

# Review

Michael Vickery, Cambodia 1975-1982,  
George Allen & Unwin, 1984

Recently the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) carried a detailed review by David Jenkins on Michael Vickery's latest book on the Kampuchean tragedy. Unfortunately Jenkins only deals with those parts of the book, in which the revolution in Democratic Kampuchea is discussed. He omits Vickery's reflections on the Heng Samrin regime and Vietnamese policies in Kampuchea. My review will focus on these issues, too.

## Revolution in Kampuchea

By putting Democratic Kampuchea's revolution in the framework of Kampuchean history, culture and traditional society, Vickery gives a more scholarly analysis than Kiernan, Barnett, Burchett and other apologists of the Vietnamese. Pre-war Kampuchea was not the "peaceful, gentle land", that most western observers wished to believe. Kampuchean society was deeply divided between town plus town-related rice and market-garden producing peasantry and the rest of the peasantry, who were relatively homogeneous and self-sufficient, the author notes (p.5). Vickery's observations fit well with Samir Amin's comparison of class-structures and class-contradictions in Kampuchea with those of most countries in Black Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Vickery's description and evaluation of the Democratic Kampuchean regime is based mainly on his own and Steve Heder's refugee interviews. Other primary sources (official documents, broadcasts, reports of foreign delegation having visited Democratic Kampuchea) are mostly neglected. But the author's conclusion that living conditions in Democratic Kampuchea differed significantly according to time and place (pp.82-143) seems well founded. Generally speaking, conditions were best in areas where a homogeneous peasantry existed, strong revolutionary administrative structures had been established during the anti-American struggle and only relatively few evacuees from the cities ("new people") were mixed with the rural population ("base people"). Both the poor Southwestern zone and the wealthier Eastern zone (until its destruction following So Phim's coup d'etat attempt) belonged to such "good" places. By contrast, conditions were most terrible in those places, where deep class divisions inside the peasantry prevailed, Lon Nol forces had complete control during most of the war and the ratio of "base people" to "new people" was very unfavourable. Such was the case in the rich rice-growing areas of Battambang and Pursat, where rice production and consumption apparently declined from 1975 until 1978. Vickery's description of the favourably developing Southwestern zone (which is confirmed by Khmer refugees I have spoken with in Germany and the DK-base of Phnom Malai) seems intriguing, since the Southwest (Kampot, Takeo, Kandal) under the leadership of Ta Mok proved to be as a stronghold of the CPK-central leadership. Relying on Kiernan's analysis of factional struggle in the CPK ("chauvinist" Pol Pot-faction versus "pro-Vietnamese and moderate" faction plus pro-Cultural Revolution-group), Vickery fails to recognise this fact.

Vickery's assessment of the Kampuchean revolution as a primitive backward peasant revolution (Chapter 5) may be reasonable in some aspects, but on the whole it veils the real nature of the revolution.

It is not true that DK-theory was peasantist and populist rather than communist, as the author asserts (p.285). Vickery is even contradicting himself, when he notes "Pol Pot and company were not just peasantists, but also had a goal of rapid economic development accompanied by the elimination of private ownership of land and equipment" (p.266). Since the beginning of 1977 the DK-government promoted a so-called "socialist revolution". Huge amounts of rice were exported to gain the revenue for industrializing the country. Dozens of machines were imported from China and North Korea. Contrary to Vickery's views (pp.158f) the building of a Kampuchean (light-) industry proved to be not propaganda, but reality.<sup>2</sup> The additional tribute imposed on the rural population together with such unpopular measures as the introduction of communal eating alienated also large segments of the base peasantry. Living conditions deteriorated (except from the Southwest and Northeast, where they apparently improved) during 1977 and 1978, following the DK-government's new policy of industrialization and rapid development of the country's agricultural potential.<sup>3</sup> Thus the failure of Kampuchean revolution does not indicate the failure of a peasant revolution (Vickery, pp.286f) but reveals the difficulties of reconciling the demands of the peasant revolution with the building of a modern socialist state. Interestingly, Vickery is neglecting changes of DK-policy in the second half of 1978. He only mentions that in September 1978 all intellectuals were called back from the countryside to Phnom Penh, where most of them should work in certain ministries, according to their skills (p.165). Further, in October 1978 the DK-government decreed the abolishment of all differences in the status of "base" and "new" people. Some other radical measures were abandoned, too, in order to pursue a new united front policy.<sup>4</sup> By then it was too late. The Vietnamese had already prepared for a full-scale invasion to overthrow the DK-government and to install their own puppets in Phnom Penh. I believe, all evidence indicates that without the Vietnamese invasion conditions in Democratic Kampuchea would have improved in general. However, this view might be unacceptable for all those who are justifying the Vietnamese invasion for whatever ideological reasons, as Vickery does.

