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Singapore | 11 August 2022

The Roots of Cambodia's Actions against Illegal Vietnamese Immigrants

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Since 2015, the Cambodian government has been addressing the politically and diplomatically sensitive issue of illegal Vietnamese immigrants through methods such as documentation, deportation, eviction, relocation and registration. In this picture, Cambodia's Prime minister Hun Sen (R) and his then Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Xuan Phuc (L) inspect the guard of honour during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi on 4 October 2019. Photo: Nhac NGUYEN/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since 2015, the Cambodian government has been addressing the politically and diplomatically sensitive issue of illegal Vietnamese immigrants through methods such as documentation, deportation, eviction, relocation and registration.
- These actions are the ruling Cambodian People's Party's response to the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party's successful politicisation of anti-Vietnamese sentiments among Cambodian voters.
- The Cambodian government's Vietnamese immigrant policies also serve the ecological development goal of improving Cambodian water systems, as well as beautifying and developing its urban areas.
- Given Cambodia's asymmetrical power relationship with Vietnam and the sensitive issue of illegal Vietnamese immigrants, the closer bond between Cambodia and China serves as an enabling factor for the Cambodian government in adopting tougher policies.
- The Cambodian government's measures will however neither reduce the fear held by many Cambodians of Vietnamese domination nor will they alleviate the potential diplomatic fallout.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, the Cambodian government, under the control of the Cambodian People's Party (CCP), has taken measures to address the long-standing issue of Vietnamese immigrants living in Cambodia. These measures include documentation, deportation, eviction, relocation and re-registration of Vietnamese immigrants. Against this backdrop, extant literature has focused on controversies over alleged violations of the human rights of Vietnamese immigrants, their liminal citizenship status, and anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia.¹ Unlike these works, this article offers a preliminary analysis of under-discussed factors that underlie the Cambodian government's current policies towards Vietnamese immigrants. These include: (1) the Cambodian National Rescue Party's (CNRP) successful politicisation of anti-Vietnamese sentiments among voters; (2) Cambodia's improved state capacity and changing needs; and (3) Cambodia's narrowing power gap with Vietnam due to increasingly close Sino-Cambodian relations.

BRIEF HISTORY OF ETHNIC VIETNAMESE IN CAMBODIA

The influence of the Vietnamese court over Cambodia in the 1600s made possible the settlement of ethnic Vietnamese in the country. French colonisation of Indochina in the 19th century further facilitated the movement of ethnic Vietnamese into Cambodia. Particularly, French colonial policies of agro-industry development and administrative consolidation led to the recruitment of ethnic Vietnamese to staff the French colonial bureaucracy and work in the rubber plantations in Cambodia.² The French colonial administration also encouraged Vietnamese traders to settle in Cambodia. A significant Vietnamese population continued to live in Cambodia following Vietnam's independence from France in 1945. The Vietnamese community in Cambodia subsequently grew, to approximately 450,000 members by 1970.³ Between 1970 and 1979, this minority group faced state-sanctioned anti-Vietnamese campaigns, which led to the expulsion of approximately 200,000 ethnic Vietnamese to Vietnam under the Lon Nol regime (1970-1975). Still worse, the ultranationalist Khmer Rouge government forced many to flee to Vietnam and undertook ethnic cleansing policies against those remaining in Cambodia.⁴

Following the Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia in 1979, many ethnic Vietnamese who had previously been forced to leave Cambodia returned. In addition to these returnees were new Vietnamese immigrants who moved in to settle in Cambodia. The Khmer resistance movements against the Vietnamese army and the new People's Republic of Kampuchea claimed that a "settler colonization of Cambodia" was occurring. Hoang Minh Vu contests such a claim, arguing that the movement of people from Vietnam to Cambodia in the 1980s was the outcome of a "refugee crisis" caused by an "economic collapse" associated with "draconian economic, monetary, land, and political reforms" imposed on southern Vietnam by the communist government following the unification of the country in 1975.⁵ He further states that "There was no need for the Vietnamese government to institute a policy of settler colonialism; people were simply voting with their feet."⁶ This is the locus of the controversy over ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Independent sources estimate the number of ethnic

Vietnamese living in Cambodia to be between 400,000 and 700,000.⁷ These immigrants engage in diverse economic activities such as trade, retail, carpentry, mechanical repair, restaurants, construction, and fishing. A large number of them live on floating houses on rivers and lakes, particularly the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong and Bassac Rivers. There is a widespread belief among Cambodians that most ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia are not descendants of those who had lived in the country before the war. Rather, they were those who accompanied the invading Vietnamese army in 1979 and their descendants, or more recent immigrants.

