

# Pol Pot Plans the Future

Confidential Leadership Documents from  
Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977

David P. Chandler  
Ben Kiernan  
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Monograph Series 33/Yale University Southeast Asia Studies  
Yale Center for International and Area Studies

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**Translated and Edited by  
David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua**

**With a Preface by David P. Chandler and Ben Kiernan**

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 88-50289

International Standard Book Number: 0-938692-35-6

©1988 by Yale University Southeast Asia Studies

New Haven, Connecticut 06520

Distributor:

Yale University Southeast Asia Studies

Box 13A Yale Station

New Haven, Connecticut 06520

Produced with funds provided by the  
Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.



# Contributors

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DAVID P. CHANDLER holds degrees from Harvard University, Yale University, and the University of Michigan. From 1958 to 1966 he was a U.S. Foreign Service Officer and worked for two years (1960-1962) in Phnom Penh. Since 1972 he has lectured in Southeast Asian History at Monash University in Melbourne where he is now Associate Professor of History and Research Director of the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies. His major publications are *The Land and People of Cambodia* (Philadelphia, 1972); *Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794-1848* (1974), his doctoral dissertation; *A History of Cambodia* (1983), which dealt with Cambodian history up to 1953, and *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*, ed., with Ben Kiernan (Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph No. 25, 1983). He is now working on a history of Cambodia between 1945 and 1979, and on a biography of Pol Pot.

BEN KIERNAN was born in Melbourne in 1953 and graduated from Monash University in 1974. From 1975 to 1977 he was a tutor in Southeast Asian History at the University of New South Wales. He earned his Ph.D. in history from Monash University in 1983, served as a post-doctoral fellow there in 1984 and 1985, and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Southeast Asian

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# Acknowledgements

In preparing these texts for publication we have incurred several debts of gratitude which we're delighted to acknowledge.

Funds provided by the Christopher Reynolds Foundation enabled Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua to carry out field work in the Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) in 1980. The *New Statesman* helped to defray Chanthou Boua's expenses while she was translating Document 8 and a grant from the Vice Chancellor's Research Fund at Monash University was helpful to her while she was translating Document 3. Documents 2, 5, and 7 were translated by Ben Kiernan while he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Monash in 1984-85. Document 1 was translated in 1986.

Most of the work was carried out at Monash University using the facilities of the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies. Pam Sayers, Assistant to the Centre and a long-suffering and competent friend, helped us in numerous ways, and Sally Kiernan typed the documents themselves from drafts which varied in readability. The map was prepared by Margaret Pitt, and the photograph that serves as a frontispiece was generously provided by the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Once again we are happy to express our gratitude to Jim Scott of Yale University, who agreed to publish our proposed collection sight unseen, and to Kay Mansfield, who has shepherded it into print.

Over the years our points of view about Cambodian history, which occasionally coincide, have been hammered out in many hours of conversation. While we have also benefitted from the insights of many colleagues in Australia and overseas, it seems appropriate to single out our intellectual debt to Michael Vickery. The book itself has been a collective effort from the start. This means, among other things, that we all accept responsibility for any errors that have crept into it.

DPC BK CB  
February 1988

## Provenance of these Documents

The eight documents from Democratic Kampuchea reproduced in translation in this book have been selected from a large collection compiled from a variety of sources.

Document 1 was made available to me by a Khmer who had discovered it in Phnom Penh in early 1979. Document 2 was kindly provided to Chanthou Boua and me by Timothy Carney in early 1979 (and when our copy was mislaid, once again in 1984). I copied Documents 3 to 7 in 1980 from the originals held in the Institute of Social Science, Phnom Penh. Document 8 was copied in 1980 by Anthony Barnett from the original in Tuol Sleng Museum, Phnom Penh, and was analyzed in Anthony Barnett, Chanthou Boua, and Ben Kiernan, "Bureacracy of Death: Documents from Inside Pol Pot's Torture Machine," *New Statesman*, 2 May 1980.

I wish to thank all the people who made these documents available to us. I hope this collection helps to correct the misapprehension that most documents from Democratic Kampuchea are inaccessible.

