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CAMBODIAN POLITICAL PARTIES' ATTITUDES ON THE ETHNIC VIETNAMESE IN CAMBODIA: INTER-PARTY CONFLICT AND EVOLUTION (1993–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of ethnic Vietnamese residents in Cambodia's volatile political landscape post-1991 Paris Peace Agreements, focusing on inter-party conflicts from 1993 to 2018 elections. The article elucidates how Cambodian political parties' attitudes toward ethnic Vietnamese shape electoral strategies and contributes to political instability. The analysis draws on historical data, party platforms, and electoral rhetoric to assess the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and opposition parties' approaches to ethnic Vietnamese issues, particularly citizenship and legal rights. The study finds that the CPP adopts a pragmatic stance, balancing historical Vietnam ties with rising nationalism, while opposition parties leverage explicit anti-Vietnamese rhetoric to mobilize voters. This rhetoric often conflates Vietnamese citizens with long-term ethnic Vietnamese residents, fueling hostility and destabilizing politics. Such strategies intensify inter-party tensions, as parties exploit ethnic identities for electoral gains. The persistent use of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in electoral politics risks deepening social divisions and hindering national reconciliation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing Cambodia's political volatility and fostering inclusive policies that protect ethnic Vietnamese rights while curbing divisive rhetoric. This study highlights the need for dialogue to mitigate ethnic-based political strategies and promote stability. Future research should examine the socioeconomic impact of anti-Vietnamese rhetoric on Cambodia's Vietnamese community and assess the effectiveness of inclusive policies. These efforts aim to alleviate ethnic tensions, enhance social cohesion, and promote stable governance in Cambodia.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam, Cambodia, Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, Political Parties.

1. INTRODUCTION

Through the survey of ancient sources, the Vietnamese and Khmer peoples have been in contact since the 13th century. In the late 16th century, a significant number of Vietnamese people relocated to Cambodia and established settlements (Duong, 2006; Nguyen, 2010; Dinh, 2020). During the French colonial period, the Vietnamese continued to settle and work in Cambodia (Goscha, 2008; Jeffrey, 1981).

Since 1954, the Cambodian government's perspective on the ethnic Vietnamese minority has been shaped by its diplomatic engagement with the dual Vietnamese states the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North) and the Republic of Vietnam (South). Upon Lon Nol's ascent to power in 1970, the Khmer Republic implemented an anti-Vietnamese policy in Cambodia, which resulted in many Vietnamese leaving Cambodia to return to Vietnam (Wain, 1981). During the period from 1975 to 1978, the Democratic Kampuchea government enforced a hostile policy toward Vietnam. Many Vietnamese in Cambodia were expelled or killed, thus the Vietnamese diaspora in Cambodia was nearly annihilated (Abuza, 1995; Amer, 2013, pp. 88-89). Following Vietnam's aid in toppling the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and the founding of the People's Republic of Kampuchea in January 1979, the Vietnamese diaspora in Cambodia saw its restoration (Chou, 1992).

With the signing of the Paris Agreement on Cambodia 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 count of Vietnamese individuals living and working in Cambodia rose accordingly. 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, notably hosts a substantial Vietnamese population (Cuc, 2018, p. 4).

However, the presence of the Vietnamese population in Cambodia has evolved into a complex issue within the Vietnam-Cambodia relationship, 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 Cambodian political factions to resist the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP) headed by Hun Sen. It can be said that the attitude of Cambodian political parties toward the Vietnamese community in Cambodia plays a crucial role in shaping Vietnam-Cambodia relations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vietnam and Cambodia share a longstanding friendly relationship. Benefiting from geographic proximity and shared historical circumstances, Vietnamese people began migrating to Cambodia for trade, settlement, and livelihood development, gradually forming the Vietnamese community in Cambodia through various means. Since returning to Cambodia in the early 1980s, these individuals have been regarded by the Cambodian government as "immigrants," leading to precarious living conditions, particularly after 1993. The Vietnamese minority community in Cambodia faces numerous challenges, notably the significant number of individuals unable to secure or maintain Cambodian citizenship despite multiple generations of presence in the country. Numerous studies have elucidated the roles of both domestic and foreign actors in the precarious circumstances faced by the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. The unstable situation of the Vietnamese in Cambodia partly stems from opposition by Cambodian political forces, rooted in deeply entrenched anti-Vietnamese sentiment (Berman, 1996; Ehrentraut, 2011; Sperfeldt, 2020; Canzutti, 2022).

