

Islam in Cambodia: The fate of the Cham Muslims

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Having recently raised its economic status from low-income to lower-middle income, and on its way to becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030, increasingly open to foreign investments and businesses and with a dynamic and tech-savvy young population, Cambodia is a country that cannot leave its Muslim minority behind on its fast-paced development path. Despite the efforts by the Cambodian Government to better integrate the Cham and ameliorate their situation in society, discrimination remains from parts of the Buddhist Cambodian population. Indeed, as the Muslim communities in the country become increasingly exposed to Islamic influences from neighbouring countries, Cambodia must do more to eliminate the barriers, especially economic ones, preventing the Cham community from feeling truly integrated in Cambodian society. Overall, in a country that is still struggling with the protection of fundamental rights such as freedom of expressions and assembly, and with two important rounds of elections approaching (in June 2017 and 2018 respectively), young generations, regardless of their ethnicity and religion, seem likely to play a key role in shaping the future of Cambodia in order to integrate its thriving economy with a more open democracy and the participation of ethnic minorities.

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1. Brief Historical Background

The Muslim community in Cambodia, generally known as “Cham”, descended from refugees from the ancient Kingdom of Champa who fled central Vietnam 500 years ago.²The community has faced two main dramatic periods of persecution. The first began with the end of the Champa kingdom in the 16th century, when Cham, most of whom are Sunnis of Malay influence, were persecuted and murdered, thus having to migrate to Cambodia. A similarly tragic fate occurred from 1975 to 1979 in Cambodia under the infamous Khmer Rouge regime. The idea of Muslim persecution during this period based on race and/or religion has been dismissed by most scholars as the Chinese minority suffered an even higher death toll. In fact, it seems that the Cham were not victims of racism, but rather became collectively labelled as regime enemies because some of them refused to comply with certain policies. Villages, religious leaders and teachers were targeted for executions. With the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, the new People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) immediately allowed the reestablishment of Buddhism and Islam. The Cham became strong supporters of the new regime with several Cham members in the National Assembly and other institutions. In the following years the Cham went through the process of rebuilding their mosques as well as a new religious leadership.³

2. Current Situation

2.1 Overview

The Kingdom of Cambodia is home to approximately 300,000 Muslims,⁴who are viewed as generally well-integrated into society by the Cambodian government and by the Cham themselves. However, many Cambodia's Cham live in poverty and have lower education levels, higher illiteracy rates, and poorer health indicators than the rest of the Cambodian population. Like other Cambodians, most Cham live in rural areas, where they are primarily engaged in fishing and farming. Most of them are concentrated along rivers in 6 of Cambodia’s 22 provinces: Kampong Cham, Kampot, Pursat, Battambang, Kandal, and Kampong Chhnang. Muslims in Cambodia mainly consist of Cham, speaking their own language, and Javanese descendants or Chwea, speaking Khmer. There are also smaller groups of Bangladeshi and Pakistani descendants. The term Cham is generally used to indicate all Muslims in Cambodia regardless of the above-mentioned ethnicities.

2.2 Integration

‘Sharing the same fate’ is the expression which is often used to describe the reason behind the lack of discrimination towards Muslims in Cambodia. Indeed, as described before, Cham Muslims and Cambodians both experienced the same suffering under the Khmer Rouge regime.

² Islam Cambodia. (2014). Communities & Culture. Retrieved from <http://islamcambodia.org/communities-culture>.

³ Bruckmayr, P. (2014). The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalisation, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, pp. 5-7.

⁴ World Population. (2016) Cambodia population. Retrieved from <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/cambodia-population/>.

However, contrasting views regarding the existence of discrimination remain, leading to the lack of a true integration of Cham Muslims into the Cambodian society. The Cambodia 2015 International Religious Freedom Report released by the US State Department underlined the fact that the "Cham Muslim community continue to face barriers to full integration into society" and that "some members of the Buddhist community and other minority groups reportedly continued to view the Cham with suspicion and superstition as purported practitioners of 'black magic'". On the other hand, both government officials and Cambodian Muslim leaders stress that Cham and Khmer people live in absolute harmony and have the same rights.⁵

The Cambodian Government has always demonstrated sensitivity towards the Muslim community, especially in recent years, by allowing and promoting many activities, religious events (e.g. for the fasting break). At times it also facilitated cooperation with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), and in a few cases even made donations for mosque repairs and construction. Besides, as far as political integration is concerned, there is a fair political representation of the Muslim community in the government due to the presence of prominent Cham leaders in the current administration. This has led to the Muslim community being characterized by a strong support to the ruling party. However, as the community now seeks new types of integration (e.g. economic), a switch in their political support seems to be occurring. A demand for change, generally perceived in Cambodia not only among Cham, combined with the presence of Muslim personalities in the opposition party is producing such switch.

As for the economic integration of the Cham community, several obstacles remain. In fact, there is no rule discriminating against Muslims or any practical barrier that prevents them from having equal education or job opportunities vis-a-vis the Buddhist majority. However, both in schools and in working places, there was until recent years a general sense of discrimination and sometimes even intimidation towards those Muslims who strictly practiced Islam. For instance, the failure of some schools to be flexible in their dress codes has reportedly led some Muslims, especially females wearing head scarves, to drop out of school rather than going against their beliefs. Further reason is also due to the fact that the Cham have never been encouraged by Muslim leaders to go to public schools. A clear example of discrimination faced by Cham is represented by a TV programme, named "Manpower and Destiny", aired in 2005 by the Cambodia Television Network featuring a Cham as a leading character for the first time. However, the series depicted the Cham character as an indolent who depended on destiny rather than his own efforts. In addition, the actor portraying the Cham character wore an earring (which Muslim men are not allowed to do) and clothing that is supposed to be worn for praying and religious ceremonies only. Besides, he also drank beer. An outcry from the Cham community contributed to the series being taken off the air.⁶ Following this episode and similar discriminations, like refusing to issue identity cards to women who were wearing a hijab, the Cham community as well as the public opinion pressed the government to take action. As a result, in 2008 the government issued a directive to allow traditional clothing in schools to be applied nationwide. More specifically, Cambodian public and private schools

⁵ Sokhavuth, T. (2016, August 18). Chams Not Integrated into Society: US Report. Khmer Times. Retrieved from <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/28645/chams-not-integrated-into-society--us-report/>.

