

Straight Talk on the Trial of Pol Pot

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In the end of July, ABC News broadcast parts of a videotape showing a trial of Pol Pot in territory controlled by Khmer Rouge forces in western Cambodia.

Pol Pot has been the long-time leader of the Khmer Rouge (which means "Red Cambodians"). The Khmer Rouge armed forces seized power in Cambodia in 1975 after many years of guerrilla warfare. They led the country for three years. Then they were driven out of power and back into the countryside by a 1979 Vietnamese invasion.

With news that Pol Pot had been arrested and put on trial, the U.S. media reissued their familiar charges about "killing fields" during the years 1975-79 when Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia. They insisted that Pol Pot be handed over to an international tribunal to be tried for genocide.

Nowhere is it mentioned that for years the U.S. bombed and invaded Cambodia in an attempt to defeat the anti-imperialist forces, totally wreck the country's economy and punish the people of Cambodia. Given this bloody history, the U.S. imperialists have no right to speak on what is good for Cambodia--and no right to judge those who fought them.

In the hands of the western media, the story of Cambodia has become a crude anti-communist morality tale. *New York Times* reporter Elizabeth Becker appeared on TV again recently as an official "expert" to hammer home the message: Cambodia, she said, shows that attempts to carry out "wonderful-sounding ideals" about equality using "social engineering" produces a disaster for people.

To make the facts fit this message, official discussion rips the Cambodian events out of any recognizable context. Cambodia is portrayed as a gentle, peasant land destroyed by communist revolution. In fact, any serious approach to the events in Cambodia has to start with the imperialist invasion of Indochina launched by the U.S. in 1965 and the class nature of Cambodian society.

U.S. Destruction and the Challenges of the Year Zero

"Traditional" Cambodia was a brutal feudal society that *needed* a revolution. About 80 percent of the people were peasants, most of them extremely poor and exploited by a class of government officials based in urban strongholds. Cambodia's absolute monarchy rested on a military that repeatedly suppressed peasant uprisings. The country was colonized by France in the late 1800s. In one famous incident, 900 workers died constructing a colonial resort at Bokor during nine months of forced *corvée* labor.

As the French imperialists were defeated in Indochina, the U.S. moved in to assert influence and control. In Cambodia the U.S. maneuvered for influence through aid and arms to the government of Prince Sihanouk, while backing reactionary armed forces in opposition to Sihanouk.

In the 1960s the Khmer Rouge, led by Angkar (which means "the Organization" in the Khmer language), launched a just revolutionary armed struggle by establishing rural base areas among the

peasants. (Angkar later publicly named itself the Communist Party of Kampuchea--CPK.) Their goals were to overthrow feudalism, develop an independent new economy, and drive any foreign dominating forces out of Cambodia.

As revolutionary forces made progress in Indochina, U.S. forces invaded in 1965. Within a few years, the U.S. had 500,000 troops in Vietnam.

Unknown to most of the world, the U.S. also launched a "secret war" of massive bombardment of the neighboring countries Cambodia and Laos--targeting the rural base areas of the guerrilla forces. The U.S. expanded its aggression against Cambodia. In 1969 a U.S.-instigated coup overthrew Sihanouk and brought the right-wing general Lon Nol to power. Then, in 1970, President Nixon ordered a land invasion of eastern Cambodia to attack Vietnamese liberation forces based there. It was a defeat for the U.S.--their armies had to withdraw. *And the Khmer Rouge made major advances.*

The U.S. responded with one of the most intense and protracted air wars in history. They dropped over 500,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia between 1970 and 1973--three times what the U.S. dropped on Japan during World War 2. In 160 days of "carpet bombings" in 1973, U.S. planes dropped over 240,000 tons, concentrated on the main farming areas along the Mekong River.

This was the real genocidal episode in Cambodia and it marked everything that followed.

In April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge troops took the capital Phnom Penh, Angkar and the masses of people faced extremely difficult conditions. Unable to win the war, the U.S. had set out to wreck and punish the country. Agriculture was in ruins. At least 500,000 people had died during the war--many because of the U.S. bombing. About two million people--a third of the country's population--had fled the countryside into Phnom Penh, where they faced starvation.

At the beginning of what Angkar called "Year Zero," the challenges were huge: a new state system, agriculture, and industry had to be rebuilt, virtually from scratch, in one of the poorest countries of the world--under constant threat of new invasion.

In May 1975, U.S. President Gerald Ford staged the so-called Mayaguez incident, launched new air raids and destroyed Cambodia's *only oil refinery*.

Under these conditions, any government leading Cambodia would have had to take emergency measures to ensure survival for the masses of people. In the process, the Khmer Rouge attempted to replace the old semifeudal, semicolonial society with their vision of a new independent Democratic Kampuchea.

Any serious analysis of the Khmer Rouge has to start with understanding these conditions--which is precisely what the standard tales about "Khmer Rouge genocide" try to hide.

Dishonest Distortions

The western press repeats a standard formula: "at least a million people died under Pol Pot." When people hear this, they are supposed to believe that one million people were *killed by Pol Pot*.

