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**CAMBODIAN POLITICAL PARTIES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE  
ETHNIC VIETNAMESE IN CAMBODIA: A STUDY OF INTER-PARTY  
CONFLICT IN CAMBODIA, 1993-2018**

***ATITUDES DOS PARTIDOS POLÍTICOS CAMBOYANOS EM  
RELAÇÃO AOS VIETNAMITAS ÉTNICOS NO CAMBOJA: UM  
ESTUDO DO CONFLITO INTERPARTIDÁRIO NO CAMBOJA, 1993-  
2018***

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**ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** This article aims to clarify the attitudes of Cambodian political parties towards the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia during the period of 1993-2018. Based on this, the article seeks to elucidate the conflict among Cambodian political parties concerning the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia in the National Elections held from 1993 to 2018.

**Method:** A qualitative analysis encompassing discourse analysis, historical analysis, and political event analysis was conducted through the utilization of a literature review and typical case studies regarding the attitudes of Cambodian political parties towards the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, thereby illuminating the conflict among Cambodian political parties in the parliamentary elections held from 1993 to 2018.

**Results:** Following 1993, the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia became a subject of debate in Cambodian politics, particularly concerning the anti-Vietnamese sentiment held by many political parties. The anti-Vietnamese sentiment of extremist ethnic groups in Cambodia developed into a strong anti-Vietnamese wave during the National Assembly elections, which caused social division in Cambodia and negatively impacted the image and development of the country, as well as affecting the bilateral relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam.

**Conclusions:** The study concludes that the ruling elite, particularly the CPP – the ruling party in Cambodia – needs to introduce reasonable policies that reflect the spirit of national harmony represented in various political parties, thereby reducing discrimination against ethnic groups, including the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Stabilizing the lives and identity of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia will help



them feel secure and contribute more to the country's development, thereby helping to strengthen and develop the bilateral relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Cambodia, The ethnic Vietnamese, Political parties.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este artigo visa esclarecer as atitudes dos partidos políticos cambojanos em relação à etnia vietnamita no Camboja durante o período de 1993 a 2018. Com base nisso, o artigo busca elucidar o conflito entre os partidos políticos cambojanos em relação à questão da etnia vietnamita no Camboja nas eleições nacionais realizadas entre 1993 e 2018.

**Método:** Uma análise qualitativa abrangendo análise do discurso, análise histórica e análise de eventos políticos foi conduzida por meio da utilização de uma revisão de literatura e estudos de caso típicos sobre as atitudes dos partidos políticos cambojanos em relação aos vietnamitas étnicos no Camboja, iluminando assim o conflito entre os partidos políticos cambojanos nas eleições parlamentares realizadas de 1993 a 2018.

**Resultados:** Após 1993, a questão da etnia vietnamita no Camboja tornou-se um tema de debate na política cambojana, particularmente em relação ao sentimento antivietnamita de muitos partidos políticos. O sentimento antivietnamita de grupos étnicos extremistas no Camboja transformou-se em uma forte onda antivietnamita durante as eleições para a Assembleia Nacional, o que causou divisão social no Camboja e impactou negativamente a imagem e o desenvolvimento do país, além de afetar as relações bilaterais entre o Camboja e o Vietnã.

**Conclusão:** O estudo conclui que a elite dominante, em particular o CPP – o partido governista no Camboja – precisa implementar políticas razoáveis que reflitam o espírito de harmonia nacional representado em vários partidos políticos, reduzindo assim a discriminação contra grupos étnicos, incluindo os vietnamitas étnicos no Camboja. Estabilizar a vida e a identidade da comunidade vietnamita no Camboja os ajudará a se sentirem seguros e a contribuir mais para o desenvolvimento do país, contribuindo assim para o fortalecimento e o desenvolvimento da relação bilateral entre o Camboja e o Vietnã.

**Palavras-chave:** Vietnã, Camboja, Vietnamitas étnicos, Partidos políticos.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Through the survey of ancient sources, the contact between the Vietnamese and the Khmer peoples dates back to the 13th century. By the end of the 16th century, Chenla Chan Lap (present-day Cambodia) entered a period of decline due to civil war and the constant threat of invasion from Siam. In this context, the Nguyen lords