Broadly, numerous studies contend that the disposition of Cambodian political factions toward the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia has been profoundly shaped by a convoluted history of inter-party strife and regional influences, particularly in relation to the Cambodia-Vietnam bilateral relationship. Historically, the narrative of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia underscores the nation's perception of Vietnam as a paramount national security concern. This perception has historically fueled continuous, politically motivated assaults against ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, a pattern that commenced in the 1970s and persisted through Cambodia's successful 1993 elections. Scholarship suggests that contemporary Cambodian society has yet to transcend the profound societal repercussions of decades of civil conflict and

factional infighting, a point elucidated by deciphering the historical xenophobia of the Khmer toward their Vietnamese neighbors (Amer, 1994; Oosterheld, 2014).

The presence of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia has consistently served as a flashpoint for conflict among Cambodian political factions. **This is evident in the divergent stances adopted by various parties** some espouse a pro-Vietnamese position, while others maintain a more nationalistic or even anti-Vietnamese posture. This inter-party conflict becomes particularly pronounced during Cambodia's parliamentary election campaigns, specifically in the clashes between the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, and various opposition political parties. Historically, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has demonstrated a pro-Vietnamese inclination, aligning itself with Vietnamese interests. This alignment has, in turn, shaped the party's policies and attitudes toward the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. This perceived association often becomes a significant point of contention for other political parties, who may view the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia with suspicion or as a potential threat to national sovereignty (Amer, 2006, 2013; Oosterheld, 2014; Khun, 2020).

Building on this, certain Cambodian political factions have vigorously exploited anti-Vietnamese sentiment, leading to isolated acts of violence and widespread debate about the re-emergence of racism in contemporary Cambodia. This exploitation provides a foundation for various political factions to mobilize support from the Cambodian electorate by employing anti-Vietnamese racism. More broadly, the discriminatory and antagonistic attitudes toward the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia represent a larger trend of pervasive anti-Vietnamese sentiment that continues to significantly impact Cambodia's internal political landscape. These dynamics demonstrate that anti-Vietnamese sentiment has evolved into a potent political instrument, transcending ideological differences among Cambodian political factions (Amer, 2013; Oosterheld, 2014; Soja, 2018).

Overall, the existing body of scholarly work paints a comprehensive picture of the inter-party conflict in Cambodia concerning the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. This conflict is deeply intertwined with historical, regional, and ideological factors. Research consistently demonstrates that anti-Vietnamese sentiment is not merely a historical legacy but also a political tool continuously leveraged by the Cambodian elite. The attitudes of

various political parties reflect their broader strategies related to national sovereignty, regional security, and ethnic relations. Within this intricate dynamic, the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia often serves as a focal point. Building upon these established findings, this analysis will elucidate the attitudes of Cambodian political parties toward the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia through the lens of inter-party conflict. Specifically, it will examine the conflict between the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and opposition political parties during the tumultuous period of 1993 to 2018, a historically volatile era for Cambodia.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The article mainly used 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. Documents were selected based on relevance, reliability, and temporal coverage of the 1993–2018 period. Primary sources included official party platforms, manifestos, and public statements from the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and major opposition parties (e.g., FUNCINPEC, Sam Rainsy Party, and Cambodia National Rescue Party). Secondary sources encompassed credible media reports, and academic analyses. Selection prioritized materials explicitly addressing ethnic Vietnamese issues, citizenship policies, or anti-Vietnamese rhetoric in electoral contexts. Documents were sourced from government publications, and reputable news outlets to ensure authenticity and diversity of perspectives.

The article uses discourse analysis, adopting a linguistic approach to analyze documents, speeches, and other forms of political communication. This helps to grasp the perspectives and attitudes of Cambodian political parties regarding the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Discourse and content analysis was applied to examine how parties framed ethnic Vietnamese in political rhetoric. Texts were coded for themes such as nationalism, anti-Vietnamese sentiment, and citizenship policies. Qualitative discourse analysis identified narrative patterns, e.g., the CPP's cautious balancing of Vietnam ties versus nationalist appeals, and opposition parties' explicit anti-Vietnamese messaging. Quantitative content analysis measured the frequency and intensity of ethnic references in

campaign materials. This dual approach revealed how rhetoric shaped inter-party conflict and electoral strategies, highlighting the politicization of ethnic Vietnamese identity.