In fact, these numbers include *everyone* who died from starvation, disease and political execution in the 1975-79 period between wars--and assigns blame for each of those deaths to the new government of the Khmer Rouge-led Democratic Kampuchea.

Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman devote a useful chapter in their book *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina & the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* to documenting how the official myth of "Khmer Rouge genocide" was systematically created using false information and distortions.

In Cambodia, after 10 years of war, revolution, invasion, bombardment, famine and dislocation, the country was dotted with mass graves. Many people, certainly hundreds of thousands, died during the years that the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia. Their skulls and bones are offered as proof of "Khmer Rouge atrocities." In fact, the overwhelming majority of those who died during the 1970s died of war, bombardment, starvation and disease.

Michael Vickery, in his book *Cambodia 1975-82*, shows why no one knows how many Cambodians died during the wars and upheavals of the 1970s. There were no reliable population figures before the fighting. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (*The Nation*, June 25, 1977) point out that John Barron and Anthony Paul, who wrote the first widely publicized book accusing the Khmer Rouge of genocide, estimated that only about 10 percent of those who died in that hard first year of 1976 were from political executions. Vickery's account covering the larger period from 1975-79 suggests a higher range estimate for the number who died from execution, but he emphasizes the lack of precision inherent in all the data and estimates concerning this period.

A former U.S. Foreign Service officer in Phnom Penh, David Chandler, reported that the U.S. government itself estimated that a million Cambodians were going to die of starvation in the years after the U.S. bombardment. Then--when hundreds of thousands *did* die of starvation--the U.S. media machine claims all this was "auto-genocide" by those who *opposed* the U.S. aggression.

Any serious international tribunal on genocide in Cambodia would have to indict the U.S. war-makers Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, General Westmoreland, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, Gerald Ford and all the rest.

A Standard for a Serious Analysis

The defenders of capitalist/imperialist society examine the experience of Cambodia from *their* perspective--from the perspective of defending and justifying capitalist society. In these accounts, the disruption of the old society is itself considered a crime. The fact that the upper class elite had to do manual labor under the Khmer Rouge, or that young people and women should be encouraged to break from the traditional family control, or that officials of the old society were deposed and often punished--these things are portrayed as atrocities.

Clearly, analyses that start from *that* bourgeois class stand cannot serve our struggle for liberation. For oppressed people, a serious analysis has to approach these experiences from a completely different point of view, using a completely different standard--seeking to make radical ruptures in traditional ideas and traditional property relations.

In a discussion of Cambodia, Chairman Avakian asked (*Revolution/Fall 1990*): "How do you break with these very oppressive and exploitative relations and traditions, customs, and cultures in a way that... fundamentally *relies on the masses* and acts on the understanding that *they* are the ones that have to carry out these social transformations. Not that this will just happen spontaneously--it requires that the masses have the leadership of a vanguard party, *but* a vanguard party that precisely relies fundamentally on the masses to carry this out and doesn't try to impose it from the top down."

Evaluating the experience of the Khmer Rouge is a very complex and difficult problem. Reliable information and analysis is hard to come by and fragmentary. But some initial investigation points to several important questions that would have to be looked at in the course of any serious evaluation of the experience of Cambodia and the approach of the Communist Party of Kampuchea.

The Relocation of People and the Reconstruction of Agriculture

The bourgeois press often accuses the Khmer Rouge of atrocities because they immediately evacuated Phnom Penh after taking it in April 1975. This evacuation is portrayed as an irrational and cruel "death march."

In fact, the Khmer Rouge had real reasons to fear that the U.S. might launch bombing raids to attack Phnom Penh and the people there. The U.S. had done this during the 1968 Tet offensive when Vietnamese fighters seized parts of Hue and Cholon.

In addition, the huge refugee encampments around Phnom Penh had only days worth of food stocks. Eight thousand people there had already starved to death in the month before liberation. Hospitals were terribly overcrowded, and over half the country's doctors had left for exile. This objective situation has to be taken into account in evaluating the decision to evacuate Phnom Penh.

At the same time, the lines and policies that were then carried out need to be evaluated. The new government of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) put the whole country on an emergency footing--and moved the relocated people into peasant villages or uninhabited forest areas to plant rice, create new irrigation systems, restore agriculture, and rebuild roads. Vickery estimates that after overthrowing Lon Nol, the Khmer Rouge quickly relocated over 2.5 million people to the countryside.

This was undoubtedly a wrenching process. In many areas people had to scratch for roots and edible plants until the first crops could be harvested. There were often few tools, and many of the relocated people knew little about how to farm the new areas. There were many deaths from starvation and disease.

But it was also wrenching in a political sense--strangers were moved in large numbers into isolated and insulated villages, resources were strained--and there were inevitably sharp conflicts over who would rule, who would control the land, and how food, tools and seed grain would be distributed.

Vickery reports a new political arrangement was envisioned where the population was divided into three categories: Full rights, Candidate, and Deposittee. "The Full rights people were poor peasants, the lower middle strata of the middle peasants, and workers. Candidates were upper middle peasants,

wealthy peasants and petty bourgeoisie; while the Depositees were capitalist and foreign minorities." People with links to Lon Nol's officers and police were reportedly made Depositees.