Since 2015, the Cambodian government has identified approximately 70,000 Vietnamese who possess “irregular administrative documents”.⁸ The new immigration laws require that these people apply with a fee for a residency card, which is subject to renewal every two years; in year seven, they are eligible to apply for citizenship.⁹ The Cambodian government has also tightened its immigration policies and, since 2015, has expelled 5,223 Vietnamese from the country.¹⁰

CAUSES OF ACTIONS AGAINST ILLEGAL VIETNAMESE IMMIGRANTS

Countering the CNRP’s Rise

Since Cambodia allowed multi-party elections in 1993, ethnic Vietnamese have become one of the core campaign issues for opposition parties. They link the presence of ethnic Vietnamese to Vietnam’s alleged broader intention of “swallowing Cambodia”. Such claims resonate among many Cambodians, given the long history of animosity between the two countries and Cambodia’s loss of territory to Vietnam’s southward expansion. Given the absence of exit polls and survey data on voters’ behaviour, the effectiveness of opposition electoral appeals to anti-Vietnamese sentiments is unknown. However, the International Republican Institute’s (IRI) multiple-year surveys on Cambodians’ opinions about the future of Cambodia allow us to gauge the general appeal of the opposition parties’ anti-Vietnamese rhetoric. The IRI surveys indicate that many Cambodians considered “illegal immigrants” a pressing issue for Cambodia, to a level as salient as issues of corruption, inflation, nepotism, poverty, and the environment.¹¹ Moreover, in 2013, 17 percent of respondents to the IRI Survey ranked “illegal immigrants” as the reason for Cambodia moving in the wrong direction.¹²

Therefore, the issue of Vietnamese illegal immigrants has been, in Dr. Kin Phea’s words, “a political wound for the CPP”.¹³ Arguably, the CPP government’s indecisiveness in addressing the issue offered the opposition the pretext to label the CPP “a Vietnamese puppet”; this cost the party much popular support in the 2013 national election.¹⁴

It should be noted that prior to the 2013 national election, the issue of Vietnamese immigrants on the CPP’s electoral performance was mitigated by several other factors. The first was divisions within the opposition camp. These, compounded by an electoral system that favours large political parties, offered the CPP an advantage in capturing votes.

The second factor was the CPP’s institutional and resource strength which permitted it to maintain nationwide and top-down patronage networks, and thus electoral domination.¹⁵ In the

years leading up to the 2013 national election, however, rapid socio-economic transformation lessened the CPP's domination. Population growth in recent decades meant that youth constituted the majority of voters. Being more educated, more politically active and engaged, and more mobilized as a result of information technology, Cambodian youth began to seek changes to the status quo dominated by the CPP.¹⁶

The third factor was the merger of the Human Rights Party and the Sam Rainsy Party into the CNRP—a union that offered the opposition a united rural and urban front. These changes, compounded by the CNRP's intensified politicisation of the issue of Vietnamese immigrants, boosted the party's electoral gains in the 2013 general election to a level that shocked the CPP. Particularly, in areas with large numbers of Vietnamese immigrants, the CNRP outperformed the CPP.¹⁷ It was the first time that an opposition party was able to expand into and deepen its electoral footprints in rural Cambodia, the CPP's stronghold.¹⁸ It was at this critical juncture that the CNRP became a clear and present danger to the CPP. These conditions forced the CPP to initiate new policies to strengthen state capacity, promote economic development, and address the issue of Vietnamese immigrants.