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 Vietnamese diaspora in Cambodia and provide context for the current situation. Finally, by employing content analysis and examining major political events, this study clearly explains the internal struggles of Cambodian political parties regarding the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Period 1993-2011

Following the full withdrawal of Vietnamese volunteer troops from Cambodia in September 1989, the Vietnamese community in Cambodia began experiencing waves of anti-Vietnamese sentiment from a segment of the Cambodian populace. 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). Increased pressure was placed by these political factions on the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to address the considerable Vietnamese influence still present in the country. The Democratic Party of Cambodia began, in early July 1992, to include the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia in its criticisms of the United Nations, alleging that UNTAC was ignoring what was seen as widespread and illicit Vietnamese immigration (Amer, 2013). The Democratic Party of Cambodia's opposition to the Vietnamese community was also evident in its attempts to restrict Vietnamese participation in the upcoming general elections. Specifically, this faction opposed the election law, drafted by UNTAC and approved by the Supreme National Council on August 5, 1992, because it permitted Vietnamese in Cambodia to vote. Concurrently, attacks by political groups on the Vietnamese community in Cambodia intensified, bolstered by the support of the PDK (Amer, 1994).

After the elections in late May 1993, the political parties within the Constituent Assembly established a joint provisional government the Provisional National Government of Cambodia to oversee the country until a constitution was adopted. With the enactment of new legislation, the Constituent Assembly transitioned into a legislative body. 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. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP), under Hun Sen's leadership and formerly called the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party (CPRP), forcefully denounced the aggression and assaults against the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Hun Sen, as the CPP leader, prioritized maintaining strong ties with Vietnam. At this time, besides the Vietnamese who had gained naturalization through extended residence in Cambodia, a significant number of ethnic Vietnamese continued to live in Cambodia with highly precarious legal standing. Instead of passing a nationality law to clarify the status of ethnic Vietnamese, the Cambodian legislature, for an extended period, passed an immigration law that served to deport ethnic Vietnamese residents of Cambodia. Consequently, many Vietnamese in Cambodia continued to face an uncertain status (Berman, 1996).

In April 1994, a Cambodia-Vietnam Joint Communiqué was issued during the official visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet to Cambodia. This communiqué addressed the resolution of the Vietnamese issue in Cambodia in accordance with Cambodian and international legal frameworks. As per the communiqué, consensus was reached by both sides regarding the equitable treatment of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, aligning their status with that of other nationals. However, on August 26, 1994, The Immigration Law enacted by the Cambodian National Assembly elicited concerns from 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, the influence of various political parties correlated with a resurgence in armed attacks targeting the Vietnamese community in 1994, causing widespread confusion and fear among the Vietnamese population in Cambodia.

In January 1995, an official visit to Vietnam by

His Royal Highness Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the First Prime Minister of Cambodia, presented an opportunity for high-level political discourse between the two nations regarding the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. The leadership of both nations resolved to convene expert meetings to address the issue concerning the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. The Cambodian side provided an undertaking during the discussions that its Immigration Law would not target Vietnamese nationals for collective confinement or mass expulsion. Cambodia additionally affirmed its commitment to undertake all measures in accordance with Cambodian regulations and within its operational capacity to ensure the security of Vietnamese nationals residing in Cambodia (Amer, 1997). The expert-level working group meetings, convened in Phnom Penh (March 1995), Hanoi (July 1995), and Phnom Penh (July 1996) to address the issue of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, established a constructive basis for safeguarding their rights. 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 pertaining to the legal standing and entitlements of other ethnic groups in Cambodia were also subject to discussion and promptly resolved. On October 9, 1996, the Cambodian Nationality Law was promulgated, delineating the criteria for acquiring Cambodian citizenship and outlining the requirements for foreign nationals seeking naturalization (Nguyen & Sperfeldt, 2012, pp. 128-131). In November 1996, the Cambodian Government initially granted temporary residence permits to Vietnamese individuals who had established their presence in the country prior to 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 evidenced the pervasive anti-Vietnamese sentiment deeply entrenched in Cambodia during that period (Amer,

2013). The Vietnamese government responded strongly to these hostile actions, recognizing that they could significantly affect the ongoing development of the relationship between the two nations.

