

How Pol Pot Came to Power

**(A History of Communism
in Kampuchea, 1930-1975)**

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for Joan and Peter

**The Story of El Salvador
The Silence of Hiroshima
Destruction of Cambodia
Short memory, must have a short memory.**

Midnight Oil, 10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1.

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Introduction

A certain euphoria came over Phnom Penh just towards the end of the war at the thought that the fighting was soon to be over. And many people seemed almost ready to welcome the communist troops (which is what eventually happened after the surrender). There were some who went into a panic, however, or wondered whether they should leave if possible. One of these was a friend who had previously been in the Khmer Rouge, and who had always hitherto been prepared to speak frankly in their favour. As the 'Liberation' forces came nearer to victory, his attitude changed to fear, and when he saw that there was no possibility of his leaving he seemed to sink into dejection. When I reminded him of his previous remarks, he said pathetically that he had only been joking. Why else did I think he had left the Khmer Rouge? Of course he disliked communism.

Nobody knew what to expect but this man knew something more than the rest. He seemed to have just remembered it — and I wondered what it was.

James Fenton, 'The Bitter End in Cambodia'.¹

When the 'Khmer Rouge' marched in to Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, their ruthlessness surprised most observers. So did the fact that they had triumphed. Communism, like brutality, had long been considered alien to the Khmer people, something that could only be imposed by outsiders. Of course, outsiders had played a critical role in the 1970-75 war; for the last two years, however, it was fought almost entirely by Khmer armies, republican and communist (see Chapter Eight). Further, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) regime of Pol Pot quickly established a reputation for obsessive secrecy. Not only were all foreigners other than Chinese either expelled from the country, shut up in half a dozen embassy compounds, or, in a handful of cases, shepherded around on guided tours in which they were forbidden to talk to ordinary people;² but also, for its first two years in power, the regime published almost no information about itself. Even when the CPK 'declared itself' to the world in September 1977, the membership of its Central Committee, for instance, remained almost entirely unknown to outsiders. Timothy Carney's seminal work, *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea* (1977), based on the surprisingly few captured documents and defectors' accounts from the war period,³ was one of the rare sources of information about the

CPK and its history. And of course conditions inside the country made it impossible, to say the least, for Khmers themselves to obtain or publicize such information; refugees, therefore, had little to say about the internal dynamics of the movement that had caused them to flee. But it was not only the *modern* history of Khmer communism that was shrouded in mystery.

The CPK's victory came twenty-five years to the day after 200 delegates assembled in Kampot province on 17 April 1950, and formed the communist-led Unified Issarak ('Independence') Front (UIF), ushering in the first period of significant growth of Khmer communism. The next year, 1951, saw the official formation of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), backbone of the UIF and predecessor of the CPK itself. By the Geneva Conference of 1954, the Khmer communist movement had become a serious political force, a direct product of France's refusal to grant independence to the components of Indo-China - Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos. As a result of the Conference, King Norodom Sihanouk's government secured international recognition, and the French withdrew. So did the Vietnamese troops who had been backing the KPRP. A thousand of the most experienced KPRP cadres, fearing Sihanouk's repression, followed them to north Vietnam; this opened up critical opportunities for a new, 'domestic' communist leadership, as we shall see. When Sihanouk proclaimed Kampuchean neutrality in foreign affairs soon afterwards, the local Khmer communists, like their counterparts in Vietnam and China, restrained their opposition to his regime. All three communist parties, not to mention Sihanouk himself, or the French, now found it prudent to maintain silence about the role played by the Khmer communists in the struggle for independence. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the KPRP had led not Kampuchea's only anti-colonial resistance movement, but the major one; however, for compelling international reasons, the early history of Khmer communism was very difficult to write. Nor did Western observers delve deeply into the subject. Most, sympathetic to Sihanouk's fiercely independent regime, tended to regard Khmer communism as limited to 'several hundred' Vietnamese proxies.⁴ (The fact that after 1954 the KPRP, whatever its political loyalties, received little or no material aid from Hanoi, and was staffed by ethnic Khmer, was overlooked.) An exception was Wilfred Burchett; although a personal friend of Sihanouk, Burchett provided what was not merely the first book in any

language on Khmer politics, *Mekong Upstream* (1957): for many years it was the only detailed account of the local communist movement.

