

Notes on today's Maoists who uphold Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge

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The Communist Party of India (Maoist) is one of many democratic, progressive, anti-imperialist, groups fighting the Indian state, a part of the global empire. They are one of many movements fighting for the liberation of the poor in the second most populous country on Earth. They are a movement that deserves our critical support even though, as of today, their organization has refused to give up the dogmatism of the past. One example of this dogmatism is their continued embrace of the Khmer Rouge as the last genuine communist movement with state power. And, for Maoists, upholding Mao's theories is the dividing line between Marxism versus revisionism. So, since, according to the CPI (Maoist), only fellow Maoists are communists in the present era, it stands to reason they also regard the Khmer Rouge of the past and Democratic Kampuchea as Maoist. Around 2002, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) highlights the Khmer Rouge in key documents, including their basic course on Maoism for their cadre:

“After the death of Mao in 1976, the capitalist roaders who had remained in the party staged a coup under the leadership of the arch revisionist Deng Tsiao-ping and took over the control of the party under the nominal leadership of Hua Kuo-feng, a so-called centrist. As Mao had often taught, with political control going over to the hands of the revisionists the socialist base had gone out of the hands of the proletariat. At the same time the leadership of the Albanian Party of Labour switched over to an opportunist line attacking Mao Tse-tung Thought and projecting Mao as a petty bourgeois revolutionary. Though the Khmer Rouge continued to hold power in Kampuchea they were waging a constant struggle against the internal and external enemies of the Revolution and were yet to emerge from the economic ravages of war and consolidate their rule when they were defeated by the Soviet backed Vietnamese Army.” (1)

According to the CPI (Maoist), the Khmer Rouge were the last remaining communist organization with state power:

“The mid-70s saw the final overthrow of many long standing colonial regimes after long guerrilla wars. Thus the US and their puppets were thrown out of Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos in 1975. In Africa the republics of Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, Congo, and Benin were formed in this period. However most of these countries were taken over by puppets or satellites of the new imperialism – Soviet social imperialism. A prominent exception was Kampuchea, where genuine communist revolutionaries – the Khmer Rouge – remained independent until invaded in 1978 by Vietnam on the behest of the Soviet imperialists.” (2)

On the anniversary of Mao's birthday, December 26, 2006, the Central Committee of the CPI (Maoist) further stated at an international conference:

“Many communist movements were ruthlessly crushed as in Kampuchea. Now, after over 150 years of the communist movement we can count the number of genuine communist movements with some mass base on our finger-tips.” (3)

Furthermore, according to some of their critics, People's War Group, the main predecessor group of the CPI (Maoist), did not just praise the Khmer Rouge in print, but distributed Pol Pot badges. Thus they promoted Pol Pot's cult of personality. An editorial in *Dalit Voice* reports:

“If DV can also get hold of the erstwhile PWG's literature boasting of how it distributed Pol Pot badges, our savarna maoists [in this context, a reference to the CPI (Maoist) and its predecessors – ed.] will be totally exposed globally.” (4)

The CPI (Maoist) are not the only Maoists who express their admiration of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge are popular amongst some of the smaller Gonzaloist and Gonzaloist-influenced sects. For example, a Panamanian Gonzaloist-influenced blog reproduces a document that states:

“The experience of the Khmer Rouge revolution is unprecedented and it shows that young people can also do great revolutions and these are not huge heritage of countries or world leaders. There are also 'small' leaders who acquire greatness but their victories pretend to be ignored and maligned worse.” (5)

The Panamanian blog reproduce a video entitled “Kampuchea: Honor and glory to the beloved Comrade Pol Pot, a communist steel and his gift to his beloved Kampuchean people!” (6) Brazilian Gonzaloists also celebrate Pol Pot:

“Today, we celebrate the 87th birth anniversary of the historic cambodian communist leader, Comrade Pol Pot (1925-1998).” (7)

Thus there is a strange convergence of opinion on this point between the CPI (Maoist), some Gonzaloist and Gonzaloist-influenced sects, and the imperialist media. The former praise the Khmer Rouge as “communist.” At the same time, the imperialists pin the “Maoist” and “communist” label on the Khmer Rouge as a way to taint Maoism and communism as a whole. For example, the reactionary media used to refer to the Communist Party of Peru as “the Khmer Rouge of Latin America.”