BK  
December 1986



# Preface

*David P. Chandler and Ben Kiernan*

The documents assembled in this book spring from an important period in the history of the group that generated them, the leaders of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Document 1 was composed shortly before the Party officially took over the reins of power in Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Document 8, the last, was written shortly after DK forces began the systematic, aggressive forays into Vietnam which led in December 1978 to a Vietnamese invasion and the collapse of the regime.

The fourteen months between March 1976 and May 1977 marked the high point of the CPK's efforts to control and transform Kampuchea, unrestricted by sharing power with anyone else and not yet distracted by waging war.

Despite the importance of the documents, very few people were allowed to read them. Only one, Document 2, was ever published in a journal aimed at Party cadre. The others have come to us in typewritten form, except for Document 8—Hu Nim's forced "confession"—which was originally hand-written. The distribution of the documents varied, but readership was tightly controlled.

When we read the documents, we overhear the leaders of the CPK talking among themselves. Naturally, the texts contain many revelations, but a good deal remains hidden from us. The language the documents employ is often ambiguous, and some issues appear to have been left purposely obscure, perhaps to allow the CPK's leaders greater freedom of maneuver.

Except for Hu Nim's confession, the documents appear to have been prepared before or after meetings of these leaders. Some, like Documents 1 and 5, are in the form of notes that summarize more detailed discussions.

Others, including Documents 2, 4, and 6 seem to be transcriptions of speeches. Document 4 is attributed to the Secretary of the CPK Central Committee, Pol Pot, who probably delivered Document 6 originally as a speech as well.

Before examining the documents, two further points need to be made about the context in which they were prepared. The first is that 1976 and 1977 were tumultuous years in two countries that were important to DK: China and Thailand. Mao Zedong's death in early September 1976 and the uncertainty attending the power struggle in China may well have made DK's leaders worry, at least initially, about continuing Chinese support, and may also have encouraged more pro-Vietnamese elements within the Party to seek to increase their influence on policy matters. In Thailand, the abrupt and violent end of parliamentary democracy in October 1976 imperilled the co-operation that had developed between DK and the Bangkok government, which was now much more vigorously anti-Communist. In other words, at the end of 1976 China's continuing patronage of DK could not be taken for granted, and CPK leaders probably felt that DK was hemmed in to the east and west by hostile powers.<sup>1</sup>

The second contextual point is that the fortunes of the CPK leaders began to change in September and October 1976 in response to a sequence of events, possibly involving an unsuccessful *coup d'etat* which is by no means clear.<sup>2</sup>

Documents 1 through 4, composed between March and August 1976, exude a verbal optimism about the prospects of achieving socialism in Kampuchea. After September, the Party's Four-Year Plan was temporarily withdrawn, the Party decided to keep its existence a secret after weighing the advantages of going public, and the documents themselves become darker, less hopeful, and more vindictive. Documents 6 and 7, in particular, teem with references to "enemies" (*khmang*) within and outside the CPK, comparing them at one point to "microbes" (*merok*) which would destroy the revolution unless destroyed themselves, presumably *en masse*.

Earlier studies and log-books from the DK interrogation center at Tuol Sleng reveal that from October 1976, there was a substantial increase in the number of men and women who were arrested, tortured, and executed by the regime.<sup>3</sup> Further, whereas victims earlier in the year had generally been charged with criminal offenses or with sympathy toward earlier regimes, those singled out from October onward were largely people accused of treachery to the CPK and of collusion with its enemies, particularly Vietnam. By 1978, the brush-fire of purges which had spread through 1977 was burning out of control in much of the country and particularly in parts of it

that bordered on Vietnam<sup>4</sup>. The number of victims in due course summoned up comparisons of DK with Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia.

A good deal of evidence from 1977 and 1978, indeed, supports the contention that in these years DK was tearing itself apart. Power in the countryside was usually exercised by young, illiterate, heavily armed men and women, who ate better and did less work than anyone else. For ordinary people, available medicines were harmful or non-existent, work was unrelenting, punishment severe, and food scarce and of low quality. Under these conditions, about a million Kampucheans (estimates vary; this is a relatively low one) suffered regime-related deaths from mistreated illness, malnutrition, overwork, beatings, and executions.

