

"The Khmer revolutionaries have actively contributed to the postwar regional integration of Southeast Asia while consolidating Cambodia's position as a nonaligned state."

Defining the Revolutionary State in Cambodia

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ONE OF THE FEW Europeans to visit Cambodia since revolutionaries gained power there in 1975 observed that "the Khmer revolution is much more radical than the Chinese or Russian revolutions." In expressing this view, Kaj Bjork, Sweden's Ambassador to China with accreditation to Phnom Penh, echoed the prevailing consensus in international diplomatic circles. He noted that the Cambodians do not "speak of socialism or communism but of new collectivist ideas," that the leaders of the new regime are "extremely nationalistic, neither Moscow nor Peking oriented" and that Prince Sihanouk appears to have adapted well to "the new conditions and to be cooperating loyally with the new revolutionary leaders. . . ."¹

The ambassador's comments corrected many erroneous assumptions and myths about current Khmer politics. Journalistic speculation about Marxist factions within the revolutionary movement and their anti-national ideological loyalties to Peking, Moscow or Hanoi rapidly gave way to efforts to comprehend these new, radical nationalist, collectivist policies.² Speculation about Sihanouk's allegiance to the revolution and its leadership also receded once the Prince returned to Phnom Penh in January, 1976, to endorse a new constitution drawn up by the revolutionary government and after he was observed by Bjork and others to be attending to a range of public duties normally reserved to Heads of State. The Prince subsequently resigned from this office and from active political life when it was clear that a newly elected Assembly of People's Representatives would designate

former Vice Premier and Defense Minister Khieu Samphan to succeed him. Since his retirement, Sihanouk continues to live in Cambodia where, according to another visiting emissary, he enjoys the respect and affection befitting his status as an eminent nationalist.³ Moreover, the Khmer delegation to the August, 1976, Conference of Nonaligned Nations claimed that the Prince was still consulted on some foreign policy matters.⁴

Local observation and reporting of the wide ranging economic and political changes occurring inside Democratic Kampuchea, as the state is now officially called, have been rare. Available information comes mostly from Khmer or foreign diplomats on formal missions or from exiles and refugees. This need not have been the case. At the time of Kaj Bjork's fact-finding mission, there were indications that other foreign observers and selected journalists would soon be invited on similar two-week tours of inspection.⁵ From the revolutionaries' point of view, it was an appropriate time to have visitors; the end of the year's rice harvest had been good, industrial reconstruction was well under way and "pacification" of frontier regions appeared complete. The Bjork mission, apparently the first of these projected visits, included Peking-based diplomats from Zambia, Egypt, Tunisia and Afghanistan, among others, and a representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The mission, however, was rudely interrupted by a mysterious attack on the northwestern town of Siem Reap on February 25. The Cambodian government accused the United States of conducting two separate bombing raids on the town, killing 15 people and wounding 40 others. Some 300 buildings, including houses and the local hospital, were badly damaged or destroyed. United States officials immediately insisted that no American planes were involved in the incident. The Thai government, anxious to preserve peaceful relations with a highly mobilized, revolutionary neighbor and concerned to erase parallels with last year's Mayagüez affair, was equally quick to deny

¹ *Le Monde*, March 9, 1976; Stockholm radio service, March 6, 1976.

² One such effort is Leonard Silk, "Varied Communist Goals in Asia," *The New York Times*, March 10, 1976.

³ *Le Monde*, May 29, 1976, attributes this comment to a special envoy from Mali.

⁴ *Le Monde*, September 5-6, 1976, in the course of noting hearsay in Bangkok to the effect that the Prince is not allowed to maintain foreign contacts.

⁵ *Le Monde*, March 4, 1976.

that Thai airbases had been used for the attack.⁶

Meanwhile, the visiting diplomats witnessed two large anti-American demonstrations staged by Khmer soldiers, farmers and workers. Vice-Premier Ieng Sary then took them to the scene of the attack so they could inspect the damage for themselves. While most third world diplomats joined the Phnom Penh government in insisting that the attack was an air raid and that only the Americans could have arranged it, because of his inexperience of war Kaj Bjork could not confirm that the crater he saw was made by aerial bombardment. He could describe what he saw only by reference to World War II. Cambodians, in contrast, are only too familiar with and alarmed by war. Their fears of direct foreign intervention are based on such recent destructive experiences as the joint United States-South Vietnamese invasion of 1970, saturation bombings by the United States in 1973 and the Mayagiez confrontation of 1975. Whatever the explanation for the timely or untimely attack, Phnom Penh was obliged to abandon any plans for relaxing restrictions on foreign visitors. Exile and refugee reports accordingly received much more attention than they might have and, as it turned out, than they deserved. This, in turn, served to harden Phnom Penh's attitude towards Western journalism even as the government welcomed a few Asian journalists into the country.

