

Vietnam Faces UN Scrutiny Over Khmer-Krom Rights

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In July 2025, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) reviewed Vietnam's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), placing particular focus on its treatment of the Khmer-Krom people. The review followed Vietnam's fourth periodic report and was accompanied by submissions from international human rights groups, including the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO).

The Khmer-Krom, one of the largest Indigenous communities in southern Vietnam's Mekong Delta, continues to face systemic restrictions on their basic rights. Despite their long-standing presence in the region known in Khmer as Kampuchea-Krom, the Vietnamese government does not recognize them as Indigenous Peoples. Instead, they are categorized as one of 53 ethnic minority groups, effectively denying them legal recognition and international protections that come with Indigenous status.

According to the report submitted by UNPO, this denial significantly contributes to violations of the Khmer-Krom's civil and political rights. These include restrictions on freedom of expression, religious persecution, and systemic discrimination in education, political representation, and land access.

One of the central concerns raised was the Vietnamese state's active suppression of fundamental freedoms. Independent organizations are prohibited, social media and internet activity are heavily censored, and authorities reportedly use police force to silence political dissent. Khmer-Krom activists, particularly those advocating for cultural and religious rights, often face arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, and even torture.

Religious freedom remains a significant point of contention. Khmer Theravada Buddhism, the traditional religion of the Khmer-Krom, is not officially recognized, and monks are forced to operate under state-controlled religious institutions. This prevents communities from freely observing religious traditions and conducting cultural preservation efforts.

Land access issues also persist. Historically, the Khmer-Krom lands have been subject to government appropriation under collectivisation policies, leaving many communities in poverty with limited options for livelihood. The report notes this has led to severe economic hardship, particularly in rural provinces.

The Human Rights Committee echoed many of these concerns in its concluding observations. It noted that women and girls from rural and impoverished backgrounds, especially from ethnic groups such as the Khmer-Krom, Montagnards, and Hmong, are disproportionately affected by entrenched patriarchal norms and discriminatory stereotypes. The Committee urged the Vietnamese government to take concrete steps to address these issues and to implement legal and policy reforms.

Religious minorities were another area of focus. The Committee cited ongoing reports of intimidation and harassment against groups such as the Khmer-Krom Buddhists, Hmong

Protestants, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao practitioners. These groups often report being monitored, threatened, or pressured to join state-recognized religious bodies that limit independent worship.

UNPO welcomed the Committee's findings but emphasized that significant challenges remain. In particular, it expressed disappointment over the Committee's continued use of the term "ethnic minority" rather than recognizing the Khmer-Krom as Indigenous Peoples. UNPO and other advocacy groups argue that self-identification is a core tenet of Indigenous status under international law, specifically Article 33 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The UN Special Procedures have previously criticized Vietnam for its failure to acknowledge Khmer-Krom identity and for implementing assimilationist policies that erode cultural identity and autonomy. Despite repeated calls from experts and rights organisations, Vietnam has yet to change its official stance.

Additionally, the Human Rights Committee raised alarm over Vietnam's use of transnational repression, including politically motivated extraditions and the abuse of international mechanisms such as INTERPOL to target dissidents abroad. Human rights advocates, including those from the Boat People SOS (BPSOS), have reported incidents of abductions and harassment of exiled Vietnamese activists, particularly in neighboring Thailand.

The UNPO stressed the need for continued pressure on Vietnam to comply with its international obligations under the ICCPR and other human rights frameworks. It urged the Vietnamese government to officially recognise the Khmer-Krom as Indigenous Peoples, stop the use of force and intimidation against activists, and provide unrestricted access to religious and cultural expression.

As international attention on Vietnam's human rights record intensifies, organizations like UNPO remain committed to supporting the Khmer-Krom and ensuring their voices are represented on the global stage.