⁶ So, F. (2005, June). The Study of the Qur-An vs. Modern Education for Islamic Women in Cambodia. Documentation Center of Cambodia. Retrieved from http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Cham%20Muslim%20Leaders/Cham_Muslim_Leaders.htm

were advised by Prime Minister Hun Sen to allow Muslim students to wear headscarves or any other traditional Muslim clothes for the sake of national unity.

Moreover, the Cambodian government has worked to better incorporate the Cham into society by not only allowing traditional clothing in schools but also through building a prayer room at Phnom Penh airport and appointing dozens of Cham to high-level government positions. According to the Cambodian Muslim Student Association, many more Cham are attending colleges or universities in the country than before and this is considered to be the direct result of the government's actions directed at Cham integration. An August 2009 survey found that the majority of the Cham feel they have become more involved in Cambodian society over the past ten years. Only 2 percent felt they get along poorly with the Buddhist community. However, 23 percent of Buddhists felt that they have a poor relationship with the Cham community.⁷

Overall, it seems safe to say that compared to other countries, the Muslim community in Cambodia is quite well integrated; not much in terms of economic integration as of yet, but at least in terms of thought.

2.3 Foreign Influences

According to a 2010 cable from the US Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's "porous borders, rampant corruption, easy access to forged documents and black-market weapons" might "work together to make Cambodia an attractive haven for criminals and extremists, and make the Cham, especially the unemployed youth, susceptible to the potential of radicalization and violent extremism."⁸

However, already since 2002, when the Bali bombing mastermind Riduan Isamuddin, known as Hambali, was caught while staying at a Muslim school in Cambodia, Cambodian officials enhanced their capacity to monitor the Cham community and foreign influences while the ruling party started to work at the same time with Cham leaders through including them in the government's administration.⁹

According to Farina So, the 1993 elections represented a turning point for the Muslim community in Cambodia, as the country became more open to the world and, consequently, transnational Islamic networks started to attract the local Muslim community. The necessity to rebuild the identity of the Islamic community after a troubled past and the young Cham's desire to strengthen their bond with the international Islamic community represent crucial factors for the development of the Cambodian Muslim community.

In this sense, Malaysia especially played a key part in influencing the Cham, both for its historical role in promoting Islam and for being a country symbol of rapid economic growth and successful educational reform policies. Several international Islamic NGOs from Arab countries and Malaysia appeared as well as numerous Cambodian Islamic NGOs to channel foreign aid and coordinate the activities of the Muslim community. Besides, an increasing number of Cham students began to have the opportunity to major in Islamic studies both

⁷ WikiLeaks. (2010). Cambodia's vulnerable Muslim minority: Embassy efforts to bridge the gaps. Retrieved from https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10PHNOMPENH3_a.html.

⁸ Ibid.

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in Cambodia and abroad. In particular, most of them travelled to Saudi Arabia and Muslim majority countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and Indonesia after receiving scholarships funded by Islamic foundations in Cambodia, by the government or by the destination country. This contact led to the emergence of new currents and versions of Islam, most of them quite radical, being imported by young Cham upon their return to Cambodia. However, according to Farina So, radical messages did not generally find a positive reception in the country.

Overall, growing influences from other Muslim countries are demonstrated by the increasing number of mosques being built in the last decades, often in a Middle Eastern architectural style, and the adoption in many Cambodian Muslim villages of stricter separation of the sexes in communal gatherings and the wearing of Middle Eastern dress, including women going fully veiled.¹⁰

3. CONCLUSION

The Cham seem to be increasingly interested and involved in politics now vis-à-vis previous elections. Officials at registering stations confirmed, the high turnout of Cham registering to vote in Chrang Chamres 2, a commune in Phnom Penh where a large percentage of Cham reside. The same level of participation can apparently be observed not only in the Muslim community in Phnom Penh but also in those spread across the provinces of Cambodia. Well aware of this, both parties are increasingly addressing the grievances of the Cham in exchange for their political support.

Young Cham generations can therefore play a crucial role in bringing change to their community while contributing at the same time to the development of the nation. More educated as well as more open to social media and to new sources of information they seek new opportunities. In this sense, despite the presence of several Cham in the National Assembly and others working as high-ranking officials in several ministries, much has yet to be done to provide Cambodian Muslims with better access to modern education and, as a consequence, better career perspectives.

A further challenge is represented by their freedom of expression in the Kingdom, an issue that they share with other groups of people in the country. Indeed, while the government has done its best to ensure the protection of freedom of religion in Cambodia, the same cannot be said regarding freedom of expression, a right that is particularly sensitive for the new generation and in particular for minorities.

In view of the fast-paced economic and political developments happening in Cambodia, the Muslim community seems ready to emerge and to be a proactive part of these changes rather than a marginalized and underdeveloped minority. In this sense, the upcoming 2018 general elections in Cambodia will represent a turning point for the country, the Cham included. Hence, the near future will tell if the current administration or its successor will fulfil all promises made to make Muslims feel fully integrated in Cambodian society.

¹⁰ Osborne, M. (2014, October 16). Cambodia's Muslims: More orthodox, less integrated. The Interpreter. Retrieved from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cambodias-muslims-more-orthodox-less-integrated>.