Following the July 1997 'coup' that led to the deposition of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, Prime Minister Hun Sen's assumption of *de facto* power provided a basis for the positive amelioration of bilateral relations between Vietnam and Cambodia. The CPP also condemned hostile actions against the Cambodia's Vietnamese minority. 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 contestation with the CPP, opposition parties frequently utilized the issue of Vietnam and the Vietnamese community in Cambodia as a strategic instrument to exert pressure upon and galvanize Cambodian citizens against Vietnam. The anti-Vietnamese rhetoric employed by the opposition during the campaign preceding the July 26, 1998, general election represented the culmination of this trend, which caused concern among the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. Following the election, political friction among the principal Cambodian parties escalated, making it difficult to form a coalition government, further exacerbated by anti-Vietnamese actions in Cambodia (Kiernan & Hughes, 2007). Generally, anti-Vietnamese factions in Cambodia exhibited considerable compositional diversity, including royalists, conservatives, liberals, and communists; all of these groups articulated, or continue to articulate, anti-Vietnamese perspectives (Bertrand, 1998).

Following the establishment of a new coalition government in Cambodia in November 1998, a process achieved through tense negotiations, 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 address to the Cambodian National Assembly on November 30, 1998, outlining the new coalition government's program, Prime Minister Hun Sen explicitly stated that the administration would "absolutely prevents racial discrimination, which is an activity violating laws and against human rights" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1998, p. 2).

Consequently, the incidence of 'hostile' armed attacks targeting the Vietnamese community in Cambodia also decreased. From the end of 1998 to

1999, following Cambodia's accession to ASEAN with active assistance from Vietnam, the two countries' relations developed positively. The June 1999 visit to Cambodia by Le Kha Phieu, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, represented a significant juncture in the evolution of bilateral relations. This visit marked the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between the two countries. Through their Joint Statement, both sides pledged to advance their 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).

Beginning in 2001, a significant reduction in attacks targeting the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia was observed, a trend that coincided with the positive evolution of the Vietnam-Cambodia bilateral relationship during the initial ten years of the 21st century. The National Assembly elections in Cambodia, held in July 2003, were successfully concluded, with the CPP retaining its governmental authority. After the influence of the Democratic Party of Cambodia diminished, the Royalist Party (FUNCINPEC) acknowledged the growing influence of the CPP, which had established itself as the preeminent political entity in Cambodia. The 2003 election was notable for the [almost] complete absence of anti-Vietnamese rhetoric from opposition parties, unlike previous elections.

During the election and leadership process, the CPP consistently depicted Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Party's leaders as liberators who had earned the right to lead the country by playing a key role in overthrowing the Khmer Rouge dictatorship and genocide. 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).

The CPP's policies have consistently focused on the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, primarily to maintain strong ties with Vietnam and secondarily to secure votes from 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 created a favorable legal environment for the Vietnamese community to live and operate legally, fostering an open space for deeper bilateral relations between the two countries. While anti-Vietnamese activities still occurred in Cambodia, they no longer took the form of armed attacks (Albritton, 2004).

With the Democratic Party of Cambodia's declining influence, the CPP and FUNCINPEC negotiated to form a new coalition government in mid-2004, and it notably excluded 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 Cambodia and Vietnam.

In March 2009, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister and Chairman of the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, Nguyen Thanh Son, visited Cambodia. While meeting 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 pledged that the Cambodian government would prioritize and accelerate 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 Vietnamese community in Cambodia was also a topic of discussion during high-level visits between Vietnam and Cambodia, specifically during the official visit of Nguyen Phu Trong, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (December 12, 2011), and the visit of King Norodom Sihamoni of Cambodia to Vietnam (September 2012). In the Joint Statement released during his December 2011 visit to Cambodia, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong expressed high appreciation and gratitude to the Cambodian government and people for the legal conditions provided to Vietnamese residents 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. The emergence of the Cambodia National Salvation Party (CNRP), the CPP's main opposition, has particularly fueled a tense political atmosphere in Cambodia, stirring up 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 his party.