employed various diplomatic methods to influence the Cambodian government (Nguyen, 2010, pp. 39-56). As a result, the Nguyen lords expanded their influence into the Southern region and the Dang Trong territory. From the early 19th century, following its establishment, the Nguyen dynasty maintained significant influence over Cambodia. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, Vietnam engaged in fierce competition with Siam to maintain its influence in Cambodia. During this period, many Vietnamese people migrated to Cambodia to settle (Dinh, 2020; Duong, 2006, pp. 17-26). Since the mid-19th century, France has acted as a protectorate over Cambodia. During the colonial exploitation of Indochina, the colonial government recruited many Vietnamese to work in Cambodia (Goscha, 2008). The number of Vietnamese in Cambodia increased rapidly. In 1936, the protectorate government recorded 191,000 Vietnamese living in Cambodia (Jeffrey, 1981, p. 69). During the period from 1945 to 1954, the Vietnamese continued to settle and work in Cambodia. Since 1954, the Cambodian government's perspective on the ethnic Vietnamese minority has been shaped by its diplomatic relations with both the Northern (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and Southern (Republic of Vietnam) regimes.

After 1954, the Cambodian government's attitude toward the ethnic Vietnamese minority was influenced by its diplomatic relations with both the Northern (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and Southern (Republic of Vietnam) regimes. Following Lon Nol's rise to power in 1970, the Khmer Republic implemented an anti-Vietnamese policy in Cambodia, which resulted in many Vietnamese leaving Cambodia for Vietnam. By 1975, an estimated 400,000 Vietnamese had returned to South Vietnam, leaving approximately 200,000 in Cambodia (Wain, 1981, p. 48). During the period from 1975 to 1978, the Democratic Kampuchea government enforced a hostile policy toward both Vietnam and the Vietnamese people in Cambodia (Abuza, 1995, pp. 433–445). Approximately 170,000 Vietnamese people in Cambodia were expelled by the Khmer Rouge to Vietnam, while the remaining 30,000 were killed, became ill, or starved to death. Under the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese community in Cambodia was nearly annihilated (Amer, 2013, pp. 88-89). After Vietnam helped Cambodia overthrow the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and establish the People's Republic of Kampuchea on January 7, 1979, the Vietnamese community in Cambodia was restored (Chou, 1992, pp. 33–47).



After the Paris Agreement on Cambodia was signed on October 23, 1991, Cambodia entered a new period of development. The relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia also evolved within a new framework, influenced by changes in the regional situation and the development status of both countries. The number of Vietnamese people living and working in Cambodia increased as well. According to statistics from the Khmer-Vietnam Association, approximately 170,000 Vietnamese people reside in Cambodia, with more than 70% having been granted foreign resident cards. These individuals participate in activities within overseas Vietnamese associations, ensuring the legal conditions necessary for stable and long-term residence in Cambodia. In particular, Kampong Chhnang, one of the provinces bordering Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake, is home to a large number of Vietnamese people (Cuc, 2018, p. 4).

However, the issue of the Vietnamese population in Cambodia has become a complex matter in the relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia, primarily due to the hostile attitude of many political factions in Cambodia. Since 1993, Vietnam has become a target of resentment among Cambodian nationalists. Consequently, the Vietnamese people in Cambodia have also faced similar hostility. Anti-Vietnamese policies are often employed during election campaigns by extremist political parties in Cambodia to oppose the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) led by Hun Sen. It can be said that the attitude of Cambodian political parties toward the Vietnamese population in Cambodia has a significant impact on the relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vietnam and Cambodia have a long-standing friendly relationship. With a favorable geographical location and similar historical circumstances, Vietnamese people began to go to Cambodia to do business, settle down and develop their lives, gradually forming a Vietnamese community in Cambodia through many different forms. Ehrentraut (2011), through a survey of migration theories from the West, focuses on studying Vietnamese ethnic minority groups in Cambodia. Based on extensive field



research, Ehrentraut's article examines the historical and practical aspects of Cambodia's Vietnamese ethnic minority group as well as the ethnic exclusion policies and practices of the state and the Khmer majority group towards them. Sperfeldt (2019) also focuses on the case of the Vietnamese ethnic minority group in Cambodia, who are long-time residents, born and raised in Cambodia for many generations. Since their return to Cambodia in the early 1980s, individuals in this group have been considered 'immigrants' by the Cambodian government and their lives have been precarious ever since.

Canzutti (2022) conducts a case study of the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia, a significant portion of whom have been unable to obtain or retain Cambodian citizenship despite having lived in the Kingdom for generations. In doing so, Canzutti clearly analyzes the role of domestic and foreign actors in the precarious situation of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. One of the reasons for the precarious situation of the Vietnamese in Cambodia comes from the opposition of Cambodian political forces stemming from a long-standing anti-Vietnamese sentiment.