As a result of these developments, information about day-to-day events in Democratic Kampuchea is unavailable. Nevertheless, several major events during the year including the promulgation of a new constitution and the holding of a general election reveal that the revolutionaries are attempting to institutionalize their power and to put the country on a more peaceful footing. They have also stabilized and strengthened Cambodia's international posture as a nonaligned state by normalizing diplomatic relations with several non-Communist states.

THE REVOLUTIONARY CONSTITUTION

On January 5, Cambodia's Information Minister announced the promulgation of a new constitution that sought to translate the "wishes of the people,

⁶ *The New York Times*, February 28, 1976; *Le Monde*, March 2, 1976.

⁷ The Special National Congress was convened by Khieu Samphan, a major intellectual figure in the revolution and at that time the highest ranking minister in the country. He was also Commander-in-Chief of the liberation armed forces. The congress had 311 delegates representing various mass organizations (125), sections of the liberation armed forces (112), Buddhist Monks (20), constituent organizations of the National United Front of Kampuchea (41) and the government (13 ministers). See the press communiqué from the congress in the government's *Bulletin d'information* (Paris), May 9, 1975.

⁸ *Constitution du Kampuchea Democratique* (Paris: Mission du Kampuchea Democratique, January, 1976), p. 7 *passim*.

workers, farmers and the Cambodian revolutionary army . . . [for] a national society characterized by happiness, equality, justice and genuine democracy" into reality. According to the minister, the effort to prepare a constitution reflecting the goals of the revolution began during the Special National Congress of April, 1975, that is, shortly after the liberation and evacuation of Phnom Penh.⁷

During the congress, a constitutional committee was empowered to consult with member organizations of the National United Front "at all levels" and with the royal government, the Cabinet announced by Prince Sihanouk from Peking in 1970, which was reshuffled several times during the war. This committee, the minister reported, produced four consecutive drafts, resubmitting each revised version to all groups involved until a Third National Congress meeting in December agreed to submit the fourth document to the Cabinet. The Cabinet, convened by Prince Sihanouk at the beginning of the year, unanimously approved the document. As described, the procedure employed by the revolutionaries roughly combines Leninist ideas about democratic centralism with traditional peasant beliefs about consultation and consensus in community decision-making. Sihanouk himself devised national congresses of the people and used them for consultative purposes during most of the post-colonial period. In theory, institutional arrangements specified by the constitutional document would have legitimacy.

The preamble and first articles declare that the Khmer national state is the state of the Khmer workers, peasants and other laborers who carried the heaviest burden during the liberation war and who make up 95 percent of the nation's population. All major means of production, including land, factories and machinery, are declared the collective property of "the people's state and the people's community." The "collective principle," as the constitution names it, is to be used in work relations and in government and administration. Thus, every worker has the right and the duty to participate in the running of his factory, and every peasant has the same privileges and obligations in farming the community's land. Wherever the collective principle is irrelevant, an egalitarian one is often prominent. Men and women are declared equal in every field; polygamy and polyandry are equally outlawed; and every citizen has "the right to have spiritual beliefs and religions or equally, the right not to have beliefs or religion."⁸

As for political institutions, the constitution establishes organs for law making (an Assembly of People's Representatives), for law executing (a Cabinet named by and responsible to the Assembly) and for law enforcement (people's tribunals and appeals courts set up by the Assembly). Finally, there is provision for a three-person State Presidium composed of a

President and First and Second Vice Presidents, which represents the state in domestic and foreign affairs, thus subsuming the formal duties of the Head of State. It also serves a supreme court function, because the Presidium is responsible for interpreting the constitution as well as the political "lines" defined by the Assembly.⁹

The promulgation of the constitution was an occasion for public gatherings and commemoration all over the country. The constitution was discussed and, in a sense, sanctified; the solemnity and ritual pattern of these meetings were clearly designed to use the constitutional text as the vital link between the individual and the new revolutionary *cum* cosmic order. In so doing and without specifically raising discussion of the issue, the revolutionaries were replacing monarchy with covenant as the guide to temporal order. Their intent was not lost to Prince Sihanouk. The Prince accordingly announced his retirement from public life on April 2.

