church and they turn around and sets up a shell organization that they control…the real issue is that they’re setting up bogus organizations to be the faith community for that particular denomination” Ven. Tol follows up and affirms that Theravadan Buddhism and the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam are compatible, but the government simply does not want Khmer Krom Buddhism to continue existing in the Mekong Delta. Tol goes to ask why does when Vietnamese Buddhists demonstrate that they are not prosecuted, but when Khmer Krom Buddhists are met with the same circumstances, they are arrested and defrocked (Khmers Kampuchea Krom Federation)? Tol recalls his experience, “I was tortured and beaten incessantly. I was interrogated at night and forced to admit wrongdoings that I did not commit. I was jailed in a small dungeon, about three meters long and a meter and a half for up to 6 months at a time. I was in insolation, in darkness, and naked. Whenever I was sick, they gave me a medicine to worsen my sickness and forget what happened. When I passed out during my interrogations they’d throw water on me to wake me and start over again” (Prey Nokor News). He goes on mention fellow monks Vens. Thach Thoul and Lieu Ny who were more recently arrested. “I urge the committee to urge Vietnam to unconditionally release these and other prisoners like them. I believe that they will suffer the same torture as myself” Tol says.

On November 7 2013, Vietnam became the latest country to sign the UN convention against torture (Prey Nokor News). Sarah Cox, a researcher and international human rights activists who worked in Southeast Asia for a long time, confirmed that the signing and ratification of the Convention against torture is an important factor, but [there’s] still a lot to do.” Again, Vietnam continues to declare one thing to the world, but behind closed doors, will probably not hold itself accountable.

In 2010, Voice of Kampuchea Krom broadcasted interview with Ven. Thach Thuol who has been summoned many times by the Vietnamese authorities regarding to his connection with Venerable Kim Moul, a monk of the same temple, who was at the time was living in Sweden as a political asylum seeker. He was summoned to meet a government agent names “Phuong” whom proposed Venerable Thach Thuol to “work for him as a secret agent [,] report where Venerable Kim Moul is currently living in Sweden and write monthly report for him. If Ven. Thach Thuol agrees, he would receive monthly salary and a mobile phone.” He refused and voiced concerns for his and his sangha’s safety in Soc Trang. Two years later the VBS announced “that the two men had used phones and the Internet to give interviews and transmit ‘fabricated information’ about state policy toward Vietnam’s ethnic Khmer Krom minority” and ordered for Thoul to disrobe (http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/monks-05172013155156.html). They sent word out to 70 different pagodas for them not to recognize his religious authority as a monk (Khemara). At last, on May 16th the Vietnamese authorities came to take Thoul by force. There were about 100 plainclothes officers, he recalls to Radio Free Asia. Thankfully, they were halted at the entrances by fellow monks and local followers. Days later, Ven. Lieu Ny and him, along were 2 young students were caught at the border on after an attempt to flee the country. Just two days before their capture they published a video testimony appealing to the world to help protect them. As their trial was set shortly after, their families were only notified of their arrest the week of, giving them no time to find legal representation. They were convicted and remain imprisoned to this day. There has been no word on Thoul’s condition while the KKF

Thach Thoul attempted escape was towards Cambodia, but he would have undoubtedly be forced to flee Cambodia as well. Human Rights Watch reports rights abuses of Khmer Krom people who’ve moved to Cambodia “where they remain among Cambodia’s most disenfranchised groups. Because they are often perceived as ethnic Vietnamese by Cambodians, many Khmer Krom in Cambodia face social and economic discrimination. The Cambodian government has repeatedly stated that it considers the Khmer Krom to be Cambodian citizens. Yet the Cambodian authorities often react harshly when Khmer Krom become too critical of the Vietnamese government, a close ally of the Cambodian government” (Human Rights Watch). If this dynamic did not make sense, it’s because it doesn’t. And where one finds inconsistencies is where one can find the truth. These The *Khmer* Krom move to Cambodia, where they are seen as Vietnamese and discriminated against however, and when Khmer Krom monks protest at the Vietnamese embassy in Cambodia is followed by police brutality. Why is a country whose people dislike the Vietnamese such close allies with their government?

There exist two parties in Cambodia: The Cambodia Peoples’ Party (CPP), which is the ruling party, and the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). The CPP is the government established after 1979, when the Pol Pot regime was toppled by Vietnamese occupation and a new ‘democratic’ party was installed. Placed at its head is Prime Minister Hun Sen a former Khmer Rouge officer, making him the world’s longest standing head of state. However, to many Cambodians, especially followers of the CNRP, Hun Sen is what the New York Times refers to as “Vietnam’s ‘Puppet’” The Khmer Krom simply have no place to call home (Erlanger).

The State Department designated “Vietnam from 2004 to 2006 as a ‘country of particular concern,’ or CPC for systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief” The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF “note[s] that productive diplomatic discussion and tangible improvements took place without apparent disruption of progress on other issues in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. Progress included the fulfillment of a bilateral agreement to release prisoners and ban forced renunciations of faith, and to enact a religion law” (USCIRF). In 2006 Vietnam’s CPC or blacklist status was removed due to the progress made by the U.S. prioritization on religious freedom. Referencing the State Department’s 2012 report, USCIRF states that Vietnam continues to commit significant violations of freedom of religion and given these ongoing violations, USCIRF continues to recommend that Vietnam be put back on the blacklist. Ending the report by saying, “Frankly, it is difficult to see how we should and would make any different recommendation” (Schwartz).