Amer's article (1994) addresses the situation of the Vietnamese in Cambodia, as well as the Cambodian government's attitudes and policies towards this minority group. Anti-Vietnamese discourse in Cambodia reflects the country's perception of Vietnam as a security threat, which led to continuous politically motivated attacks on the Vietnamese in Cambodia from the 1970s until the successful 1993 elections in Cambodia. In 2006, Amer further expanded his research by examining politically motivated attacks on the Vietnamese in the 1990s. According to Amer, these attacks posed a real threat to the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Oesterheld's (2014) study argues that anti-Vietnamese sentiment remains an uncomfortable reality in contemporary Cambodia. Some Cambodian political parties have capitalized heavily on anti-Vietnamese sentiments, leading to minor incidents of violence and a lengthy discussion of the resurgence of racism in contemporary Cambodia. Oesterheld argues that popular Khmer anti-Vietnamese sentiment is largely based on descriptions of the social history of the Mekong Delta in the early and mid-19th century and that it has undergone significant transformations throughout Cambodia's political history throughout the 20th century. Since then, different political factions have tended to use anti-Vietnamese racism to mobilize support from Cambodian voters.

By deciphering the history of Khmer xenophobia towards their Vietnamese neighbors, Oesterheld argues that contemporary Cambodian society continues to fail in its efforts to overcome the social legacy of decades of civil war and factional infighting. Also taking a historical approach, Soja (2020) demonstrates that the anti-Vietnamese narrative is often overstated given the actual scale of the problems that have arisen between these countries. It is also based on irrational concerns, old superstitions, and deeply ingrained stereotypes in Cambodian society. Despite this, anti-Vietnamese and xenophobic attitudes in Cambodia represent a larger trend of anti-Vietnamese sentiment that continues to pervade and greatly impact Cambodia's internal political situation.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

The study examines the attitudes of Cambodian political parties towards the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia since 1993. The paper mainly uses qualitative research methods by examining secondary data related to the research topic. Specifically, it utilizes discourse analysis by approaching the language in documents, speeches, or other forms of political communication to understand the views and attitudes of Cambodian political parties towards the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Furthermore, historical analysis is applied to examine historical events, developments, and political processes during the research period. This aims to clarify the impact of Cambodian political parties on the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia and provide context for the current situation. Finally, the method of content analysis, approaching major political events, is used to clearly explain the internal struggles of political parties in Cambodia on the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in this country.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1. PERIOD 1993-2011

After the complete withdrawal of Vietnamese volunteer troops from Cambodia



in September 1989, the Vietnamese community in Cambodia began to face waves of anti-Vietnamese sentiment from a segment of the Cambodian population. By the end of June 1992, anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia sharply increased, primarily from representatives of the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK) and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). These political factions increased pressure on the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to actively address the still significant Vietnamese influence in the country. In early July 1992, the Democratic Party of Cambodia began to incorporate the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia into its criticism of the United Nations, accusing UNTAC of being indifferent to what was perceived as a massive and illegal Vietnamese immigration (Amer, 2013). The Democratic Party of Cambodia's opposition to the Vietnamese community was also reflected in its efforts to limit the number of Vietnamese who could participate in the planned general elections. Specifically, this faction opposed the election law drafted by UNTAC and approved by the Supreme National Council on August 5, 1992, which still allowed Vietnamese in Cambodia to vote. Simultaneously, attacks by political groups on the Vietnamese community in Cambodia also escalated with the support of the PDK (Amer, 1994).

Following the elections at the end of May 1993, the political parties represented in the Constituent Assembly formed a joint provisional government—the Provisional National Government of Cambodia—to govern the country until a Constitution was passed. New legislation was enacted, and the Constituent Assembly was transformed into a legislative assembly. On July 1, 1993, the Constituent Assembly voted to approve the Provisional Government. Based on this, UNTAC forces began to withdraw from Cambodia, and the political situation in the country became temporarily stable. However, the "hostile" attitude of many political parties in Cambodia toward Vietnam in general, and the Vietnamese community in Cambodia specifically, persisted. Attacks by political parties and groups in Cambodia, which resulted in the deaths of many Vietnamese people, continued from July to August 1993. These attacks on the Vietnamese community in Cambodia only temporarily subsided after official protests from the Vietnamese government. In this context, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), formerly known as the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party (CPRP) and led by Hun Sen, strongly condemned the hostile acts and attacks on the Vietnamese



community in Cambodia. In fact, CPP leader Hun Sen sought to maintain good relations with Vietnam. At this time, in addition to the Vietnamese who had been naturalized due to long-term residence in Cambodia, many the ethnic Vietnamese still lived in Cambodia with very precarious legal status. For an extended period, the Cambodian legislature did not pass a nationality law to clarify the status of the ethnic Vietnamese but instead passed an immigration law that was used to deport ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. As a result, the status of many Vietnamese in Cambodia remained precarious (Berman, 1996, pp. 817-874).