Efforts began immediately to honor the Prince as a great patriot and nationalist. The Cabinet voted to give him a pension of \$8,000 a year and to dedicate a monument to him. These gestures simultaneously served to remind the public of his mortal needs and life's work, while diminishing any remnants of traditional power still attached to his royal person. This, too, was essential to protect or establish the superior value of the new constitution, because in the past, royal power was perceived

as superhuman power, to some extent magical, and [mon-

⁹ *Ibid.* The Assembly is a "law-making" rather than a "legislative" body, according to a detailed explanation made by Khieu Samphan. In other words, it will establish general guides for policies which the Cabinet will then develop. The constitution specifies that the Assembly will contain 150 peasant representatives, 50 worker representatives and 50 army representatives, all elected every five years. In general elections in March, former "intellectuals" stood for election as workers' representatives. "Office workers" are also workers or laborers, but they are expected to contribute to the community's real labor by cultivating gardens whenever they are not working in offices.

¹⁰ Thioum Thiounn, *Le pouvoir monarchique au cambodge* (Thesis, University of Paris, 1952), p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153. Members of the Thioum family were prominent supporters of the liberation movement.

¹² A similar fervor animated many urban youth in the period after the 1970 coup deposing Sihanouk. Their sense of opportunity faded even as they rushed to join the army because leaders of the "republican" revolution remained loyal to monarchical tradition (Lon Nol, Sirik Matak) or proved unable to relate parts of monarchical tradition to modern republican practice (Son Ngoc Thanh). Not that an exclusively urban base would have been sufficient for a political revolution in any event. One Phnom Penh youth whom I had known before and after service in the republican army said his experience on the front line was horrifying. Having apparently forgotten his earlier radicalism, he exclaimed that the revolutionary army was composed of "violent children," that the whole of peasant youth had been transformed. Lon Nol could not win the war, he said, because there "are too many peasants in Cambodia."

archs] pretended to be invested by the cosmic order or law for the earthly duties, for shaping the political order of the Kingdom. The goal was to assure universal harmony between microcosm and macrocosm; the means was monarchical power.¹⁰

In times of great social instability and monarchical succession, the same writer argues that an "almost doctrinal conception of power" allowed certain *procedures* to acquire the status of customary law. Subsequently and gradually, the Khmer monarchy became an elective institution, and because succession was not automatic or predetermined, monarchical power was depersonalized. By modern times, the principle of cosmic unity, harmony between society and the universe, was more highly valued than the sovereign person, the King being only one of many specified components of natural unity.¹¹ To this analysis of Khmer political theory it should be added that many monarchical persons compromised the royal institution by collaborating with colonial power from the nineteenth century on. The aristocratic, administrative and peasant revolts that followed greatly divided Khmer society.

The logic of this argument implies that the key to eliminating the monarchy lies in a modified concept of social unity, a design for a conflict-free social order that omits a specified royal component. In announcing an order where "happiness, equality, justice and true democracy reign without rich or poor people, without exploiting or exploited classes and where people live in harmony and the greatest national unity . . .," the preamble of the revolutionary constitution taps profound moral roots in Khmer political tradition even as it breaks with part of that tradition. This lends the revolution almost sacred force, a sense of historical inevitability and momentum that is translated into the desire to promote essential radical social and political changes before the historical moment is lost to others. Like the puritan revolution in England, the Khmer revolution is the expression of deep cultural and social malaise unleashed by a sudden and violent foreign assault on the nation's social structure.¹²

THE USE OF POWER

If the constitution clarifies some of the goals of the revolution, it reveals very little about the current use of revolutionary power. Government officials speak of the efforts of solidarity groups (family-based work teams) and the army in agriculture and industry, without discussing their organization or conditions of work in detail. By all accounts, however, universal conscription for work prevented a postwar famine. In addition, all industrial installations are now in operation and work is being extended on an ambitious national irrigation scheme that will reduce the country's dependence on natural forces in agriculture. In

the near future, the government hopes to exchange surplus rice, fish and rubber for capital goods; its first commercial delegation went abroad in September.¹³ Work thus far has been accomplished by a widely dispersed administrative structure under central direction with transport of supplies and mobile work teams provided by the army.¹⁴