Development Goals and Increased State Capacity

If Vietnamese immigrants had been only an electoral issue for the CPP, then logically any measure to address it would not have been necessary following the dissolution of the CNRP in 2017. However, as suggested earlier, one of the factors that undermined the CPP's electoral performance in 2013 was Cambodians' dissatisfaction with the CPP's patronage-based development and its low state capacity. With the dissolution of its main political opponent—the CNRP—the CPP realised that its future legitimacy and thus political domination rest on its ability to strengthen state capacity and promote broad-based economic development, improve social order, and strengthen national sovereignty. To improve state capacity, the CPP has focused on strengthening state revenue mobilisation. Tax revenue increased substantially from 12.1 per cent of GDP in 2013 to 15.25 per cent in 2016, 19.4 per cent in 2019,¹⁹ and 20 per cent in 2020.²⁰ Indicators of governance effectiveness significantly improved by 46.15 percentage points (from -0.91 in 2013 to -0.46 in 2020).²¹ Such increased state capacity allows the government to address its development goals, including improving Cambodian water systems, beautifying cities and towns, and restoring order so as to attract investment.

Beginning in 2012, as part of the government's development plan, Phnom Penh and provincial capital cities were required to enter a contest for the most "beautiful city". Provincial governors' and city mayors' potential promotions rested in part on their provinces' success in beautifying their provincial capitals. Furthermore, it should be noted that "cleaning up" the floating communities (that were primarily but not exclusively ethnic Vietnamese) in Phnom Penh opened up prime real estate areas along the river for investment, particularly from China. In Kampong Chhnang, floating communities are also located in the vicinity of the provincial capital. "Messy" floating communities, whose members raised fish in cages, allegedly contaminated the areas' ecosystems, violated people's sense of orderliness, and consequently reduced the value of nearby properties and investments.²² These floating communities included ethnic Vietnamese, Khmer, and Cham (also called Khmer Islam). Thus, city development and environmental improvement necessitated the eviction and relocation of Vietnamese people along rivers and lakes.

Sino-Cambodian Relations: An Enabling Factor

Given the historically close ties between the two countries' ruling parties—the CPP and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)—Vietnam and Cambodia have maintained comprehensive cooperation on key issues, including trade, security and diplomacy.²³ Two-way trade turnover has been increasing steadily since the early 2000s. Vietnamese exports to Cambodia grew from US\$81 million in 2000 to US\$182 million in 2005, US\$501 million in 2010, US\$1.682 billion in 2017 and US\$2.725 billion in 2019.²⁴ Cambodia's exports to Vietnam also increased substantially from US\$20 million in 2000 to US\$46 million in 2005, US\$96 million in 2010, US\$326 million in 2017, and US\$359 million in 2019.²⁵ By 2019, Vietnam had become Cambodia's third-largest trading partner after China and the United States.²⁶ Vietnam is currently the third largest investor in Cambodia after China and South Korea.²⁷

Diplomatically, the two countries have also maintained high-level party and government dialogues.²⁸ Vietnam is a key CPP security partner, providing assistance in terms of training and medical care for senior Cambodian military officers. During Cambodia's border conflicts with Thailand in 2008 and 2011, Vietnam provided security assistance—albeit limited in scope—in response to requests from the Cambodian government.²⁹ Moreover, the ruling parties of the two countries have worked closely to combat forces deemed “hostile” and “unfriendly” toward their respective governments.³⁰

At the same time, there are also issues that can potentially disrupt the seemingly close Vietnam-Cambodia relations. Apart from the issue of Vietnamese immigrants in Cambodia, some segments of the two countries' border have not been demarcated, allowing border disputes to persist. These are challenging issues within the context of the asymmetrical power relationship between the two countries. Since Vietnam is more powerful than Cambodia, the latter needs to exercise caution to avoid drawing reactions from the former in ways that could have a negative impact on Cambodia's security and economic interests. Such reactions could be Vietnam's non-cooperation on border issues or military training, for example.

But Cambodia's asymmetrical power relationship with Vietnam began to change in the early years of the 21st century when the rise of China provided new opportunities for Cambodia to balance against its more powerful neighbours, Vietnam and Thailand, and Western powers. China became Cambodia's natural ally given its economic potential and ideological appeal. Cambodia has also been a beachhead for China's soft-power projection into Southeast Asia.³¹ In 2010, China and Cambodia upgraded their relations to the level of a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. Consequently, the volume of two-way trade rose from US\$1.4 billion in 2010 to US\$9.53 billion in 2020.³² During the same period, China's aid to Cambodia rose from US\$54.1 million in 2010 to US\$420.56 million in 2020, while its investment in Cambodia jumped from just over US\$1 billion³³ in 2010 to US\$2.96 billion in 2019.³⁴ Sino-Cambodian military relations have also been strengthened, evidenced by increases in military aid, training and annual joint military exercises.³⁵ China also funded the renovation of Ream Naval Base, which has drawn much scrutiny and suspicion of China's geostrategic ambitions.³⁶ Apparently, closer Sino-Cambodian relations have provided Phnom Penh with more leverage, and enabled it to narrow its perceived power gap with Vietnam. Cambodia has therefore been able to reassert its sovereignty and tackle the sensitive issue of Vietnamese immigrants without being too concerned about reprisals from Vietnam.³⁷