In April 1994, during the official visit to Cambodia by Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, the two countries issued a Cambodia-Vietnam Joint Communiqué, which addressed the settlement of the Vietnamese issue in Cambodia in accordance with Cambodian and international law. According to the communiqué, both sides agreed that the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia would be treated like other nationals. However, on August 26, 1994, the Immigration Law passed by the Cambodian National Assembly raised concerns among the Vietnamese side, as many provisions of this law were seen as greatly disadvantaging the Vietnamese community in Cambodia (Law on Immigration, 1998, pp. 113–129). Subsequently, under the influence of several political parties, armed attacks on the Vietnamese community increased again in 1994, causing widespread confusion and fear among the Vietnamese population in Cambodia.

In January 1995, the First Prime Minister of Cambodia, His Royal Highness Prince Norodom Ranariddh, paid an official visit to Vietnam, providing an opportunity for the two countries to discuss the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia issue at the highest political level. The leaders of the two countries agreed to hold expert meetings to address the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. During the discussions, the Cambodian side pledged that Cambodia's Immigration Law would not be aimed at "confining or deporting en masse Vietnamese nationals." Cambodia also stated that it would "try to do everything" in accordance with Cambodian regulations and "within its capacity" to ensure the safety of Vietnamese nationals in Cambodia (Amer, 1997). The meetings of the expert-level working groups on the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, held in Phnom Penh (March 1995), Hanoi (July 1995), and Phnom Penh (July 1996), created a positive foundation for ensuring the rights of the ethnic



Vietnamese in Cambodia. These meetings achieved a number of positive outcomes. However, Vietnam repeatedly proposed that the two sides sign an agreement on expatriates, but Cambodia considered this unnecessary (Tran, 2019; Le, 2021).

At that time, hostility toward the Vietnamese in Cambodia from some political parties in the country had not ceased, most notably from the Democratic Party of Cambodia. The Vietnamese side strongly condemned this, prompting the Cambodian government to intervene and implement measures to protect the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Legal issues related to the legal basis and rights of other ethnic groups in Cambodia were also discussed and soon resolved. On October 9, 1996, the Cambodian Nationality Law was promulgated, specifying the criteria for obtaining Cambodian citizenship as well as the requirements that foreigners must meet in order to be naturalized (Nguyen & Sperfeldt, 2012, pp. 128-131). In November 1996, the Cambodian government initially issued temporary residence permits to Vietnamese individuals who had been present in the country before 1993. Despite this, anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, stirred by some political parties, continued to be strong, particularly in the form of armed attacks on Vietnamese communities. A notable example of this was the bomb attack on the Vietnam Volunteer Army memorial in Sihanoukville, which clearly demonstrated the deeply rooted anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia at that time (Amer, 2013). The Vietnamese government responded strongly to these hostile actions, recognizing that they could significantly affect the ongoing development of relations between the two countries.

After the "coup" that deposed Prince Norodom Ranariddh in July 1997, actual power was held by Prime Minister Hun Sen, which provided a foundation for the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia to improve positively. The CPP also condemned hostile actions against the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. This incident led to increased tensions within political parties in Cambodia, particularly among those opposed to the CPP, with the most notable reaction coming from the Democratic Kampuchea Party. During their struggle with the CPP, opposition parties often used the issue of Vietnam and the Vietnamese community in Cambodia as a means to pressure and incite Cambodian citizens to oppose Vietnam. The culmination of this was the anti-Vietnamese rhetoric employed by the opposition during the election campaign preceding the general election held on July 26, 1998, which caused concern



among the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Following the election, political tensions between the leading Cambodian parties intensified, making it difficult to form a coalition government, further exacerbated by anti-Vietnamese actions in Cambodia (Kiernan & Hughes, 2007). In general, anti-Vietnamese groups in Cambodia were quite diverse in composition, encompassing royalists, conservatives, liberals, and even communists, all of whom have either expressed or continue to express anti-Vietnamese views (Bertrand, 1998, p. 39).