Several points must be made:

1. Imperialism, not the Khmer Rouge, was the main perpetrator of violence against the peoples of Kampuchea. More bombs were dropped on Indochina during the years of the Vietnam War than were dropped in every country in World War 2. The violence inflicted by imperialism on the peoples of Kampuchea, Vietnam, and Laos reached genocidal levels. Millions were killed by the imperialists. By 1975, already an estimated 10% of the Kampuchean population– 600,000 had died as a result of the Vietnam War. (8) When the Khmer Rouge took power in April in 1975, the country had been devastated. The cities had swelled from refugees fleeing the bombing of the countryside. Food production was disrupted. The Khmer Rouge inherited a crisis situation where they had to attempt social transformation in a country that was ruined and in a country that was under constant threat by imperialists. We must never forget that imperialism caused the most harm to the Kampuchean people, not the Khmer Rouge.
2. The Khmer Rouge were an extremely opportunist movement. They only claimed to be “Maoist” after Mao had died. And they only claimed to be “Maoist” to get aid from the post-Mao, revisionist regime in China. In fact, the Khmer Rouge did not claim to be Maoist in their internal documents or to their

domestic audience. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge denounced the “Gang of Four,” arguably the last remaining leftists in the Chinese Communist Party, as “counter-revolutionary.” Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge praised the revisionist leadership of Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping in an effort to secure support. (9)

3. Despite their rhetoric of independence and self reliance, the Khmer Rouge always aligned politically with whatever forces would give them aid. This opportunism led them into supporting the revisionists in China when the Chinese were giving them support. Later, this opportunism led them into an alliance with Western imperialism. The United States delivered aid to the Khmer Rouge and other anti-Vietnamese and anti-Soviet forces after the Khmer Rouge were driven from power in 1979. It was the United States that was instrumental in keeping The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, which included the Khmer Rouge, as the official representative of Kampuchea at the United Nations up until 1993. As part of their opportunism, the Khmer Rouge quickly dropped the communist label after they were deposed in 1979. In his last interview before his death, Pol Pot was honest about his disregard for communism:

“When I die, my only wish is that Cambodia remain Cambodia and belong to the West. It is over for communism, and I want to stress that... When I say Cambodia [should] be part of the West, I mean that if you belong to the West, at least there is no fascist regime.” (10)

The reality is that the Khmer Rouge were never a real communist organization. Rather, they were a nationalist organization that opportunistically used communist rhetoric and symbols to secure aid. And, when China no longer cared about communist rhetoric, the Khmer Rouge dropped the communist rhetoric altogether in an attempt to befriend Western imperialism, especially the United States.

4. The way that the Khmer Rouge understood socialist construction was not unlike some of the Chinese revisionists. They placed extreme emphasis on economic development carried out by a terrorized, disciplined, and docile population. They embraced a version of the revisionist Theory of the Productive Forces, which overemphasizes economic and technological development at the expense of class struggle. They embraced crackpot schemes to propel Kampuchea forward that ended in disaster. Although their developmental schemes failed miserably, their model put development and economic prosperity at the forefront, not class struggle that would prepare the masses for taking power.

Even though they used rhetoric from China to describe their model, they modified Chinese slogans to suggest their approach would outdo even the Chinese. Thus they claimed to outdo the Chinese “Great Leap Forward” with their own Khmer “Super Great Leap Forward.” They claimed that their Khmer revolution was unprecedented. There is an underlying nationalist chauvinism in this bombast, in their false claim to have outdone previous revolutions, especially the revolutions of their Chinese, Maoist neighbors. Thus like many other movements nationalism accompanied developmentalism at the expense of revolution.