The Vietnamese government has not publicly protested over the Cambodian government's immigrant policies. Rather, it has extended its support by assisting poor Vietnamese to pay the residency card fees, and creating employment opportunities for those resettled from Tonle Sap Lake through Vietnamese companies operating in Cambodia.³⁸ Arguably, the lack of public protests by the Vietnamese government suggests that Vietnam is concerned that confrontation with Cambodia over the issue might push the latter further into China's orbit. Given its ongoing territorial conflict with China in the South China Sea, and past efforts by China to encircle Vietnam through its alliances with Democratic Kampuchea, the Vietnamese government seems to fear history repeating itself.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam's past territorial expansion and wars with Cambodia have made ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia an explosive political issue, even reaching the level of state-sanctioned discrimination and massacre in the 1970s. The extent of the Cambodian public's satisfaction with their government's recent actions against Vietnamese immigrants, as well as the Vietnamese government's reactions, remain to be seen. If the 70,000 Vietnamese who have been granted temporary residency are denied citizenship status and deported to Vietnam, there will likely be a strong reaction from the Vietnamese government. However, many Cambodians will be frustrated if expulsions do not occur. The citizenship status of the thousands of Vietnamese living in Cambodia remains a controversial issue and therefore, anti-Vietnamese sentiments will continue to be salient in Cambodia for the foreseeable future.

However, the Cambodian government's recent policy of granting temporary residency to Vietnamese living in Cambodia with the possibility for them to become Cambodian citizens is a step in the right direction in resolving a long-standing and contentious issue.

It should be noted that such a policy is effective only when the governments of both Cambodia and Vietnam undertake two additional measures. First, the two governments need to strengthen joint efforts in patrolling their porous borders to combat the flow of new illegal Vietnamese immigrants into Cambodia. Second, the Cambodian government needs to strengthen the capacity of, and reduce the venality within its immigration agency.

ENDNOTES

¹ See, for example, Christoph Sperfeldt, "Minorities and statelessness: Social exclusion and citizenship in Cambodia." *International Journal On Minority And Group Rights* 27, no. 1 (2020): 94-120; Ben Mauk, "A People in Limbo, Many Living Entirely on the Water", *The New York Times*

Magazine, 28 March 2028, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/28/magazine/cambodia-persecuted-minority-water-refuge.html>.

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³ Ramses Amer, “The Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia: A Minority at Risk?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 16, No. 2 (1994), p. 214.

⁴ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁵ Hoang Minh Vu, “Vietnam’s Near Abroad? Vietnam-Cambodia Relations in Historical and Regional Perspective, 1975-present”, paper presented at the Annual Association of Asian Studies, March 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Minority Rights Group International, Cambodia: Ethnic Vietnamese, at <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/ethnic-vietnamese/>.

⁸ Ate Hekstra and Meta Kong, “Vietnamese in Cambodia: Stateless, discriminated and in fear of deportation”, *LICAS.NEWS*, 15 September 2015, <https://www.licas.news/2020/09/15/vietnamese-in-cambodia-stateless-discriminated-and-in-fear-of-deportation/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ General Department of Immigration, *Foreigner Deportation Statistics, 2015-2022*. Kheang Un’s personal communication.

¹¹ International Republican Institute, Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion, 30 November-15 December, 2011, at <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/201220May201020Survey20of20Cambodian20Public20Opinion2C20November203020E2809320December20252C202011.pdf>; 12 July-6 August, 2010, at [https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/2011 January 20 Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion, July 12-August 6, 2010.pdf](https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/2011%20January%20Survey%20of%20Cambodian%20Public%20Opinion,%20July%2012-August%206,%202010.pdf).

It should be noted that the survey does not explicitly refer to “illegal immigrants” as Vietnamese, but based on extant literature and the authors’ own research, it is certain that respondents equate “illegal immigrants” predominantly to illegal Vietnamese immigrants.