Most studies of DK have relied heavily on oral evidence provided by survivors. Repeatedly, and understandably, these men and women have said they are unable to *explain* what happened in Kampuchea between 1975 and 1979. To many of them, the regime was merely murderous, insane, and unjust. To most, what happened to them personally was conjured up by Pol Pot. Others blamed "Communists" for what went wrong.

Explanations like these are adequate for people attempting to reconstruct their lives, but they can be amplified by the documents assembled in this book. They reveal that what one historian has called the "howling wilderness"<sup>5</sup> of 1977-1979—even if never consciously intended by CPK's leaders—can be traced directly to the ideas and policies which these men and women set down first on paper and then into motion in Kampuchea in the second half of 1976. What happened after was a disaster, but few people reading the documents will agree that it was accidental. Decisions taken at the Center and documented here were honored with varying degrees of literalness, but seldom faulted, throughout DK.<sup>6</sup> These decisions, in turn, led indirectly and often directly to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. They destroyed what was left of the economy. They produced endemic distrust, sporadic opposition, and widened the gaps between CPK cadre and ordinary men and women. Among cadre unnerved by what was going on, the decisions led, in turn, to waves of executions of "guilty" and innocent alike. And while the leaders of the regime blamed what was happening on foreigners, class enemies, and traitors, most others probably had little difficulty in placing the blame on the men and women who had agreed in 1976 to transform Kampuchea in a particular way by taking a "super great leap forward" (characteristically, the phrase goes one better than Mao)—into the dark.

In this context, the key document in the collection is probably the Four-Year Plan itself, but the ideas that made the Plan unworkable crop up in

the other documents as well. These included the notion that the Kampuchean revolution owed nothing to foreign inspiration or advice, and its corollary, that future success was also to be autarchic. From Maoism, without admitting it, and from the unsuitability of the objective conditions facing it, the CPK took the idea that revolutionary consciousness was more important than anything else in the revolution and the notion that class warfare would continue or intensify even after the advent of socialism. Finally, the Plan suggests that if all precedents for the revolution were irrelevant, so too were other countries' development plans: even the material data from Kampuchea are from pre-revolutionary times.

These ideas coalesced in the assertion that nearly all the farmers in DK, fired with revolutionary zeal, could increase annual yields of paddy from a national *average* of slightly over one metric ton per hectare to the national *goal* of three metric tons on land harvested once, and six or seven tons on land cultivated twice.

While it is likely that here and there in DK, particularly in well-watered regions cultivated by well-fed people, three-ton yields occurred more frequently in 1975 and 1976 than they had before, the target was a national one and under conditions prevailing at the end of 1976, this was totally unrealistic.

Hastiness and self-assurance, however, characterize all Party pronouncements in this period. The people who wrote the Plan made little effort to determine where or even whether three tons of paddy could be grown in a given year, or to estimate the human costs of such an enterprise. Little effort was made because it had been decided beforehand that ninety percent of the foreign exchange which DK was counting on to pay for the revolution (approximately US\$1.4 billion, over the next four years) was to come from export sales of rice—an amount obtainable only if harvests expanded dramatically.

Tables included with the Plan make it clear that the burden of producing rice for export was to fall disproportionately on the Northwestern zone, which in pre-revolutionary times had also provided the bulk of Kampuchean rice exports. In 1975-1976, perhaps a million "new people" from Phnom Penh and other urban centers were resettled in the Northwest. Expectations for these newly enlisted agricultural laborers were higher than in zones peopled by "base people," those who had lived in CPK-controlled zones before 1975. In the Northwest, half of the money earned from rice sales was to revert to the state, whereas only twenty percent was so designated in other zones. Moreover, areas to be harvested twice in the Northwest were to expand more rapidly than elsewhere in DK and were to

produce, on average, an additional ton of paddy per hectare per year.