After a new coalition government was established in Cambodia in November 1998 through a tense negotiation process, the CPP became the ruling party, and the political situation in Cambodia became more stable (Kheang, 2005). The new government and ruling party were more proactive in protecting the non-Khmer ethnic groups in Cambodia. In his speech to the National Assembly of Cambodia on the program of the new coalition government on November 30, 1998, Prime Minister Hun Sen made it clear that the new government would "absolutely prevent racial discrimination, which is an activity violating laws and against human rights" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1998, p. 2).

As a result, "hostile" armed attacks against the Vietnamese community in Cambodia also declined. From the end of 1998 to 1999, following Cambodia's accession to ASEAN with active assistance from Vietnam, the two countries' relations developed positively. A significant milestone in the development of bilateral relations was the visit to Cambodia by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Le Kha Phieu, in June 1999. This visit marked the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between the two countries. In the Joint Statement, both sides affirmed their commitment to developing bilateral relations under the motto of "good neighborly cooperation, traditional solidarity and friendship, long-term stability," based on "respect for independence, sovereignty, and each other's territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, non-use of force or threats of force, and the prohibition of any political or military forces using the territory of one country against the other, with equal cooperation for mutual benefit..." (Le, 1999).

Entering 2001, attacks against the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia decreased significantly, coinciding with the development of the Vietnam-Cambodia friendship during the first decade of the 21st century. In July 2003, the National Assembly



elections in Cambodia were successfully held, with the CPP remaining in power. After the influence of the Democratic Party of Cambodia diminished, the Royalist Party (FUNCINPEC) also accepted the influence of the CPP, which became the largest political party in Cambodia. It can be said that the 2003 election [almost] lacked the anti-Vietnamese rhetoric from opposition parties that had been present in previous elections.

During the election and leadership process, the CPP consistently portrayed Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Party's leaders as liberators who had played a key role in overthrowing the Khmer Rouge dictatorship and genocide, thereby earning the right to lead the country. As a result, the Cambodian people were presented as indebted to the party and encouraged to express gratitude toward it. The CPP also propagated the idea that any attempt to overthrow Prime Minister Hun Sen's government was reactionary, and that if the CPP were no longer in power, the country could once again fall into tyranny (Phu, 2020).

In its policies, the CPP has consistently paid attention to the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, firstly to maintain good relations with Vietnam, and secondly, to secure the votes of the Vietnamese constituency. On March 24, 2003, the Cambodian Ministry of Home Affairs officially recognized and licensed the operation of the Overseas Vietnamese Association in Cambodia, allowing the establishment of 19 branches across 19 of the country's 24 provinces (Vietnamese Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2011, p. 4). This provided a favorable legal condition for the Vietnamese community to operate and live legally, creating an open space for the deepening of bilateral relations between the two countries. In fact, while anti-Vietnamese activities still existed in Cambodia, they no longer manifested in the form of armed attacks (Albritton, 2004, p. 106).

After the Democratic Party of Cambodia gradually lost influence, negotiations between the CPP and FUNCINPEC led to the formation of a new coalition government in the summer of 2004, which did not involve the Vietnamese issue. During the period from 2004 to 2007, the CPP was quite successful in establishing basic political stability in Cambodia, which positively affected the stability of the Vietnamese community in the country. This outcome was further supported by high-level dialogues and negotiations between the governments of Vietnam and Cambodia.



In March 2009, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister and Chairman of the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, Nguyen Thanh Son, visited Cambodia. During a meeting with Cambodian Minister of Home Affairs Prum Sokha, Deputy Minister Nguyen Thanh Son expressed the wish that the Cambodian government would support and assist the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Minister Prum Sokha committed that the Cambodian government would consider and expedite the process of granting legal status to Vietnamese nationals. He stated, "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" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, 2009).

The issue of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia was also discussed during high-level visits between the two countries, specifically: the official visit to Cambodia by General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong (December 12, 2011), and the visit to Vietnam by King Norodom Sihamoni of Cambodia (September 2012). In the Joint Statement issued during his visit to Cambodia in December 2011, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong stated, "The Vietnamese side highly valued and thanked the government and people of Cambodia for their legal conditions for the Vietnamese people living in Cambodia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, 2011).

