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ETHNIC MINORITIES OF VIET NAM

An Overview

DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

In a multi-ethnic country like Viet Nam, issues related to ethnic minorities are inevitably at the center of attention of policymakers, researchers, and the public. However, the apparently straightforward question *Who are the ethnic minorities in Viet Nam?* still awaits a satisfactory answer. A clear understanding of the concept and coverage of ethnic minorities, although essential to improve the implementation of existing policies in Viet Nam, has yet to be provided by policymakers and development agencies. There have been ample discussions and numerous workshops organized by various ethnological institutions.

Since recovering part of the country from the French colonialists in the 1960s, the Government of Viet Nam has been interested in the identification of ethnic minorities. Under government requirements, a National Program of Ethnic Classification was first conducted by Vietnamese ethnologists based in the Institute of Ethnology. The principal investigators defined an ethnic group (*dan toc*) as a stable or relatively stable group of people formed over a historical period with common territorial ties, economic activities, and cultural characteristics. It was on the basis of these common ties that there arose an awareness of ethnic identity and a name of one's own.¹ A stable community was one formed over a historical period, involving relationships of identity in regard to language, habitat, socioeconomic activities, and cultural characteristics, and was also conscious of a shared ethnic identity.²

The Program acknowledged for the first time an officially recognized ethnic classification in Viet Nam, which has been used until now for administration, development, and research purposes. The Vietnamese population was classified into 54 ethnic groups, of which

the Kinh, the vast majority, account for about 87%. The remaining 13% are divided into 53 other groups, officially called the ethnic minorities (*dan toc thieu so, dan toc it nguoi*) (Table 1). Throughout this report, the term *ethnic minority*, which has been recognized by the Vietnamese Government, is used instead of *indigenous peoples*.

The weakness of this classification is widely recognized among Vietnamese researchers and policymakers.³ Some researchers propose that the present list should be classified into more groups and subgroups. Sometimes, the cultural difference between groups of the same ethnicity is even greater than between two separate ethnic groups. Field studies indicate that many small ethnic groups are dissatisfied to have been merged with larger ethnic groups, because their historical and cultural backgrounds are very different. In reality, administration, development, and research activities require more adequate ethnic identification. To this effect, the Institute of Ethnology is currently conducting a new project on ethnic classification.

A similar need has been expressed at the local level in the course of project and program implementation. For example, the 1997 Statistical Yearbook of Kon Tum lists seven ethnic groups and those not included are considered to belong to "other ethnic groups." In the 2000 Statistical Yearbook, there is no ethnic classification of the Kon Tum population. Similar situations have been found in the northern mountainous region. The ethnic data section in a proposal submitted by provincial authorities for the Viet Nam Northern Mountainous Region Poverty Reduction Project funded by the World Bank, refers to some major ethnic groups but ignores others, particularly small groups. In other provinces, either there are no data on ethnic groups or the data are too general to be included in the official census classification for ethnicity.

Table 1. Ethnic Groups in Viet Nam, 1998

No.	Ethnicity	Subgroup	Population (person)
1	Ba-na	Ro Ngao, Ro Long (Y Lang), To Lo, Go Lar, Krem	189,500
2	Bo Y	Bo Y, Tu Di	1,750
3	Brau		245
4	Bru-Van	Van Kieu, Tri, Khua, Ma Coong	44,000
5	Cham	Cham Hroi, Cham Pong, Cha Va Ku, Cham Chau Doc	114,000
6	Cho-ro		18,000
7	Chu-ru		11,450
8	Chut	May, Ruc, Sach, Arem, Ma Lieng	2,800
9	Co		24,500
10	Cong		1,480
11	Co-ho	Xre, Nop (Tu Nop), Co Don, Chil, Lat (Lach), To Ring	98,000
12	Co Lao	Co Lao Xanh, Co Lao Trang, Co Lao Do	1,900
13	Co-tu		40,500
14	Dao	Dao Do, Dao Quan Chet, Dao Lo Gang, Dao Tien, Dao Quan Trang, Dao Thanh Y, Dao Lan Ten	650,000
15	E-de	Kpa, Adham, Krung, Mdhu, Ktul, Dlie, Hrue, Bih, Blo, Kah, Kdrao, Dong Kay, Dong Mak, Ening, Arul, Hwing, Ktle, Epan	240,000
16	Giay		42,000
17	Gia rai	Chor, Hdrung (Hbau, Chor), Arap, Mthur, Tobuan	320,500
18	Gie/Trieng	Gie (Gie), Trieng, Ve, Bnoong (Mnoong)	33,000
19	Ha Nhi	Ha Nhi Co Cho, Ha Nhi La MY, Ha Nhi Den	14,500
20	Hmong	Hmong Trang, Hmong Hoa, Hmong Do, Hmong Den, Hmong Xanh, Na mieo	710,000
21	Hoa	Quang Dong, Quang Tay, Hai Nam, Trieu Chau, Phuc Kien, Sang Phang, Xia Phong, Thang Nham, Minh Huong, He	1,100,000
22	Hre		101,000
23	Khang	Khang Dang, Khang Hoac, Khang Don, Khang Sua, Ma Hang, Bu Hang, Ma Hang Ben, Bu Hang Coi	4,650
24	Khome		1,050,000
25	Kho-mu		49,200
26	La Chi		9,780

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Table 1. (cont.)