## Vietnamese Invasion and Occupation

In Chapter 4, Vickery explains the invasion as a countermeasure for Kampuchean attacks on Vietnamese soil (pp.194ff). Unintentionally the author shows that the Vietnamese would not have invaded Kampuchea so long as they could hope for an Laotian-style solution: "...the overthrow of DK would not have been undertaken until after the East Zone coup of May 1978 which finally destroyed the Cambodian faction friendly to Vietnam...and they would thus certainly not have undertaken an invasion if the East and allied high-level cadres in other zones had remained intact."(p.194)

Vickery contests in detail Heder's thesis<sup>7</sup> that the Vietnamese invasion was followed by social chaos, political suppression and wide-spread famine. He may be partially right that western mass media had grossly overestimated the size of malnutrition and famine in autumn 1979 (pp.218ff). According to independent estimates probably several hundreds of thousands of Kampuchean starved or died due to epidemic diseases during 1979, mostly in the mountainous DK-zones, but

also in the eastern and southwestern parts of occupied Kampuchea and in the environment of Phnom Penh.<sup>8</sup> Even the official Vietnamese propaganda frankly admits the 1979-famine. According to the Vietnamese journalist Vu Can "hunger was to last until September 1980, i.e. for nearly two years, although international assistance was great help in alleviating immediate hardships. Only in early, or in some instances, late 1981 could the scourge of famine be considered as having been warded off in the various regions thanks to the harvest of rice and other crops. Physical exhaustion following many years of hard labor, malnutrition and the hard living conditions of the post-liberations period led to terrible epidemic outbreaks. No village was immune from dysentery and diarrhoea....Malaria, which had been endemic over four-fifths of the territory, broke out in epidemics which threatened the lives of hundreds of thousands of people."<sup>9</sup>

This may be evidence enough that Vickery's relatively positive picture of living conditions in 1979/80 is - to say the least - one-sided. In fact, living conditions deteriorated in the first year of "liberation".

Vickery's description of the Heng Samrin-regime, the Vietnamese occupation and the Kampuchean resistance is not only strongly pro-Vietnamese, but even apologetic contrasting sharply with the other more scholarly parts of his book. Vickery cannot evade the question of Vietnamese settlers on Kampuchean territory. He doesn't worry about the 150-200,000 Vietnamese settlers (estimate given by John C. Monjo of the US State Department in 1983): "This is a number which Cambodian society can easily assimilate, which must represent mostly returning residents, and which does not....raise serious questions about Hanoi's long-term intentions towards Kampuchea" (p.296). The French scholar Marie A. Martin, giving a higher estimate of more than 400 000 settlers, has impressively described in her recent study the dangers of the Vietnamisation of Kampuchea.<sup>10</sup>

Most Kampucheans have realised that a long-term Vietnamese domination will slowly but inevitably lead to a situation, in which the Khmer people will become a national minority in its own country. This very policy of Vietnamisation is helping the three Kampuchean resistance groups in gaining popular support and new recruits for their liberation struggle.

Vickery, however, is unable to present a reasonable explanation of the success of the resistance. His assertion that Pol Pot-forces were gaining new recruits "with gold bullion, cash, and late model Chinese weapons" (p.298) is too ridiculous to be subjected to serious discussion.

"Peace as a Vietnamese protectorate" (Vickery, p.298) is unacceptable for the Kampuchean people, struggling for national self-determination and dignity. As Marie A. Martin expressed it:

"And if the Khmers wish for the future some kind of an agreement with their dangerous neighbours, they never fail to make clear that they will never be the servants of the Vietnamese."

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Vietnamese occupation has brought neither peace nor enough food for the Kampuchean peasantry.

#### NOTES

- 1 FEER, 17 January 1985, pp.38-45.
  - 2 Samir Amin, *The Problems of Transition and of the Building of Socialism: The Lesson of Cambodia*, Dakar, April 1976.
  - 3 Ben Kiernan, *Pol Pot and the Kampuchean Communist Movement*, in: Ben Kiernan & Chantou Boua (ed.), *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942-1981*, pp.227-317.
  - 4 See Marie Alexandrine Martin, *L'industrie dans le Kampuchea democratique (1975-1978)*, in: *Etudes rural*, janv.-sept. 1983, pp.77-110.
  - 5 See Laura Summers, *Cooperatives in Democratic Kampuchea*, unpublished manuscript, p.23.
  - 6 Summary of World Broadcasts, Part 3, 3 November 1978.
  - 7 Stephen R. Heder, *Kampuchean Occupation and Resistance*, Bangkok 1980.
  - 8 See E.A. Meng Try, *Kampuchea: A Country Adrift*, in: *Population and Development Review*, Vol.7, No.2/1981, p.219.
  - 9 Vu Can, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea at the Threshold of its Sixth Year*, Hanoi 1983, pp.14f.
  - 10 Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Le Processus de Vietnamisation au Cambodge*, in: *Politique Internationale*, No.24 (ete 1984), pp.177-191.
- For Vietnamese policy in Kampuchea see also: *Indochina Report-Pre Publication Issue* ("The Vietnamisation of Kampuchea: A New Model of Colonialism"), October 1984.
- 11 Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Le Processus de Vietnamisation au Cambodge*, p.190.