Only with the overthrow of the CPK regime by the Vietnamese army in 1979 has it become feasible to attempt a history of that movement. Firstly, the archives of the former political prison, Tuol Sleng, have been made accessible to outsiders by the new government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK); they contain much rare and valuable documentation on the CPK, mostly in the form of confessional autobiographies, extracted under torture, of communists suspected of dissidence.⁵ The most revealing is probably that of Vorn Vet, who had held the No. 5 position in the CPK Politburo until his arrest in 1978; but there are hundreds of others. Secondly, it has become possible for journalists and scholars to interview (in many cases unsupervised) large numbers of Khmers, including veteran communists as well as opponents of the new communist regime. This has become possible also on the Thai border, where more than 200,000 refugees and the remnants of the CPK's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime have gathered in search of foreign sanctuary and support. Finally, although much of the material in the National Library in Phnom Penh (for instance all newspaper runs) disappeared at some point after 1975, most of the political records of the French colonial regime during the First Indo-China War have survived there, and at the same time more have been made available in France. This material has not, to my knowledge, been examined by historians. I have attempted to make use of all these sources of information in the pages that follow.

During the course of my research I interviewed at length well over five hundred Khmers, including a hundred refugees in France, who had lived through all or most of the 1975-79 period in Kampuchea. I reached the conclusion that roughly one and a half million perished during those years, that is, more than a fifth of the country's population. Although I will not be dealing with that period here (I intend to make it the subject of a second study), the importance of uncovering the origins of the regime that presided over this disaster is clear.

In the 1940s, when Khmer communism first emerged, where did those wishing to secure their country's independence from France turn? Kampuchea was a small country which was the

subject of complex international contention, and there were many potential foreign allies. The most important Khmer nationalist of the early 1940s, Son Ngoc Thanh, looked first to Japan as the 'Liberator and Defender of the Yellow World' (see Chapter Two), and from 1952 to the USA (Chapter Four), without success in either case. Poc Khun, who in 1940s founded the first Khmer Issarak Committee, and Leath Muon, Kampuchea's first woman nationalist, both began their political careers in western Kampuchea in collaboration with an expansionist Thailand. They too soon became disillusioned. On the other side of the country, the Khmer communists of the period, led by Son Ngoc Minh (a pseudonym – no relation to Thanh), turned to Vietnam, a regional power traditionally as ambitious as Thailand but whose communist movement had by 1945 become the major political force in Indo-Chinese resistance to French rule. And it was the Vietnamese communists who eventually delivered the death-blow to the colonialists at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. As their movement developed its momentum towards this goal, so did that of the Khmer communists, under the tutelage first of the Indo-China Communist Party (ICP) and then, from 1951, of the Vietnam Worker's Party (VWP). (See Chapters Three and Four.)

But other alternatives were also tried. Some attempted to rely on Khmers alone, and to drive out foreign intruders of all stripes; in 1949, 'boiling over with revolutionary spirit, with love for their country, race and religion', rebel leaders such as Puth Chhay provided early and violent echoes of the nationalist/racist cause that much later pre-occupied and eventually destroyed the Pol Pot regime. The first formal Khmer political party was the Democratic Party, founded in 1946. Like Poc Khun and Muon, in their different ways, the Democrats soon tried to open another road to independence by (unsuccessfully) attempting to unite all the Khmer anti-French groups, whatever their foreign backing. When in 1949 the Democrats and another rebel warlord, Achar Yi, produced the first signs of Kampuchean non-alignment, they immediately attracted the interest of the only Asian power yet to become involved in Kampuchean affairs — China. (See Chapter Three.)

The Democrats were stifled by colonial and royal repression, but it was their path that its beneficiary Norodom Sihanouk chose to follow in order to maintain the country's independence, after he had secured power in 1954-55. Although very much a

latecomer to the nationalist movement, Sihanouk quickly recognized the strategic stake that so many powers believed they had in his small country. This suited the strategies of the Vietnamese and Chinese communists, but repelled the United States, which sought pro-American counter-weights to Sihanouk's 'unreliable' policies. All it could come up with in this period was Son Ngoc Thanh, who by then, partly because he had failed to obtain support in the anti-French war, was a spent force on the Khmer political scene. The other opposition, the Khmer communists, was now unable to obtain foreign material support, and swung behind Sihanouk's nationalism. This is why Non Suon, whose political career demonstrated many of the problems encountered by the Khmer communist movement, could be described by a conservative French commentator in the early 1960s as 'rather odd but docile'.⁶ However, some of the younger, most militant communists planned to take up arms against Sihanouk; they claimed that neither his regime nor their own movement was independent of foreign control. The tribulations and divisions of Khmer nationalism now became those of Khmer communism. The Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) strand of communism, which tended to reject all foreign influences and pressures but particularly those of the Vietnamese, increasingly took on the characteristics of such movements as those led by Puth Chhay and Achar Yi, and likewise attracted Chinese interest. The rise of the Pol Pot group also broached an issue which, like most Khmer political issues (including communism itself), had originated in the ranks of the Buddhist clergy: the struggle between traditionalism and modernist change, between faith and science, and at least in its inchoate beginnings, between countryside and town. (See Chapter One.) But the inter-communist struggle emerged only in the 1960s, and it is to this period that we now turn.

