

Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984, 361 pp., £7.95 pbk.).

Colonialists, Albert Memmi observed, were perpetually explaining, justifying and reasserting the necessity of the fate of colonised peoples. They were of two sorts: those who eagerly accepted their role with its attendant powers and status distinctions, and those who did not. The dissenting sojourners, typically left-wing intellectuals, could ill support the violence, profit-taking and class orders inherent in imperialism. In theory, they were drawn to a defence of the downtrodden. In practice, they were quickly alienated from the struggles of the oppressed, because colonised peoples repaid violence with more violence and with nationalistic movements incompatible with European revolutionary visions. As a highly personal and subjective contribution to the history of the Pol Pot regime (1975-78) and its successor, the Heng Samrin regime (1979- ), *Cambodia: 1975-1982* reproduces in contemporary form the dilemma of the left-wing colonial activist. The discussion is heavily overlaid and deeply flawed by the author's often uncontrolled hostility to American imperialism, his alienation from the allegedly 'chauvinistic' struggles of the Cambodians and his overweening confidence in the salvation regime wrought by the Vietnamese: a liberation of the oppressed under familiar Marxist colonial auspices. For readers who do not share such views, many parts of this closely argued, lengthy polemic will make unpleasant reading. This is unfortunate, for at least part of the book, chapter 3, merits the attention of all observers of contemporary Cambodia.

In defence of an acceptably revolutionary Cambodia, the brunt of Vickery's argument is directed against writers and scholars who have promoted highly sensational or unfairly negative 'Standard Total Views' of the Pol Pot and Heng Samrin regimes. The STV of Pol Pot, for example, as conveyed in best-sellers such as *Cambodia: Year Zero* or the *Reader's Digest* book, *Murder of a Gentle Land*, holds that the revolutionary regime sought to execute all intellectuals and formerly high-ranking civil servants and officers, to abolish schools, Buddhism, modern health services, to destroy family life and to deprive the population of an adequate diet. The STV of the Heng Samrin regime claims the Vietnamese have taken all important administrative posts, are imposing the study of their language, intend to absorb Cambodia into an Indochina federation and are sponsoring immigration policies which will lead to the disappearance of the Khmers as a race. In both instances, and within the limits set by himself, Vickery marshals convincing evidence from refugee and scholarly sources to demonstrate that most of these oft-repeated charges reflect the self-serving complaints and fabrications of anti-communist refugees. He observes that the ability of the refugees to provide valuable, objective information when questioned carefully means that many inaccuracies in mainstream media reporting 'owe more to the writers than to their sources'.

In chapter 3, there is a credible, if partial, non-standard evaluation of the zero years under Pol Pot. Employing refugee informants to advantage, Vickery argues that conditions varied enormously from region to region in the war-devastated country. Social developments were nowhere wholly consistent with regime policies or expectations, or with the most extravagant criticisms of refugee dissidents. Hardships were greatest, he concludes, in areas where revolutionary

organisation was poorest, local contradictions most acute and natural conditions least hospitable. Efforts were made in many regions to provide public services, especially medical services, but these did not measure up to the best pre-war standards or to basic requirements, thereby creating wide scope for public grievance. Overall, Vickery estimates there were 740,800 deaths in excess of normal mortality rates, most of these the result of hunger, exhaustion and illness. Between 2-300,000 deaths are attributed to executions. Although subject to many unknown factors, carefully noted by the author, these rough estimates are certainly more realistic than the sweeping claims of 2-4 million dead published elsewhere.

Subsequent chapters on the Heng Samrin regime, the nature of the Pol Pot revolution interpreted from the perspective of world history and a postscript on 1983 are too constrained by the author's *a priori* assumptions and loyalties to be of general interest. The arguments fail to transcend a stereotypical view of Cambodian society comprised, on the one hand, of a class of people described as 'spoiled, pretentious, contentious, status-conscious' or at best, 'soft, intriguing, addicted to city comforts and despising peasant life', and on the other, of a class of brutish peasants whose 'exotic' mores include a disposition to violence. Nor do they account for the apparently exceptional development of this society along 'chauvinist' lines, bypassing it seems, normal nationalism. Errors in the reporting of communist party history undermine the attempt to dismiss the Pol Pot revolution as partly utopian, partly anarchist and mostly peasant populism. The effort to deny Pol Pot any 'true Marxist' credentials is most strained in the hasty, misleading treatment accorded to the rapid expansion of the industrial sector between 1975-78. A tendency to avoid inconvenient realities or the realities of imperial power is most conspicuous when the 'legitimacy' of the Heng Samrin group is traced to the 1950s.

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