5. The communist movement had always placed great emphasis on ideological education. This was especially true of Mao’s revolution, which elevated the importance of ideology to a whole new level. Ideological education is one of the main forms of class struggle. However, not all ideological education is the same. At its best moments, the Chinese Maoist efforts of ideological remolding were ones that actively involved the population. The masses were not simply told what was right and wrong. Rather,

the masses were motivated to actively question many aspects of the system. Top leaders, even President Liu Shaoqi, were forced to answer questions before the masses during the Cultural Revolution. Big debates on the nature of the revolution, history, aesthetics, and other topics were published in the Chinese press. The Chinese masses were encouraged to discuss and debate the issues. Although the Chinese experience was not perfect, at its best moments, it promoted Socratic questioning, open and free criticism, and science over the blind obedience of Confucianism. Along with this, the Chinese Communist Party was patient with masses. The Communist Party of China criticized the errors of commandism and Confucianism, both of which denied the ability of the masses to think for themselves and lead themselves. In its best moments, the Chinese Communist Party recognized that it was necessary to understand that to transform the masses, it is necessary to take a gradualist approach. This principle is also behind the Maoist leadership method of mass line. Communist leadership must be humble and patient enough to meet the masses where they are. Only by coming to the masses with patience and humility can the trust of the masses be won so that the masses become open to transformation by communist leadership. This principle is also behind the gradualist approach of Maoist collectivization of agriculture, which happened in stages: New Democracy, collectives, then People's Communes. This is part of the meaning behind the most famous Maoist slogan: "Serve the people."

By contrast, in an effort to outdo the Chinese and previous revolutions, to re-establish a golden age of Khmer greatness, the Khmer Rouge did away with Maoist gradualism. The most infamous practice of the Khmer Rouge was the emptying of cities. Whole populations of cities were labeled as "new people," and treated like class enemies. They were stripped of their possessions and marched from the cities to the countryside where they labored at bayonet point. Violence and control of the food supply were two ways they motivated the population. One Khmer Rouge slogan stated: "Hunger is the most effective disease." (11) The Khmer Rouge were also known to persecute minorities. The Khmer Rouge seemed more interested in obedience than transformation of the population to prepare it for active leadership. This is reflected in the Khmer Rouge's descriptions of themselves. Even after they had taken power, the Khmer Rouge, for a long time, did not even tell the population that they claimed to be a communist party. Instead, they referred to themselves simply as "Angkar" or "Organization." Also, they described themselves as omniscient, invincible, immortal. This high-handedness is reflected in some of their slogans:

"Let Angkar pour truth into your head."

"Angkar has [the many] eyes of the pineapple."

The Khmer Rouge's attitude toward dissent was much different than Mao's. The Chinese Cultural Revolutionaries emphasized "big debates," protests, power seizures, criticism, etc. By contrast, the Khmer Rouge looked on dissent very critically:

"You can arrest someone by mistake; never release him by mistake."

"Better to kill an innocent by mistake than spare an enemy by mistake."

The terroristic aspect of the Khmer Rouge is reflected in several slogans that threaten death upon the population:

“He who protests is an enemy; he who opposes is a corpse.”

“If someone is very hungry, the Angkar will take him where he will be stuffed with food.”

“If you wish to live exactly as you please, the Angkar will put aside a small piece of land for you.”

“No gain in keeping, no loss in weeding out,” [also rendered: “To destroy you is no loss, to preserve you is no gain.” – ed] (12)

Think of how different the Khmer Rouge’s approach is to Mao’s approach. Written in April, 1956, Mao’s “Ten Major Relationships” was produced amid reports of excessive executions during the Stalin era in the Soviet Union:

“We must keep up the policy which we started in Yenan: ‘No executions and few arrests’. There are some whom we do not execute, not because they have done nothing to deserve death, but because killing them would bring no advantage, whereas sparing their lives would. What harm is there in not executing people? Those amenable to labour reform should go and do labour reform, so that rubbish can be transformed in something useful.