¹² International Republican Institute, “Survey of Public Opinion.” 12 January-February 2, 2013, at <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Cambodian20Poll20920Final20PUBLIC.pdf>.

¹³ Dr. Phea Kin, Director, International Relations Institute, Royal Academy of Cambodia, interview with authors, 7 April, 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kheang Un, *Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019). See also David Craig and Kimchoeun Pak, “Party Financing of Local Investment Projects: Elite and Mass Patronage”, in *Cambodia’s Economic Transformation*, edited by Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS, 2011), pp. 219-244.

¹⁶ Caroline Hughes and Netra Eng. “Facebook, Contestation and Poor People’s Politics: Spanning the Urban–Rural Divide in Cambodia?” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 3 (2019): 365-388.

¹⁷ Dr. Phea Kin, interview with authors via Zoom, 7 April 2022.

¹⁸ Kheang Un, *Cambodia*.

¹⁹ World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GC.TAX.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=KH> (accessed 20 April 2022).

²⁰ Ministry of Economy and Finance, Annual Review Meeting, “Report on Monitoring and Evaluation of Implementing PFMRF and Q4 and 2021 PFMRF Program.” March 23, 2022 (power point presentation, in Kheang Un’s possession).

²¹ These indicators measure “perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies”. The score ranges from -2.25 (weak) to +2.25 (strong). For more details, see World Bank, Worldwide

Governance Indicators, at <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Documents> (accessed 20 April 2022).

²² Cambodian researcher, interviews with authors via Zoom, 03 April 2022.

²³ Steve Heder, “Cambodia–Vietnam: Special Relationship against Hostile and Unfriendly Forces.” In *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2018, edited by Malcolm Cook and Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), pp. 113–32.

²⁴ World Integrated Trade Solution, Cambodia, at <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KHM/StartYear/2015/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL/Partner/VNM/Product/all-groups> (accessed 20 March 2022).

²⁵ World Integrated Trade Solution, Cambodia, at <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KHM/StartYear/2015/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL/Partner/VNM/Product/all-groups> (accessed 20 April 2022).

²⁶ World Integrated Trade Solution, Cambodia, at https://www.google.com/search?q=cambodia+largest+trading+partners&rlz=1C1HIJC_enUS838US838&oq=Cambodia+largest+trading+&aqs=chrome.0.0i512j69i57j0i390i3.8320j1j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (accessed 20 April 2022).

²⁷ U.S. State Department of State, 2021 Investment Climate Statements: Cambodia, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-investment-climate-statements/cambodia/#:~:text=Investment%20into%20Cambodia%20is%20dominated,by%20the%20end%20of%202020> (accessed 20 April 2022).

²⁸ Heng Kimkong, “Cambodia-Vietnam Relations: Key Issues and The Way Forward,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no 36, 2022, 12 April 2022, at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-36-cambodia-vietnam-relations-key-issues-and-the-way-forward-by-kimkong-heng/> (accessed 20 April 2022).

²⁹ Chanborey Cheunboran. *Cambodia’s China Strategy: Security Dilemmas of Embracing the Dragon*. Routledge, 2021.

³⁰ Heder, “Cambodia–Vietnam.”

³¹ Jing Jig Luo and K. Un, “Cambodia: Hard Landing for China’s Soft Power?” *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue 2020, no. 111, 6 October 2020, at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_111.pdf (accessed 22 April 2022).

³² OEC, Cambodia/China, at <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/khm/partner/chn?redirect=true> (accessed 21 April 2022).

³³ Prak Chanthul, “China Pumps Up Cambodia Economy, but at What Cost?” *Reuters*, 05 April 2011, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-56123620110405> (accessed 26 April 2022).

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³⁶ Ellen Nakashima and Cate Cadell, “China Secretly Building Naval Facility in Cambodia, Western Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/06/06/cambodia-china-navy-base-ream/>.

³⁷ Cambodian Researcher, interview with authors via Zoom, 03 April 2022.

³⁸ Hoang Minh Vu, interview with authors, 3 October 2019. See also Kheang Un and Jing Jing Luo, “Cambodia in 2019: Entrenching One Party Rule and Asserting National Sovereignty in the Era of Shifting Global Geopolitics.” In *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2020, edited by Malcolm Cook and Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), pp. 117-134.

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