Sam Rainsy, who has led the opposition against strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment since the 1990s, often uses the term "yuon" to describe Vietnamese people and, more broadly, Vietnam itself. During his campaign to represent his party in the elections, Sam Rainsy based his political platform openly on the issue of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia. In his 2008 election campaign, Sam Rainsy declared, "If I win this election, I will send yuon immigrants back home" (Magnuson, 1998). In a 2013 speech, he stated, "the yuon are taking the Khmer land to kill the Khmer people." (Strangio, 2014, p.263). He also said, "In Yuon companies, they only employ Yuon managers, but the Cambodians are only 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, who co-founded the CNRP when his Human Rights Party merged with it in 2012, has frequently expressed hateful statements against Vietnam, inciting anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. In 2014, Kem Sokha claimed that the 2010 Phnom Penh bridge stampede, which killed 353 and injured hundreds during a local holiday, was a Vietnamese plot to "eliminate the Khmer race and Khmer tradition" (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. In Cambodia, those with anti-Vietnamese sentiments believe that Vietnam is "invading" their nation and that the Hun Sen government is, in essence, Vietnam's puppet. They argue that Cambodia needs to be freed from the lasting impact of the "Communists" during the 1979-1989 period, which, according to them, turned Cambodia into the "backyard" of Vietnam. From this perspective, Vietnam's prolonged domination of Cambodia is the root cause of all of Cambodia's current problems, with Hun Sen viewed 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's noteworthy that the Cambodian National Salvation Party (CNRP), especially under Sam Rainsy's chairmanship, openly challenged the CPP and Prime Minister Hun Sen, using historical "puppet" arguments labeling Hun Sen 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 facilitating the flow of undocumented 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 aimed to undermine Hun Sen's image as the leader credited with overthrowing the Khmer Rouge regime, a narrative consistently propagated by the CPP. 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 CPP's reputation was also harmed by opposition political parties' use of the ethnic Vietnamese issue in Cambodia to attack it. The CPP government's apparent "favoritism" when handling the ethnic Vietnamese issue in Cambodia offered the opposition a chance to label the CPP 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 Pannasastra 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, the Cambodian Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP after President Kem Sokha's treason conviction. The court ruled the party violated political party laws and engaged in activities against the 6th National Assembly election. 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 Vietnamese diaspora 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 diaspora in Cambodia, both from opposition parties and from the public. It can be observed that the CPP's policies toward the Vietnamese diaspora in Cambodia are heavily influenced by the broader Vietnam-Cambodia relationship. The strong cooperation between the CPP and the Communist Party of Vietnam, the ruling parties of both countries, is the primary source of this close relationship. 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's campaign to revoke "invalid identification documents" resulted in approximately 70,000 people, mostly ethnic Vietnamese, losing their Cambodian citizenship. Tim Frewer, an expert on Cambodian studies, described the policy applied by the Phnom Penh government to Vietnamese people 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 Prime Minister Hun Sen's CPP. This marked the CPP's first time securing every National Assembly seat since the UN-sponsored election in 1993, 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 Vietnamese residents in Cambodia.

5. CONCLUSION

After 1993, the issue of the Vietnamese diaspora in Cambodia became a topic of debate within Cambodian politics, particularly in relation to the anti-Vietnamese views held by many political parties. The politicization of ethnic Vietnamese identity in Cambodia's electoral strategies, as observed from 1993 to 2018, exacerbates inter-party conflict and social divisions. The Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) cautious approach, balancing historical ties with Vietnam against nationalist sentiments, risks alienating ethnic Vietnamese residents when nationalist rhetoric escalates. Opposition parties' explicit anti-Vietnamese messaging, often conflating citizens with long-term residents, fosters hostility and undermines social cohesion. These dynamics perpetuate political volatility, threatening democratic stability and inclusive governance. Discriminatory policies on citizenship and legal rights for ethnic Vietnamese further marginalize this community, limiting their political participation and exacerbating tensions. Addressing these issues is critical to fostering national reconciliation and equitable representation.

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 Vietnamese residents in Cambodia. In addition, the organization of political dialogues among Cambodian political parties is essential to facilitate the exchange of perspectives, foster mutual trust, and promote cooperation for the nation's collective development. Such dialogues encourage political parties in Cambodia to prioritize policy-driven campaigns focused on national development over ethnic-based attacks. This approach contributes to mitigating ethnocentric

rhetoric targeting the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. To foster greater societal consensus, the Cambodian government should initiate campaigns to counter anti-Vietnamese stereotypes, emphasizing a shared national identity and highlighting the historical contributions of the Vietnamese community. These efforts aim to build an inclusive national community, forging a collective identity in which the Vietnamese are recognized as integral members.

Future research should prioritize investigating the socioeconomic impacts of anti-Vietnamese

rhetoric on the Vietnamese community and assessing the efficacy of the Cambodian Government's inclusive policy interventions. Longitudinal studies could explore the evolving attitudes of Cambodian political parties post-2018 to evaluate policy changes by the ruling party and the Cambodian Government. Consequently, these studies will provide additional proposals and strategies designed to reduce ethnically-driven conflicts, strengthen social cohesion, and promote stable governance in Cambodia.

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