#### 4.2. PERIOD 2012-2018

Since 2012, the wave of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia has flared up again, fueled by a number of politicians and party leaders who sought to capitalize on the declining prestige of the ruling CPP. In particular, the emergence of the Cambodia National Salvation Party (CNRP), the major opposition party to the CPP, has contributed to a tense political atmosphere in Cambodia, inciting anti-Vietnamese sentiment. It can be said that, after the Democratic Party of Cambodia, the CNRP became the largest opposition party in Cambodia until 2017. Its leaders campaigned on anti-Vietnamese policies, even declaring that they would deport the Vietnamese if they were allowed to govern. Anti-Vietnamese and anti-immigrant rhetoric became a central focus for the CNRP. The party argued that the Cambodian government had

allowed too many Vietnamese to live in the country, expressing concern that Cambodia could become the second Kampuchea Krom (Kampuchea Krom refers to the Southeast and Southwest regions in present-day Vietnam) (Phu, 2002). Notably, Sam Rainsy, leader of the CNRP since 2012, became the central figure in promoting anti-Vietnamese ideology, particularly in opposition to Prime Minister Hun Sen and the ruling party.

Sam Rainsy, who has been the face of opposition to vehement anti-Vietnamese sentiment since the 1990s, frequently uses the term "yuon" to refer to the Vietnamese and, to a larger extent, to Vietnam. During his campaign to represent his party in the elections, Sam Rainsy openly used the issue of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia as a foundation for his political platform. In his 2008 election campaign, Sam Rainsy declared, "If I win this election, I will send yuon immigrants back home" (Magnuson, 2013). In a 2013 speech, he stated, "The yuons took land from the Khmer to kill the Khmer..." (Strangio, 2014). He also said, "In yuon companies, they only hire yuon managers, while Cambodians only work as workers" (Diplomat, 2014). Notably, during the 2013 election campaign, Sam Rainsy, as Chairman of the Cambodian National Salvation Party, declared, "If we are not careful, Cambodia will become part of Vietnam. Cambodia will become Kampuchea Krom, and we will become a province under the rule of Vietnam. My compatriots, this is our last chance. If we don't rescue our country, four or five years from now it will be too late. Cambodia will be full of Vietnamese, and we will become slaves of Vietnam" (Phu, 2002). This speech had a significant impact on reigniting anti-Vietnamese sentiment among Cambodians, which had cooled down in the previous decade.

Even Kem Sokha, co-founder of the CNRP when it merged with the Human Rights Party he led in 2012, has frequently expressed hateful statements against Vietnam, inciting anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. In 2014, Kem Sokha suggested that a stampede on a bridge in Phnom Penh during a local holiday in 2010, which resulted in 353 deaths and hundreds of injuries, was orchestrated by the Vietnamese as part of a plot to "eradicate the Khmer race, tradition, and culture" (Dara, 2014). Anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia was also evident during the 2013 National Assembly elections, when Vietnamese voters were prevented from voting, and numerous conflicts erupted between Khmer and



Vietnamese groups at polling stations. Those holding anti-Vietnamese views in Cambodia believe that Vietnam is "invading" Cambodia and that Hun Sen's government is, in fact, a puppet of Vietnam. They argue that Cambodia needs to be liberated from the legacy of the "Communists" during the 1979-1989 period, which, according to them, turned Cambodia into the "backyard" of Vietnam. From this perspective, all the problems in Cambodia today are rooted in Vietnam's prolonged domination of the country, with Hun Sen being seen as a puppet of the Vietnamese communist government (Hutt, 2021). The anti-Vietnamese rhetoric is often associated with the word "yuon," a term with a pejorative connotation used to refer to all Vietnamese people and is frequently employed by opposition parties in Cambodia for election campaigning purposes (Hughes, 2007).

It is noteworthy that the Cambodian National Salvation Party (CNRP), after its founding, particularly when Sam Rainsy served as the Party's Chairman, openly confronted the CPP led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, using historical "puppet" arguments—referring to Hun Sen as a "Vietnamese puppet"—to attack him (Widyono, 2007). In July 2013, after being pardoned by the Cambodian Royal Family, Sam Rainsy returned home with the message, "I have come home to rescue the country." He organized campaigning efforts in many localities across Cambodia, delivering speeches that criticized Prime Minister Hun Sen for corruption, mismanagement of the nation's resources, and for enabling the influx of illegal immigrants from Vietnam into Cambodia. During the 2013 election campaigns, CNRP leaders publicly accused Hun Sen of being a puppet of the Hanoi government, claiming that his power came not from the ballot box of the Cambodian people but from the bayonet of the Vietnamese (Phu, 2002). These actions were intended to undermine Hun Sen's image as a leader credited with overthrowing the Khmer Rouge regime, a narrative that the CPP frequently propagates. In response to statements that hurt the feelings and sentiments of both peoples, Phay Siphon, spokesperson for the Government Office of Cambodia, stated on August 13, 2013: "The Cambodian government regrets the provocative statements made during the election campaign by Mr. Sam Rainsy, which divided the peoples of Vietnam and Cambodia. Mr. Phay Siphon reaffirmed the Cambodian government's position: Vietnamese people have lived in Cambodia for many generations and possess the necessary documentation to be recognized as legal

Cambodian citizens, with full rights protected by law..." (Nguyen, 2021).