Besides, people’s heads are not like leeks. When you cut them off, they will not grow again. If you cut off a head wrongly, there is no way of rectifying the mistake even if you want to.

If government departments were to adopt a policy of no executions in their work of suppressing counter-revolutionaries, this still would not prevent us from taking counter-revolution seriously. Moreover it would ensure that we would not make mistakes, or if we did they could be corrected. This would calm many people.

If we do not execute people, we must feed them. So we should give all counter-revolutionaries a way out of their impasse. This will be helpful to the people’s cause and to our image abroad.

The suppression of counter-revolution still requires a long period of hard work. None of us may relax our efforts.” (13)

This injunction by Mao against summary executions reflects how the Chinese revolutionaries emphasized the importance of “uniting all who could be united,” “big debates,” mass line, populism, patience and humility when dealing with not only the masses, but even many enemies.

Serve the people truth, not falsehood

In the 1970s, during and after Mao’s death, the Chinese press referred to the Khmer Rouge in glowing terms. However, the Chinese press referred to numerous states and movements in a similar way. For example, numerous Eastern European and national liberation movements were labeled “socialist” by the Chinese even though such regimes and movements would not be considered as such by Maoist nor

Leading Light standards. When examined closely, the Khmer Rouge has never deserved the label. Just as there are communist movements that have adopted national liberation as a means of advancing communism, there are also nationalist movements that have adopted communist rhetoric and policies as a way to gain support in the pursuit of purely nationalist goals. The Khmer Rouge are the latter, not the former. Although the Khmer Rouge was once an anti-imperialist movement that drove the United States out of Kampuchea, like other narrowly nationalist movements, they later opportunistically aligned with the imperialists and revisionist anti-communists when it suited their purposes.

It is important today to come to terms with the real history of revolutionary and national liberation movements. Just because a movement claims to be “revolutionary” or “communist” does not make it true. There is a long history of movements that “wave the red flag to oppose the red flag.”

Revolutionaries in China used to warn: “Be careful not to board a pirate ship.” Just because *Beijing Review* in the 1970s identified the Khmer Rouge in such a way does not mean they were. If today’s Maoist movement is ever going to advance scientifically, then it must deal honestly with history. One of the irony of ironies is that many of the same Maoists who uphold Pol Pot denounce Lin Biao as a Confucian and authoritarian with no real evidence at all. Such dogmatism would be funny if it weren’t so sad, if lives were not on the line.

Mao himself noted the importance of the correct, scientific line:

“The correctness or otherwise of the ideological and political line decides everything. When the Party’s line is correct, then everything will come its way. If it has no followers, then it can have followers; if it has no guns, then it can have guns; if it has no political power, then it can have political power. If its line is not correct, even what it has it may lose. The line is a net rope. When it is pulled, the whole net opens out.” (14)

The correct, scientific line is the key to victory. The incorrect line only leads to defeat. It is a sign of the weakness of the Maoist movement today that even though they claim to be scientific and materialist, the reality is that they are dogmatic, metaphysical, idealists that share much in common with religious sects. The dogmatic embrace of the Khmer Rouge by a Maoist organization so prestigious as the CPI (Maoist) reflects the sad state of affairs. Thus the claim by Maoism that it is the highest stage of revolutionary theory rings hollow today. Of today’s Maoist bombast, perhaps Mao would repeat his famous words: “It is an empty drum that beats the loudest.”

We can do better. If we are to initiate the next great wave of revolution, it is necessary to articulate a truly liberating vision of the future. It is also necessary that our vision of the future be based on genuine science, not old dogma. Those who uphold the Khmer Rouge today set themselves at odds with the advances of revolutionary science. We hope that those Maoists who continue to uphold the Khmer Rouge correct their line on this and other questions. We encourage the remnants of the Maoist movement to advance to the next, highest level of revolutionary science, Leading Light Communism. The masses deserve the best.

Notes

1. <https://ajadhind.wordpress.com/marxism-leninism-maoism-basic-course/>
2. *ibid.*

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11. Locard, Henri. *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar*. Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2004
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