

The Khmer-Krom People Practice their Religion in Fear

The Indigenous Khmer-Krom Peoples of Mekong Delta have centered their community on a strong belief in Buddhism since 365BC. Unfortunately, the Khmer-Krom people now must practice their Theravada Buddhism in fear under Communist Party rule in Vietnam. For the Khmer Krom, Theravada Buddhism is not just a religion, but it is part of their unique cultural identity. In Southern Vietnam, there are nearly 600 Buddhist monasteries with approximately 20,000 Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks. Under threat, the Vietnamese government has successfully forced most of the Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks to join the Patriotic United Buddhist Association (PUBA - Hội Đoàn Kết Sư Sãi Yêu Nước) which is an association established by the government to control the way the Khmer-Krom practice their religion.

Government control and interference in the Khmer Krom's religious affairs take many shapes and forms, including the following:

Language restrictions:

- Some temple walls and gateways of temples use Vietnamese language
- Original Khmer Language Abbot seals have been confiscated as Khmer script is forbidden

Restrictions on education:

- Study of Theravada Buddhism is limited, not widely available, and curriculum is regulated by the Vietnamese authorities, practitioners must request permission to study certain topics.
- Discrimination in scholarship awards for overseas study for monks and laypersons
- Summoning of monks for "Defense-Security" trainings

Interference in activities:

- Traditional Khmer Buddhist ceremonies require submitting a permit request to the government to get permission
- Temple committees and leadership, including abbot appointments, must be approved by the government and the government usually makes its own appointments to monitor and control activities
- Local authorities closely watch gatherings and ceremonies to maintain tight control

Rights of Expression and Access Information:

- Khmer Krom people are afraid to listen and watch news sources such as Radio Free Asia or Voice of America because of threats and are restricted to inaccurate and biased state-run media
- Sharing information or providing information to foreign media and abroad is tightly regulated through preventative measures, threats of violence, and violent attacks

Forced Defroking:

- The government forcibly defrocks monks who challenge government control and monks who engage in activities that authorities deem problematic

Arrests, Detention, Torture, Imprisonment:

- Arrest, prolonged arbitrary detention, torture are common practices in Vietnam and are used against Khmer Krom monks and laypersons
- Various vaguely worded Articles of the Penal Code are used to charge Khmer Krom people for expression of basic rights, including freedom of religion

An Emblematic Case: The story of Ly Chanh Da and his associates

Venerable Ly Chanh Da, born 1988, at Prey Chop Temple, Lai Hoa commune, Vinh Chau district, Soc Trang province tried to open a Khmer language class in his temple, but was not allowed by the temple Abbot, who was also a government official. On May 16, 2013, Venerable Ly Chanh Da was arrested, defrocked, detained, and tortured. On May 17, 2013, he was forced to confess his alleged crimes on Vietnamese Television. On June 17, 2013, he was able to escape Vietnam and is currently seeking refugee status.

On March 26, 2013, the Vietnamese authorities summoned representatives of ninety-two Khmer-Krom Buddhist temples in Soc Trang province to attend a meeting at the “*Political School of Soc Trang*”. The summons letter was sent to all Khmer-Krom temples in Soc Trang province just a day before the meeting. The authorities used this meeting and tactics to intimidate, harass, and threaten the Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks.

The Vietnamese authorities accused Venerable Thach Thuol, born 1985, at Ta Set temple, Vinh Hai commune, Vinh Chau district, Soc Trang province of contacting the Khmer-Krom media and Khmer Krom living abroad to provide information about human rights violations. Venerable Lieu Ny, born 1986, at Ta Set temple, Vinh Hai commune, Vinh Chau district, Soc Trang province was accused of not obeying the Vietnamese authorities’ to defrock Venerable Thach Thuol. Subsequently, Venerable Lieu Ny was ordered to resign as Abbot.

Later, Venerable Thach Thuol and Lieu Ny and two other persons, Thach Phum Rich and Thach Tha, were apprehended by Vietnamese authorities. The Vietnamese government appointed a new monk to replace Venerable Lieu Ny as Abbot of Ta Set temple and searched for the Buddhist monks who helped to protect and support Ven. Thach Thuol and Ven. Lieu Ny. Many such monks, scared for their safety, escaped to Cambodia and Thailand. They include: Venerable Lieu Nen, born 1988, Ven. Thach Sa May, born 1990, Ven. Lieu Nua, born 1996, Ven. Chau Phi Rum, born 1989, Ven. Thach Vanh Na, born 1995, Ven. Son Na, born 1990, and Ven. Kim Thi, born 1990.

Ven. Lieu Ny, Ven. Thach Thuol, Thach Phum Rich and Thach Tha remained in detention for more than 3 months without trial. The Vietnamese authorities did not allow their parents to visit during this time.

On July 1, 2013, Venerable Lai Lat, who was an Abbot of Don Tru Temple, in Vinh Chau district, Soc Trang province also escaped to Cambodia because the Vietnamese government accused him of having contact with Ven. Ly Chanh Da, Ven. Thach Thuol and Ven. Lieu Ny.

On September 25, 2013, the Vietnamese authorities sentenced Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers supported Ven. Ly Chanh Da demanding Vietnamese police to stop defrocking him on May 16, 2013, for up to a year with the alleged crime of creating “public disorder”:

1. Lam Thi Loan – Born 1957 - 1 year prison.
2. Ly Thi Danh – Born 1970 - 1 year prison.
3. Ly Minh Hai – Born 1978 – 11 months prison.
4. Tang Phola – Born 1976 – 10 months prison.

On September 27, 2013, the following individuals were sentenced 2 to 4 years for the crime of “fleeing abroad to oppose against the Vietnamese government” and “organizing for other people to flee abroad”:

1. Venerable Thach Thuol, Born 1985, 6 years prison.
2. Venerable Lieu Ny, Born 1986, 4 years prison.
3. Thach Phum Rich, Born 1989, 3 years prison.
4. Tra Quanh Tha, Born 1978, 2 years prison.