The use of the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia by opposition political parties to attack the CPP also affected the party's reputation. It can be observed that the CPP government's perceived "favoritism" in addressing the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia provided an opportunity for the opposition to label the CPP as a "puppet of Vietnam," which contributed to the party losing significant public support in the 2013 national election. Despite this, the CPP's influence remains strong in Cambodia. The CPP's institutional strength and resources enable it to maintain a nationwide, top-down patronage network, allowing it to dominate elections (Craig & Pak, 2011, pp. 219-244). Additionally, divisions within the opposition parties, combined with an electoral system that favors the major political parties, have consistently provided the CPP with an advantage in securing the people's votes (Jing & Kheang, 2022, pp. 4-5). As a result, the CPP ultimately emerged victorious in the 2013 election.

After their defeat in the election to the CPP, the CNRP continued to criticize the CPP, particularly its leader Hun Sen, contributing to serious internal divisions in Cambodia's politics. Since the beginning of 2014, under the influence of anti-Vietnamese sentiment, the opposition in Cambodia has gained momentum in many localities, resulting in direct attacks on Vietnamese communities. The Cambodian government condemned these actions and criticized the CNRP's anti-Vietnamese policies. On January 17, 2014, the *Phnom Penh Post* quoted the United Nations Special Envoy for Human Rights, Mr. Surya Subedi, who warned that the opposition CNRP was inciting anti-Vietnamese sentiment to attract voters and recruit more supporters. According to the newspaper, Mr. Subedi told CNRP leaders, "The dissemination of views inciting hatred, racism, as well as acts of violence or incitement against any race or group of people of color or of other ethnic origin, have no place in a democratic society" (Cao, 2015).

In August 2014, at the National Assembly, Prime Minister Hun Sen himself urged CNRP officials and their activists to stop mocking the government as a "puppet of Vietnam" and to call for "national harmony" and unification. While the CPP leadership pledged to introduce a legal settlement policy for Vietnamese immigrants, CNRP leaders promoted policies that discriminated against Vietnamese immigrants



and committed to expelling all "yuon" (Vietnamese) from Cambodian territory. These moves were aimed at gaining the support of Khmer voters, particularly young voters. In fact, the CPP's efforts to support the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, especially the new immigrants, later displeased a large portion of the Cambodian public, who held racist views, causing the CPP's prestige and influence to decline rapidly.

In August 2016, Cambodia's Interior Ministry announced that more than 160,000 immigrants were living in Cambodia without valid documentation, and the government stated that it would seek to provide them with an opportunity to stay. The opposition CNRP, however, campaigned for an expulsion order. A CNRP spokesman told *Cambodia Daily*, "If they don't have valid documents, it means they are residing illegally," and "they should return home" (Phu, 2002). This indicates that the CNRP's active use of racist discourse (targeting Vietnamese immigrants) reflects the party's inability to develop clear policies to effectively compete with the CPP. However, the CNRP's actions have created political complications, posed a risk of crisis, and, most notably, caused serious divisions within Cambodian society, threatening the direct interests of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia.

Billy Tai, a human rights consultant in Cambodia, said, "They [CNRP] don't develop appropriate policies to run for elections; they exploit anti-Vietnamese prejudices that have been deeply entrenched in Khmer thinking for generations, and unfortunately, it's working" (Paul, 2016). Cham Bunthet, a lecturer at Paññasatra University Cambodia and an official of the Grassroots Democracy Party, described the racist discourse of the CNRP aimed at the Vietnamese community in Cambodia as "childish and dangerous." However, according to Cham Bunthet, "this is a convenient political strategy. They don't have to worry about developing constructive policies and promoting them. This approach is difficult and costly. Secondly, the CNRP gains substantial financial support from overseas Cambodians by capitalizing on anti-Vietnam sentiment" (Paul, 2016). Despite this, the CNRP's fierce opposition to the CPP, directly led by Hun Sen, has made it a dangerous rival.