Phnom Penh's new Premier, Pol Pot, in a candid interview with Vietnamese journalists in late July, made only modest claims of success in reconstruction and emphasized the country's continuing problems. He described the rice harvest of 1975-76 as "a basically good crop" but "not a bumper one." In industry, he reported that only existing plants have been brought into operation; no new industries have been built. In the area of social welfare, the Premier revealed that "over 80 percent" of the labor force suffered from malaria and that medical knowledge and drug supplies were inadequate.¹⁵ Finally, he spoke of efforts to increase literacy and technical knowledge: "Before, the old regime built many advanced schools and universities, but a great number of people in the countryside were illiterate." The Premier thought work on literacy "between work periods" and on-the-job technical training were the proper responses to the country's real needs.¹⁶

EXILES AND REFUGEES

Exile and refugee reports begrudgingly confirm most of what the Premier reports. The rice crop was good, they say, but of poor quality; industries are operating but at low efficiency, because of on-the-job training of peasant-soldiers. Most of their observations and criticisms center on the general well-being of the population, however, and in addition to undernourishment, disease and inadequate medical facil-

ities, they accuse the revolutionaries of brutality in their rapid drive to attain self-sufficiency and of using fear as a tool for controlling the society.

There is little doubt of the fear and suffering of the now dispersed urban population, which is unaccustomed to manual labor. It also appears that some work groups, in lieu of other forms of reeducation, are obliged to work harder and longer than others.¹⁷ When questioned about reports of starvation and the fate of former city dwellers, Ambassador Kaj Bjork said he saw no signs of starvation, and noted that although "they make people work in the fields, in the sun, with a hoe and a spade . . . you do not get the impression that they are working very hard all the time."¹⁸ What the urban refugee considers "hard" labor may not be punishment or community service beyond human endurance. But his protest has been effective in Western liberal societies because of the memories it invokes of Russian history. Such associations take what is happening in Cambodia out of its historical and cultural context.

Such confusion has, nevertheless, been cultivated by those exiles who continue to wage the war they have lost and who seek to regain foreign support, primarily from France or the United States. The establishment of a self-proclaimed "exile government" led by Colonel Souvathana and including former ministers of the Lon Nol government was announced in Paris on November 17, 1975. Periodically, this group holds news conferences to bring the statements of refugees and "Khmer Rouge defectors" to the attention of the Western press. At the same time, it publicizes the progress of armed "resistance" groups inside Cambodia.¹⁹ These public pleas for support and the public concern raised by sensational, but false, documents finally provoked the Paris Mission of Democratic Kampuchea to protest that some journalists were degrading their profession and that the French held a major share of the responsibility for allowing these activities to continue.²⁰

The dispute over the truth of exile allegations of "massacres" and brutality came to a head between April and June, 1976, when prominent European magazines printed a series of photographs showing alleged atrocities in Cambodia. The photos, showing men being beaten to death with hoes and axes or pulling ploughs under armed guard, were later exposed as fakes set up by Thai journalists seeking to influence the outcome of elections in Thailand. Emotions aroused in France resulted in more refugee interviews and, finally, in a television program on the efforts of the anti-revolutionary resistance operating near the Thai frontier. Even the Socialist party leader, François Mitterrand, who acknowledged that some documents about the situation were false, felt obliged to criticize the Khmer revolutionaries for forcing social change too rapidly.²¹ The United

¹³ The condition of the labor force after the war and some of the natural and technical obstacles involved in this effort are discussed by Gareth Porter and George Hildebrand, *The Politics of Food* (Monthly Review, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Decentralized administration with collective leadership at regional, sector, commune and village levels seems fairly permanent.

¹⁵ Malaria is endemic to vast areas of Cambodia and a major factor of mortality. See Jacques Migozzi, *Cambodge: faits et problèmes de population* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1973), pp. 108-15.

¹⁶ Literacy efforts and the simplification of Khmer language eliminating unequal status designations are mentioned by Jerome and Jocelyne Steinbach, *Phnom penh libérée* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1976), pp. 20-21 and by *Le Monde*, February 15, 1976.

¹⁷ *Le Monde*, February 18, 1976.

¹⁸ *The New York Times*, March 9, 1976.

¹⁹ *Le Monde*, November 29, 1975; April 23, 1976; July 18, 19, 1976.

²⁰ "Déclaration de la Mission du Gouvernement du Kampuchea Démocratique en France," Paris, June 13, 1976.

²¹ *Le Monde*, May 2-3, 1976. Mitterrand, while no doubt well briefed on Cambodia, takes advantage of any occasion to remind the French public of the non-revolutionary orientation of French socialism.