The problems facing the Khmer communist movement in the 1960s resembled those of the Communist Party of India (CPI).⁷ Like the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party, the CPI had emerged from the struggle against colonialism as a serious political force, and also found itself confronting a nationalistic, neutralist government which followed generally conservative policies. The contrast in the ways in which the two movements dealt with their respective situations is instructive.

The CPI split in the early 1960s over differing perceptions of the nature of the Indian state, and over the Party's links with

Moscow. The radical, breakaway group, the CPI (Marxist), took the view that independence had not affected the activities of foreign monopolies in India. The old guard CPI disagreed, holding that independence was a 'historic event', and called for a 'broad anti-imperialist front' with the national bourgeoisie.⁸ The radical CPI(M) sought only a worker-peasant alliance with the petty bourgeoisie. Now all these issues similarly divided Khmer communists in the 1960s, with the Pol Pot group taking a stance similar to that of the CPI(M), rejecting close ties with Hanoi analogous to those of the CPI with Moscow.

But here the analogy ends. Both Indian parties agreed in 1964 that the time was not yet ripe for social revolution. Even the radicals affirmed the importance of a legal political struggle.⁹ It was left to a third group, the Naxalites, who broke away from the CPI(M), to stage an armed insurrection. And it was the Naxalites who threw in their lot with Beijing,¹⁰ while the CPI(M) remained neutral in the Sino-Soviet split (and the CPI, pro-Soviet).

By contrast, the Pol Pot group in Kampuchea adopted not only an underground, insurrectionary strategy, but also close ties with Beijing. Under their leadership, the Communist Party of Kampuchea was the Khmer Naxalite movement. It also, as we shall see in Chapter Six, produced contortions similar to the Naxalite view that the government of India was 'a lackey of US imperialism and [sic] Soviet Social-Imperialism'.¹¹ At the same time the actions of the Pol Pot regime in power from 1975 to 1979 echoed the words of the Naxalite leader Charu Mazmudar, when he said: 'The annihilation of the class enemy is the higher form of class struggle'.¹²

At its April 1968 Plenum, the CPI(M), which had won over most of the pro-Moscow CPI's following, had again rejected the strategy of 'people's war', and criticised both the USSR and China for interfering in other Parties' affairs. This view was vindicated over the next couple of years as the Naxalite movement was ruthlessly crushed by the Gandhi government, and the CPK rebellion in Kampuchea reached an impasse in 1969 from which only the Chinese and Vietnamese communists (because they won the allegiance of the CPK's declared enemy, Sihanouk) could rescue it. In the words of one man involved as a student in the Naxalite movement: 'Our theory that repression by the bourgeois state will make the masses revolutionary, and increase their resistance to the state, failed ...'¹³

In the meantime, however — and this is part of the tragedy of

modern Kampuchea — another theory had failed, this time in Indonesia. The Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), rejecting the strategy of armed struggle, had hoped for a gradualist programme of reforms backed by President Sukarno, but this hope was thwarted by the abortive coup of September 1965 and its aftermath, which demonstrated Sukarno's powerlessness to protect his allies. The world's third largest Communist Party disappeared overnight in an orgy of bloodletting which claimed over half a million lives. Pol Pot was in Beijing at the time; he is unlikely to have been impressed with the strategy of the PKI, or with the achievements of the CPI(M). He saw the Chinese road as the path to success, and upon his return home he took up Mazmudar's doctrine 'of annihilating class enemies through guerrilla actions' in rural areas.

For its part, the CPI(M) pursued its gradualist strategy and soon won elections for the government of several Indian states, notably the populous West Bengal, which it rules as this is written and has done almost without interruption since the late 1960s (except during periods of federal intervention). Successes on this scale were probably never possible in Kampuchea; nevertheless, in the early 1960s the Khmer communist counterparts of the CPI and CPI(M) did have something to show for their willingness to participate in the Sihanoukist state, as we shall see in Chapter Six.