Vickery writes that these divisions often were applied, in practice, so that the "really operative division was between `new' people (evacuees) and `old' or `base' people...who had lived in the revolutionary areas since before April 1975. This division is all the more meaningful in that even peasants from non-revolutionary areas were classed as Depositees, and in some cases there was a distinction between base area Depositees (former capitalists or non-Khmer) and `new' Depositees from the city." Some sources report that peasant refugees who had fled to the cities were sometimes accused of having "defected" to the Lon Nol side and were therefore treated as politically suspect. These reports require more investigation.

It would be important to understand better the line and policies of the Khmer Rouge in constructing the new revolutionary power. Were they constructing a revolutionary dictatorship of workers and peasants, and what classes did they see as allies? What were their policies on "land to the tiller" and on land collectivization? Did they envision a united front led by the proletariat?

Vickery and other sources point out that the line and policies that guided reconstruction varied tremendously from region to region, and even between neighboring towns. It would also be important to understand better the *causes* for the differences in line.

In many cases, these new arrangements had to be set up almost overnight--with little or no participation of trained political cadre. How much of the practical policies flowed from the spontaneous actions and outlooks of the "base" peasants? Cambodian villagers had long-standing hostilities toward towns and townspeople. Some may have resisted uniting with large numbers of strangers entering their villages.

To what degree did organizational and political weaknesses in the Angkar contribute to incorrect and uneven policies? Vickery and other sources report that the centralized connections between Khmer Rouge of various regions were extremely loose--and that widely different policies were carried out in the country's seven main Khmer Rouge regions. This suggests that lack of strong party organization may have been a serious problem in this movement.

To understand what happened in Cambodia it would be important to evaluate the line associated with Pol Pot that eventually emerged out of intense internal struggles within the Angkar/CPK *after* the seizure of power. As a unified command was consolidated, the Angkar/CPK attempted to quickly abolish all money, wages systems, marketplaces, religion, and private ownership of land and productive forces.

These policies are often called "ultra-Maoist" in the western press. But in reality, they are quite different from the policies of New Democratic Revolution carried out by Mao in the liberation of China. And Mao developed a whole theory which saw the socialist transition to communism as a protracted and wave-like process of struggling to overcome class society through relying on the masses of people.

Vickery suggests that the implementation of these new consolidated policies coincided with a change in the use of political execution. Before 1977, he writes, extreme punishment was mainly used against officers and officials associated with the crimes of the old regime. After 1977, he believes the numbers

of executions rose and involved more punishment of both "new" people and "base" people who ran afoul of the new campaigns and the new authorities. Again, more investigation would be needed to evaluate the truth of such reports, and to understand the extent to which incorrect methods were used to enforce the policies of the new power.

The Problem of Nationalism

It is clear that Khmer Rouge politics were heavily colored by an intense Khmer nationalism. There were apparently attempts to forcibly suppress the language, religion and culture of minority nationalities--such as the Moslem Cham people. Vietnamese people living in Cambodia were reportedly treated very harshly. Vickery's report that national minorities *as a whole* were categorized as "depositees" suggests that such policies were not just local errors.

Such narrow nationalism may also have played a role in the alliance between the Khmer Rouge and capitalist roaders in China. The Khmer Rouge movement had developed close ties to Maoist China during their years of guerrilla warfare. But in September 1976, a year after the CPK came to power, Mao Tsetung died and his close allies were arrested in a counterrevolutionary coup. Pol Pot traveled to China in September 1977 in his first public appearance and, on behalf of the DK government and the CPK, embraced the new reactionary leaders of China.

The bourgeois press often connects Pol Pot with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that Mao led in China--but in practice, Pol Pot associated himself with forces like Deng Xiaoping who overthrew the Maoist forces and reversed the Cultural Revolution.

Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge movement only held overall power in Cambodia for three short years. The internal struggles between Pol Pot and the CPK forces of Cambodia's eastern region erupted into open military fighting--which Vietnam used as a pretext to invade Cambodia and set up a new government allied to them. The Khmer Rouge was driven back into rural base areas in western Cambodia--where they still exist as an armed force. At the time, a section of the population clearly fought to defend the Democratic Kampuchean government--and for years a sizable section of the population supported Pol Pot for his incorruptible reputation, his identification with the peasants and his relentless fight against foreign domination.

Any *revolutionary* critique of Pol Pot requires much deeper investigation into the events and policies of this complex experience. But meanwhile, Pol Pot's recent trial in the jungle appears to be an attempt by forces within the Khmer Rouge to make themselves acceptable to factions within the Cambodian government and to the world's imperialist powers.

Pol Pot kicked the U.S. imperialists out of Cambodia. And *that's* why they hate him. By vilifying Pol Pot, the U.S. is pressing ahead with their attempts to slam the door on all dreams of social change--to declare that communist revolution and even national independence for oppressed countries must be rejected and denounced. They cannot be allowed to get away with this.