States press, not to be outdone, produced dramatic news reports and editorials based on refugee and unnamed intelligence sources.²² In retrospect, these reports are partly inaccurate and are still largely unverified. The flap illustrates the powerful and potentially dangerous force that is generated when the political machinations of a few capture the attention of a concerned and uninformed public.

Many exiles who are not openly waging war against the revolution nonetheless contribute to international perceptions in subtle ways. They lament the passing of elite privilege and the urban intellectual meritocracy that characterized the Sihanouk regime. Their position in that order was, however, attained at the cost of neglecting general social and economic development. Consequently, there was a great social and political distance between city and village communities. In 1957, for example, a European traveler visited a Cambodian village with a prominent Khmer novelist as his guide. The writer confessed that he had "forgotten" what a village was really like although he wrote about the villages in his novels. He stroked a child's head in violation of traditional custom.²³ This distance between city and village resulted in some stereotyping. In 1968, another visitor was chaffered past country tribesmen. "Hill people," said the capital city guide to the visitor. "Phnong" savages!, said his son. "Stop and let me look at them."²⁴ In normal, non-revolutionary times, superior or scornful attitudes are softened by paternalism or a sense of noblesse oblige.

Since the revolution, the displaced Khmer elite frequently defend the European educational system and the dual language structure that allowed it to control Khmer society. Setting aside the gentility of non-revolutionary times, they attack the unfortunate who have rejected their leadership:

Phoet who governed Maung-Russey canton . . . is illiterate. Everybody saw that on September 30, 1975, in Battambang when he couldn't read a speech to a meeting of a thousand workers. . . . Now, all village chiefs are selected from among the poorest and the most illiterate.

²² *Time*, April 19, 1976, asserts that 20,000 Khmers have fled to Thailand and that 500,000 to 600,000 are estimated to have died since the end of the war. The first figure more than doubles official Thai Interior Ministry statistics; only refugees and unnamed intelligence sources are cited for the second. *Time's* story was picked up by *Le Monde*, April 13, 1976, and by the *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1976, which reports that "observers agree" that as many as 500,000 may have died and that "perhaps" another 400,000 fled the country. Columnists like Jack Anderson took the issue to editorial pages.

²³ Christopher Pym, *Mistapim in Cambodia* (London: The Travel Book Club, 1960), pp. 24-5.

²⁴ Maslyn Williams, *The Land in Between* (London: William Collins, Ltd., 1969), p. 235.

²⁵ *Le Monde*, April 18-19, 1976.

²⁶ *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1976.

²⁷ *Le Monde*, November 8, 1976.

All documents in French or English have been burned.²⁵

For a few thousand Khmers like the writer of this passage, the proper social pecking order has been turned upside down. The chosen few have been rejected by their natural followers, who add insult to injury by insisting on self-government. As if to emphasize his own sense of inequity, the writer concludes his testimony by accusing the revolutionaries of failing to distribute food equally. This charge is challenged by another refugee, a villager, who says "the thing we liked best" about the new administration was that it divided up all pigs, chickens and ducks in his village equally.²⁶ Refugee accounts are contradictory. Clearly, they reflect the fears and expectations arising from the exile's position in the old society. Most Cambodians leaving the country in 1975 managed to do so without much difficulty as if the regime were acknowledging that they were among the few whose values could not be accommodated in a people's state.²⁷

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

In foreign affairs, too, Democratic Kampuchea seeks to dissociate herself from traditional patterns of domination. Particularly friendly relations with Thailand and Laos in 1976 reflect a desire to establish links with societies having related cultural and linguistic traditions and to break out of the colonial mold of Indochina. This requires an assertion of independence from Vietnam and its revolution. Thus, relations between Vietnam and Kampuchea are proper and formal to emphasize the equality of the partners and to deny any lingering imperial assumptions of Vietnamese hegemony. Meanwhile, the Khmers were quick to send a shipment of their own scarce rice resources to Laos and have engaged in complex and continuous negotiations with Thailand that culminated in that country's reconciliation with revolutionary power in Southeast Asia.

In January, barely two months after diplomatic relations were reestablished, the frontier between Thailand and Cambodia was temporarily sealed. Informal commercial relations (black market trade), which had provided Cambodia with supplementary rice and fuel oil, also ceased. Thousands of work teams were brought into Battambang at this time, and military operations were also noted there. Amidst these troop and labor movements, Khmers making their way to the border were fired upon. They also saw the execution of soldiers wearing the uniforms of Lon Nol's

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