Through a series of charges related to alleged crimes, including sabotaging the country's politics and conspiring with foreign forces to carry out a coup against Prime Minister Hun Sen, the government decided to dissolve the CNRP. In November

2017, after President Kem Sokha was convicted of "treason," the Supreme Court of Cambodia issued a ruling to dissolve the CNRP for violating the law on political parties and engaging in activities opposing the election of the 6th National Assembly. Thus, the CNRP's "national salvation" journey came to an end. However, anti-Vietnamese political discourse and discrimination against the Vietnamese community have not ceased and remain a part of Cambodia's political identity today.

For the CPP, as the governing party, its policies toward the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia are more moderate. However, the CPP has always been under significant pressure regarding its relationship with Vietnam and the issue of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, both from opposition parties and from the public. It can be observed that the CPP's policies toward the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia are heavily influenced by the broader Vietnam-Cambodia relationship. This close relationship stems largely from the strong cooperation between the ruling parties of both countries—the CPP and the Communist Party of Vietnam. Despite this, the CPP is still compelled to implement several tough policies toward the Vietnamese community in Cambodia to appease ethnic groups with extreme anti-Vietnamese ideologies. In part, these harsh policies are also intended to demonstrate that Prime Minister Hun Sen's government is not a "puppet of Vietnam," as opposition parties in Cambodia frequently accuse.

Specifically, in 2017 and 2018, the Cambodian government launched a campaign to cancel "invalid identification documents," leading to the loss of Cambodian citizenship for about 70,000 people, the majority of whom were of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Tim Frewer, an expert on Cambodian studies, described the policy applied by the Phnom Penh government to the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia as "discriminatory." According to Tim Frewer's analysis, this issue stems from Cambodian politics, which are heavily influenced by nationalism and xenophobia, particularly efforts to marginalize the Vietnamese community in the country. He argued that this is the root cause of many of the unfair policies that the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have faced in recent years (Frewer, 2016).

The 6th National Assembly election in Cambodia, held in July 2018, resulted in an overwhelming victory for the CPP of Prime Minister Hun Sen. This was the first time the CPP won all seats in the National Assembly since the 1993 UN-sponsored



election, opening up new opportunities for the CPP to make important decisions for the country and its people. This development has brought positive development opportunities for the Cambodia-Vietnam relationship, as well as for the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After 1993, the issue of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia became a topic of debate within Cambodian politics, particularly in relation to the anti-Vietnamese views held by many political parties. This sentiment persisted throughout the 1990s, leading to significant concerns among the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, who faced considerable losses in terms of life and property due to armed attacks by anti-Vietnamese Cambodian groups associated with these political factions. The anti-Vietnamese wave and the associated threats to the Vietnamese community in Cambodia appeared to diminish during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The "non-discrimination" policies established by the Cambodian government after the 1998 elections, with the CPP in power, reflected a commitment to combating racism in Cambodian society. Part of this positive shift can be attributed to the growing diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia. However, as the second decade of the 21st century began, the anti-Vietnamese sentiment resurfaced, largely due to the involvement of anti-Vietnamese politicians—leaders of political parties with traditional anti-Vietnamese ideologies.

It can be said that the anti-Vietnamese sentiment of extreme nationalist groups in Cambodia, which develops into an anti-Vietnamese wave, will have counterproductive effects, dividing Cambodian society and negatively impacting the image and cultural development of the country. In this context, the Cambodian political elite, especially the leaders of political parties, play a central and pivotal role. After 1993, the process of national reconciliation in Cambodia began to unfold actively; however, this process not only needed to take place among the Khmer people but also among the ethnic communities in Cambodia, including the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. This is an important aspect for increasing awareness among the



Cambodian people about the growing spirit of national harmony, which is essential for creating stability and fostering development in Cambodia.

The challenge for the ruling elite, especially the CPP—the ruling party in Cambodia—is to adopt reasonable policies that reflect the spirit of national harmony, thereby reducing discrimination against ethnic groups, including the the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Additionally, policies that facilitate the deeper integration of the Vietnamese community into Cambodian society are also crucial. An appropriate solution to the issue of nationality is an important matter for the Cambodian authorities. The stabilization of life and identity will enable the Vietnamese community in Cambodia to feel secure and contribute more to the country's development. Not only from the Cambodian side, but I also believe that the Vietnamese government must maintain a strong relationship with Cambodia, regularly coordinating with the Cambodian government to protect the legitimate interests of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Sustaining good diplomatic relations with Cambodia is the most effective measure.

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