Although the Plan was withdrawn from circulation, the regime does not seem to have reduced its targets. This means that when the 1976-77 harvest came in, nearly all of it was handed over to the state with almost nothing set aside for subsistence, emergencies, or seed. Severe shortages developed almost at once, and by 1977, the people growing the rice received less and less of it and often none at all to eat. Tens of thousands of them starved to death; the situation was even worse in much of the country in 1978.

It might be argued that by proceeding more cautiously, by setting lower targets, or by adopting more flexible policies, the CPK might have accomplished many of the goals it had set for itself in 1976. However, there is no evidence that the leaders of DK ever considered doing things differently. People who proposed going slowly were ignored or put to death. On 3 June 1976, Radio Phnom Penh boasted that

Our people are happy to live in the present Democratic Kampuchean society under the most correct, most clear-sighted leadership of our revolutionary organization the CPK because they are building the country with their own hands, having eliminated slavery, and working as the masters of the water, land, country and revolution.<sup>7</sup>

For those given responsibility for implementing the revolution and for those who had struggled for the revolution to take place, the CPK's optimism in the summer of 1976 was probably convincing, as were the public denunciations of scapegoats in 1977 and 1978. For most other people in Kampuchea, however—perhaps ninety percent of the population—it must have been difficult to believe that slavery had been eliminated and that mastery had taken its place. Instead, many of these people probably felt that they had only recently become enslaved after generations of working for themselves.

Document 4 is a detailed "explanation" of the Four-Year Plan by Pol Pot himself at the end of August 1976. Much of the text paraphrases the Plan, and the optimistic tone of the preceding document is retained. At the same time, references to "enemies" are somewhat more frequent, and Pol Pot's insistence on total collectivization is explained in terms of national independence:

We will follow the collective path to socialism. If we do this, imperialists can't enter the country. If we are individualists, imperialism can enter easily. *Thus* (emphasis added) eating will be collectivized, and clothing, welfare and housing will be divided up on a collective basis.

As the introduction to it suggests, the next document appears to leave out more than it contains. It records the victory of the radical leaders of the

CPK—those backing implementation of the Four-Year Plan—over others perhaps reluctant to transform Kampuchea so rapidly and so completely. The probable date of the document (October 1976) coincides with the period of increased purges inside the Party, perhaps springing from suspiciousness on the part of its leaders that disagreement about policies might also involve plans for insurrection. In any case, the text includes the ominous suggestion that “class enemies” could be found “especially in our revolutionary ranks” and that “combat with the exploiting classes” was aimed “especially” at those who “furtively steal their way into and hide themselves... in the ranks of the Party.” The stage was set, in other words, for radical development efforts in the countryside, based on a Plan which hardly anyone in the country knew anything about, for the collectivization of family life (the document specifically attacks this institution), and for purges inside the CPK.

In this context Document 6 is particularly intriguing, for it offers a *tour d'horizon* in the form of a speech, probably by Pol Pot, of the Party's activities in 1976 and its hopes (and fears) for 1977. While continuing to support the principles of the Plan, the speech already scales down its goals, reporting that rice *deficits* have already appeared in two zones, the North and the Northeast. Like Document 5, it makes much of the idea that enemies of the revolution abound in the middle and lower ranks of the CPK, among the people at large, and in foreign countries. The document is a disturbing *melange* of hubris and paranoia. For example, while claiming that the CPK has been “utterly victorious” in 1976, the speech asserts that the Party itself has become a nest of traitors. While claiming numerous, powerful overseas friends, the speaker asserts that Kampuchea is surrounded by enemies. Noting that “political consciousness” is the key ingredient of the revolution, he adds that it “has lagged behind.” There are serious problems involved in the recruitment and training of cadre because only one person in ten, after extensive screening, might be adept at Party work; most of the others would have “life-histories which are entangled with those of our enemies.” In other words, ninety percent of the people were considered potentially hostile.