It’s interesting to see the development of U.S.-Vietnam relations throughout the period of Vietnam’s blacklist and thereafter. WikiLeaks released encrypted State Department communications of U.S. officials being fed misinformation by Vietnam regarding religious freedom and consequently making wrongful policy decisions. These officials were largely responsible for the delisting of Vietnam as a CPC. When former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Hanoi, she raised concerns over the detention of lawyers, activists, and journalists, yet “concern over continued religious persecution was absent from her agenda” (Benge). Trade seems to have a higher priority than human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam. Clinton told the Foreign Minister in regard to trade, “we're working on expanding it through a far-reaching, new regional trade agreement called the Trans-Pacific Partnership" The Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, is in short a series of trade agreements to increase our economic influence over China in the Asia-Pacific. The TPP looms evermore as China’s economy is in flux and Vietnam tries once more to assert itself as a superpower in Asia. However, if the TPP goes through, they’ll now have the Americans on their side. How have we come from waging war in the name of democracy against communism, the scourge of the earth, to an alliance because an enemy of my enemy is now my friend? In its more recent annual reports on human rights violations around the world, the State Department has chosen not to include religious freedom anymore, a fundamental right of our Founding Fathers.

Human rights work and diplomacy is slow progress, while victories like the importation of Vens. Danh Tol and Kim Moul come few and far between. Still, they are not free men. When Tol was asked if he would return home he said “No. I can do more if I stay here. Here, I can speak out against the government and not be jailed” However, like many expatriates of Kampuchea Krom, Tol would prefer to go back to his home country, but can’t for fear of attack because of his ethnic identity and the religion he practices. Like many monks and asylum seekers turned activists, America is merely his platform. From here they teach Cambodian-Americans Khmer language, offer spiritual services for laypeople, write publications on Khmer Krom news, and attend human rights conferences. Every day, the Theravadan monks of Kampuchea Krom must fight to preserve a peaceful religion. They are the holders and keepers of the heart and soul of Khmer people. Their wats are community centers for marginalized and landless laypeople who face the same threats by the Vietnamese authorities.

Since the Vietnamese migration out of China to the French succession of Kampuchea Krom to Vietnam in 1949 to the Vietnamese siege of Cambodia’s capital in 1979 to now, one can see an age-old plan unraveled. The Vietnamese government has only one religion: communism. All others are ‘free’ after jumping through hoops of registration to acquire any sense of legitimacy only to fall into an iron grip of complete authority. The government has chosen to target Theravadan Buddhism, recognizing it as vital to the Khmer Krom identity, in order to disenfranchise the ethnic Khmer Krom community. Their influence reaches deep into the Cambodian government as well with their puppet head of state, rendering even Cambodia as no home for Khmer Krom people. These people have no authority to call on. As activists work diligently in the free world, they are also working against the giant that is America. With the Trans-Pacific Partnership in the works, religious freedom has lost all priority to the Department of State, so much so as to remove it from its annual report. Congress continues to urge the State Department to relist Vietnam as a CPC, to no avail. Vietnam continues to be one of the worst violators of religious freedoms, yet has hosted Visak for United Nations Day. The complicity among these parties is baffling. Who if anyone at all is on the side of human rights? The future of the Khmer Krom people reflects a grim past as there’s yet to be a turning point for a people in search of peace. If things continue the way they do, it will most certainly be the death of a people, and of a nation.

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Edit-Story of the soc trang demonstration.

Add-Host UN’s day: Visak

Introduction

Edit-Thesis:political agenda

History of KK

Edit- Land

Edit- People

Religion & culture

Brief of communist idealogy/constitional religious right

Edit-Only works in theory fails in practice—

Communist methodology

official registration

regulation-state shanga

defrocking

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SS scapegoats & seeding spies

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Instances

Survivors

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Thoul

Others

Christian spy

Wat cinci bought out

Complicity with Cambodia & US

Cambodia hates khmer krom

People with nowhere to call home

Cambodian gov is a puppet Seeded with Vietnamese or viet-bought officials

US removes Vietnam from blacklist - file:///C:/Users/Dinh%20Family/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.microsoftedge\_8wekyb3d8bbwe/AC/#!001/MicrosoftEdge/User/Default/WebNotes/Microsoft-Edge-Web-Notes-Vietnam-R.html

Wants to promote TPP, neglects human rights

Ramifications

Defrocking and disestablishment of base stability for activist. Detainment removes spiritual leaders, who are the educated, the holders of religion, teachers of language, and part of religious ceremonies. Seeding of bad monks cause community distrust of Buddhism and rejection – relate to seeding of Vietnamese spies in Pol Pot regime, causing distrust and led to Killing Field Genocide.

The death of a nation

Thach Ngoc Thach, director of the Khmer Kampuchea Krom Federation, told VOA that a form of torture for prisoners of the Khmer Cambodia below is how the racial animosity and different prisoners Vietnam.

He added:

We see that this is how vindictive, which showed clearly that a racist Although the Commission has pointed out several times that the infrastructure Vietnamese government to do anything on human non-racist way.

"The official documents we publish today lay bare the efforts by the Vietnamese government to silence critics," said Adams. "This is bare-knuckled, indefensible political repression."--------------- https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/01/21/vietnam-halt-abuses-ethnic-khmer-mekong-delta