But even at that stage Pol Pot had already rejected such participation, and this is inadequately explained either by the events in Indonesia or by important differences between the Indian and Kampuchean cases. One difference, the far greater development of democratic institutions in India, was perhaps offset by India's far greater social problems, which would have fuelled communist impatience for revolution more than any aspect of Kampuchea's condition would have galvanized the CPK. Secondly, the small size of Kampuchea (in relation to Vietnam) compared to that of India (in relation to the USSR), certainly strengthened the CPK's desire to avoid domination by the Vietnamese Party (just as it did Sihanouk's foreign policy of making China 'Cambodia's best friend'). But the CPK decision to go to the other extreme, and unlike the CPI(M) to reject Party ties with Hanoi and Moscow to the profit of Beijing, has quite different causes. It was not so much independence that Pol Pot wanted for his party in this period, as independence from the Vietnamese; this desire was reinforced, of course, by the fact that

many of his potential Party rivals had received Vietnamese training during the First Indo-China War and many others were doing so in Hanoi at the time.*

Sihanouk's close relationship with China, in combination with his development of secondary education for the first time in the country's history, channelled a *new political phenomenon* – large numbers of politically aware students and teachers – in the direction of Maoism. Most would have been unaware of the problems emerging between Hanoi and Beijing, but at any rate there seemed no reason to reflect on this, or to protest the difficulties Sihanouk placed in the way of contacts with Vietnam (north or south), while sympathy with communism in China was allowed to flourish among Kampuchean youth unhindered. And it did flourish, ironically owing partly to the US intervention in Vietnam. But the very newness of this educated element in Kampuchean cultural life blocked the development of an independent left-wing tradition similar to that of the CPI(M), or, say, the Vietnamese Trotskyists and even Communists in their attempts to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet split. One need go back no further than the 1950s to find that, in the absence of a modern educational system, it was former Buddhist monks like Son Ngoc Minh and others who bore much of the burden of leadership in the Kampuchean struggle for independence, much more than in any other South-east Asian Buddhist country. In Burma, of course, modern anticolonialism had begun with the formation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in 1906, but it had already become predominantly secular by the 1930s.¹⁵ In terms of its size and culture, Burma provides a closer analogy to Kampuchea than either India or Indonesia, and this difference is therefore crucial. As the only non-maritime country (apart from Laos) in nineteenth century South-east Asia, Kampuchea came under Western influence much later than the others, and to a much lesser degree. But more of this later.

To discover the important reasons for which Pol Pot adopted the strategy he did in the 1960s, we must look both to his own intellectual and cultural background and that of his closest

* A third difference from the Indian case is that, as Dilip Hiro has pointed out, the foreign policy of the Indian governments tended to 'placate' the pro-Moscow forces in India,¹⁴ while Sihanouk leaned towards China rather than towards the ideological homeland of the KPRP old guard, Vietnam. In each case it was the *neighbouring* communist power which was regarded as more dangerous by the government.

comrades; and also to the fact that his Party allies (like Mok) as well as alternative Party leaders (like So Phim), had had very little education at all, let alone a modern one. (It was this which made an educated Marxist like Hou Yuon an exceptional figure.) In their different ways both factors were products of French colonial rule and its bolstering of traditionalism to stifle modernization, as was Sihanouk's monarchical autocracy. (It was only in the late 1940s that Khmers, among them Pol Pot and Hou Yuon, began to study in France in any significant number, and this was at the height of the struggle for independence.) It is fruitful, for instance, to ask what was the impact on Kampuchean political culture when in the 1930s the French banned the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion because it threatened to undermine the Khmers' 'traditional hatred for their former despoilers'; or when in 1945 the country's republican Prime Minister Son Ngoc Thanh was dragged off 'by the scruff of the neck' into exile in France. Naïve collaborator with the Japanese though he was, few Prime Ministers have been treated in such a way. (One might also add both Thanh's failure, after his return home in 1951, to obtain the US support he sought for independence, and his success in obtaining it *after* independence.)

Subsequent events served to intensify the bitterness of those Khmers who had wanted to see their country enter the modern world and hoped for independence to usher in a new era. Many of their hopes were dashed when the International Control Commission certified as 'correct' Sihanouk's dictatorial elimination of opposition political parties from the National Assembly during the elections of 1955. (See Chapter Five.) But they were in many cases obliged to support Sihanouk a decade later when the US sent half a million troops into the country next door. Sihanouk managed to keep the Vietnam War at bay until his overthrow in 1970, but long before then his country's freedom of manoeuvre had become severely limited. The US intervention in Vietnam drained and polarised Kampuchea both economically and politically as early as 1966, and this worked to the advantage of Pol Pot when he returned from China in that year and ordered preparations for a full-scale revolt (1967-70, see Chapter Seven).

The latter was nothing compared with the war of 1970-75, a war which arose from the Vietnam conflict as well as from the local anti-Sihanouk insurgency (even though Sihanouk was now an 'ally' of the CPK). It developed its own fratricidal dimension