The speaker admits that targets imposed on cadre have led them, occasionally, to mistreat the people; indeed, he laments the fact that “some of our comrades behave as if all new people were enemies.” To overcome this difficulty, he urges cadre to “do down” among the people, while at the same time rooting out class enemies and fulfilling impossible targets. In many ways, the document is a blue-print for self-destruction, foreshadowing the catastrophes that overtook DK in 1977 and 1978.

Document 7, although written in early 1977, was perhaps aimed at a wider audience and for this reason is less critical than Document 6. It

consists of an “abbreviated history” of the Kampuchean revolution over the past 2,000 years. Unlike the other documents in the collection, it openly mentions Marx’s and Lenin’s teachings, but skips over the early history of the CPK, when it was bonded with the Vietnamese revolutionary movement, by declaring that “we are not explaining” a perhaps embarrassing portion of the CPK’s past. This was the period when DK’s raids on Vietnam began.

The document blames earlier miscalculations on the treachery of CPK leaders, two of whom had just been arrested in late 1976. It places responsibility for the revolution on the shoulders of the peasants rather than the “overt vanguard” of workers, while the “basis” of the revolution itself was the secrecy of its operations.

The document asks its listeners to  
continue the socialist revolution as time goes on, let our journey approach  
closer and closer to socialism as time goes on, let it increasingly distance  
itself from capitalism as time goes on...  
while treating capitalism as a kind of inherited disease: “if parents have 100  
oppressive elements, their children will have only 50.” This diminution of  
the disease meant that long-term prospects for Kampuchea were relatively  
bright. Perhaps the CPK leadership felt at this stage (February-March 1977)  
that the major obstacles to progress had been overcome, and the most  
important enemies of the CPK unmasked.

But their optimism was apparently short-lived, for the final document in the collection, Hu Nim’s forced confession, shows how far Pol Pot and his colleagues were willing to go by the middle of 1977 to find scapegoats for the precariousness of their position and for deteriorating material conditions in Kampuchea.<sup>8</sup> Hu Nim, the DK Minister of Information, had a distinguished revolutionary pedigree extending back into the 1950s. Like Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon, he had served in Sihanouk’s National Assembly. He had a long association with the leaders of the Party. Whether in fact he plotted against them in 1976 and 1977 is unclear from the confession itself, but a great deal of what Hu Nim admits under torture is obviously untrue, such as his recruitment as a CIA agent in the early 1950s. The text provides a poignant display of someone trying to blend the truth with what he believes his interrogators want him to confess, and with his professed continuing loyalty to the Party. Like many documents of this kind, the confession poses the question of whether the Party’s leaders actually believed the charges to which Hu Nim was forced to admit, or whether humiliation, torture, and death were their ways of telling Hu Nim that the Party had lost confidence in him. It seems likely that copies of confessions like this, or news of them in some form, were circulated among Party

members with a view to keeping them simultaneously off-balance and in line. Consistent with this possibility is the apparently pre-ordained absence from the “confessions” of any rational *explanation* of genuine dissident views held by the author.

Distressingly, while Party documents like the first seven collected here are relatively rare (only a dozen or so more CPK documents, as such, are known to have survived) several thousand written “confessions” were painstakingly extracted from “offenders” in all strata of Kampuchean society and carefully filed away in Phnom Penh and in other interrogation centers between 1976 and 1979. These documents and the ones collected in this book make up the secret agenda of the regime, and must be analyzed in combination with radio broadcasts, speeches, and interviews which provided public insights into the revolution.

Indeed, one value of the documents collected here may be that they provide written evidence for a period of Kampuchean history necessarily dominated by primarily oral, and overwhelmingly hostile recollections. No high-ranking CPK member has given us an official history of these years, but the documents provide the voices and views of those responsible for the revolution, speaking to each other at the time, under conditions where they did not expect to be overheard by anyone outside the Party. The documents are probably as close as we can get to a contemporary explanation of the Kampuchean revolution by those who directed it. And while this uniqueness makes the documents important, from an historian’s point of view it is ironic that after studying them in detail, many readers may reach the same conclusions about what happened in Kampuchea 1976-1977 that millions of Kampucheans have reached—millions who experienced this revolution, hated it, and survived it without benefit of any documentary evidence at all.



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