

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam

Out of sight

Continuing grinding poverty in Vietnam's minority regions is a liability for the Communist Party

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XU XEO GIA ekes out a living in Pho, a remote village in Vietnam's northern mountains. Mr Gia comes from the Hmong ethnic minority. He is grateful for the education and health-care subsidies that his family receives from the government. But he struggles on marginal land to raise livestock and grow rice. The odd \$25 he earns from selling a pig is just enough to clothe his children and keep creditors at bay. "Life is getting better," he says, "but not fast enough."



The same is true for many people from Vietnam's 53 ethnic minorities. They barely scrape by even as, in the cities, over two decades of economic growth has forged a car-buying middle class. Ethnic groups make up around 12m of Vietnam's population of 90m, but account for over two-fifths of the poor. They live mainly in the countryside, and sometimes high up in the mountains. They have higher illiteracy and school drop-out rates than the ethnic Kinh majority, which tends to treat minorities as an underclass. One study found that workers from ethnic minorities were paid up to a quarter less for the same work than their Kinh colleagues.

Conscious of widening disparity between Kinh and the rest of the population, the government has for years attempted to build roads, schools and hospitals in hinterlands where some of Vietnam's poorest ethnic groups live. Agricultural consulting and other forms of development assistance are pouring in. Le Quang Binh of iSEE, a human-rights group in Hanoi, says that, although government policies towards ethnic minorities have been patronising, the National Assembly, Vietnam's parliament, is drafting a raft of civil-rights laws that in theory could greatly improve their lot.

Many existing programmes for ethnic groups are certainly clunky. In Pho Mr Gia gets free fertiliser, but what he really wants is more pesticides to fight crop infestations. Elsewhere, piglets and rice seeds are distributed to mountaintop farms, yet the breeds and varieties are best-adapted to the hotter lowlands. School textbooks are mainly published in Vietnamese rather than in local languages. The disconnect seems rooted in a general aloofness—even racism—among the Kinh towards minorities. Vietnam’s state-controlled press is rife with ethnic stereotyping.

Just as worrying, Vietnam’s ethnic groups have ceded countless acres to Kinh settlers and developers, often with inadequate compensation. Land grabs are especially common in the north-west and central highlands, where state-affiliated firms often demand property concessions for mines, plantations and hydropower dams. Ethnic minorities there complain of beatings, arrests and harassment for affiliations with informal churches or underground political groups.

Among the most persecuted are the Montagnards, a largely Christian minority in Vietnam’s central highlands whose members have openly protested against land grabs and religious discrimination. Like the Hmong, the Montagnards may be targeted for repression in part because many of their parents and grandparents fought alongside American and South Vietnamese troops in the Vietnam war.

Any perceived minority challenges to Kinh hegemony are a “non-starter” for the government, says Stale Torstein Risa, a former Norwegian ambassador to Vietnam. The Communist Party of Vietnam considers ethnic minorities its top national-security priority, he argues, more important even than territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea, where Vietnam worries about Chinese encroachment. Another diplomat says the party practises “systematic discrimination and exclusion” against any ethnic minorities that appear to threaten its authority.

Perhaps, says Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch, the government keeps ethnic minorities out of the public eye lest they develop the kind of international profile—or separatist campaigns—that Tibetans and Uighurs from China have managed to carve out. The possibility is hard to prove, although it is true that the Vietnamese authorities prevent foreign charities and embassies from working in the more restless corners of the north-west and central highlands.

Still, the chief concern of most minorities is not to start revolution but to make ends meet. And they are struggling. Grinding poverty is painfully obvious in villages in the central highlands. At Diom B, where many are from the K’ho minority, Ma Duong, a farmer, says

that life has been hard ever since Kinh settlers colonised her family's land four decades ago. Now, rather than grow her own rice, she buys it out of the daily wage of \$6 that she earns working on Kinh-owned plantations. Her family's one-room bungalow has no running water. Local officials advised her to dig a well, but all her shovel hit was rock.

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