No.	Ethnicity	Subgroup	Population (person)
27	La Ha	La Ha can (Khla Phlao), La Ha nuoc (La Ha ung)	1,600
28	La Hu	La hu na (den), La-hu su (vang), La-hu phung (trang)	6,310
29	Lao	Lao Boc (Lao Can), Lao Noi (Lao Nho)	11,200
30	Lo Lo	Lo Lo hoa, Lo Lo den	3,350
31	Lu	Lu Den (Lu Dam), Lu Trang	4,200
32	Ma	Ma Ngan, Ma Xop, Ma To, Ma Krung	27,800
33	Mang	Mang Gung, Mang Le	2,740
34	Mnong	Mnong Gar, Mnong Nong, Mnong Chil, Mnong Kuenh, Mnong Rlam, Mnong Preh, Mnong Prang, Mnong Dip, Mnong Bu Nor, Mnong Bu Dang, Mnong Bu Deh	70,900
35	Muong	Ao Ta (Au Ta), Moi Bi	1,150,000
36	Ngai		1,790
37	Nung	Nung Giang, Nung Xuong, Nung An, Nung Inh, Nung Loi, Nung Chao, Nung Phan Slinh, Nung Quy Rin, Nung Din	900,000
38	O-du		204
39	Pa Then		4,040
40	Phu La	Phu La Lao-Bo Kho Pa, Phu La Den, Phu La Han	6,820
41	Pu Peo		410
42	Ra-glai	Rai, Hoang, La Oang	77,100
43	Ro-mam		286
44	San Chay	Cao Lan, San Chi	165,000
45	San Diu		106,000
46	Si La		620
47	Tay	Tho, Ngan, Phen, Thu Lao, Pa Di	1,350,000
48	Ta-oi	Ta Oi, Pa Co, Pa Hi	29,500
49	Thai	Nganh Den (Tay Dam) Nganh Trang (Tay Don or Khao)	1,200,000
50	Tho	Keo, Mon, Cui, Ho, Dan Lai, Li Ha, Tay Poong	58,500
51	Kinh		61,200,000
52	Xinh-mun	Xinh Mun Da, Xinh Mun Nghet	12,500
53	Xo-dang	Xo Trng, To Dra, Mnam, Ca Dong, Ha Lang, Ta Tri, Chau	108,000
54	Xtieng	Bu Lo, Bu Dek (Bu Deh), Bu Biek	54,400

Source: Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas/Central Ideology-Culture Department (2001).

ETHNICITY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Since the revolution in August 1945, and especially after *Doi Moi* (Renovation) in 1986, ethnic minorities in mountainous areas of Viet Nam have had a significant role to play in the country's economic and social development activities. Among other things, they are a sizeable proportion of the overall national population. According to the national census in 1999, the 53 ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam total 10,527,000 people, accounting for 13.8% of the total population of the country. This represented an increase of 1.82 million over the decade 1990–1999.

Table 2 points to the high population growth after *Doi Moi*, especially in the Central Highlands. The population in this area increased by a factor of 1.6 over a decade. This is the result of both natural growth and the migration policy of the Government. Ethnic

minorities and Kinh people have been relocated from the northern mountainous regions as well as from the Red River Delta. The relocation process has caused significant changes in the population composition in mountainous regions. Kinh people accounted for 5% of the total population in the Central Highlands in 1945, 50% in 1975, and more than 70% at present. Kinh people have become the majority inhabitants in some areas previously dominated by ethnic minorities. Other ethnic groups have also settled in the Central Highlands.

These demographic trends and the resulting pressure on lands and natural resources provide at least some explanation of the recent tensions and disturbance affecting the Central Highlands. Some researchers suggest that the mountainous regions should no longer be considered sparsely populated with an abundance of natural resources for further exploitation.⁴

Table 2. Population Dynamics in the Mountainous Regions of Viet Nam

	Year	Nationwide	Northeast	Northwest	Central Highlands
Population	1990	66,017,000	7,709,000	1,885,000	2,682,000
	2000	77,686,000	8,952,000	2,288,000	4,248,000
Population growth (%)	2000/1990	17.7	16.1	21.4	58.4
Population Density	1990	200	118	52	49
	2000	236	137	64	78

Source: National Department of Statistics (2000).