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**Paper Title:**     **“Remembering January 7, 1979: A 33-Year Debate in Cambodian Political History”<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:**

Between April 1975 and 1979, Cambodia was officially known as “Democratic Kampuchea,” under which approximately 2 million lives were lost through execution, inhumane working conditions, starvation and disease, among many other factors. On January 7, 1979, Democratic Kampuchea officially collapsed with the takeover of Phnom Penh by the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation. Almost thirty-three years have passed, yet politicians (and others) have continued to disagree over the meaning and significance of the date “January 7” for Cambodia. While the ruling party in Cambodia (Cambodian People’s Party; henceforth, CPP) celebrates it as a national holiday, calling it “liberation” from the bloody Khmer Rouge regime and a “second birthday” for Cambodian people, opposition partisans and critics of the CPP deride the date as an invasion of Vietnam to Cambodia, i.e. continued suffering for Cambodian people. This paper traces the official historical presentation of the date “January 7” in political propaganda and state’s education by the ruling party in Cambodia, and the counter arguments by its critics from 1979 to the present. In doing so, the paper discusses the “selective history” used by both sides to justify their arguments. It argues that there are certain strengths and weaknesses of both political camps, and proposes that although the date can be celebrated as a national day of victory over the Khmer Rouge, it should no longer be exploited for political gains by any party in Cambodia.

**Keywords:** liberation, invasion, Cambodia, politics of memory

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summarized version of the author’s M.A. thesis titled “The People’s Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989: A Draconian Savior?” The thesis is downloadable from <http://www.seas.ohio.edu/Program/Deth.html>

*“If you ignorant persons and extremists do not dare acknowledge the truth [of January 7, 1979], you are not humans, you are truly animals.”*

**Hun Sen, Prime Minister of Cambodia**

## **Introduction**

All Cambodians born before the 1970s who are still alive today can still vividly remember the horrors of atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979 under the leadership of Pol Pot, when Cambodia was officially known as Democratic Kampuchea. Contrary to its name, Democratic Kampuchea (henceforth, DK) was arguably the most despotic and bloody regime in Cambodia, in which approximately 2 out of about 7 million people perished due to execution, starvation, disease, slave-like working conditions, and inhumane treatment by their leaders who rather absurdly attempted to transform Cambodia into a self-reliant agrarian (and eventually, industrial) society in a short period of time. In what was termed *Phaenkar Moha Lot Plos Moha Orschar* (“The Glorious and Super Great Leap Forward”), all urban and rural people were evacuated to resettle in different parts of the countryside to work as farmers and laborers to push Cambodia toward an agricultural revolution. While the excessive agrarian programs had similarities to that carried out earlier under Maoist China, it was even more extreme. Pol Pot was also known to have said: “If the Khmers could build Angkor, they could do anything.”

In that period, schools were closed and turned into prisons or animal farms, while religion and domestic market economy were eradicated. The whole society was more or less reduced to a peasant class spending their days from dawn to dusk with little food working in rice fields, digging canals and the like. It is not possible, nor is it the focus of this paper, to recount the sufferings that took place in Cambodia during DK rule.<sup>2</sup> The atrocities committed on the people during this period were so unimaginable that even when some refugees managed to escape to neighboring Thailand and Vietnam and told their stories to news reporters, they were dismissed as merely exaggerating what truly happened. It was only following the collapse of the regime that the scale of the violence became more widely known and received with credibility. Needless to say, those people who were still inside the country were helplessly waiting for their saviors.

On Christmas Day in 1978, the Cambodian people who were suffering under Democratic Kampuchea were to receive their gift. But it was not Santa Claus with his reindeers flying in the sky that brought their “gift.” Instead, at least 100,000 Vietnamese troops accompanied by tanks and air force, as well as the largely symbolic Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation,

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion about Democratic Kampuchea, see for example, Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

made their attacks in eastern Cambodia, finally taking over Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979. Such was the beginning of the end of the brutalities by the Khmer Rouge, who retreated to the western parts of Cambodia (and eventually crossing Thai borders) and held those areas until the People's Army of Vietnam managed to take over most of the country in the next several months.

The Vietnamese invasion effectively ended the brutalities of the Khmer Rouge on the Cambodian population. To this date, however, Cambodian politicians (and civilians alike) continued to the debate over the meaning of January 7, 1979. While the ruling party in Cambodia (Cambodian People's Party; henceforth, CPP) celebrates it as a national holiday, calling it "liberation" from the bloody Khmer Rouge regime and a "second birthday" for Cambodian people, opposition partisans and critics of the CPP deride the date as an invasion of Vietnam to Cambodia, as the latter was occupied for another 10 years before the Vietnamese withdrew their troops in late 1989.

This paper presents the arguments related to the date "January 7" in Cambodian history by different political parties to boost their political support. It seeks to reach a more balanced view on the date itself by discussing the strength and weakness of both aforementioned views. It is hoped that a general reader shall be able to differentiate between propaganda and facts and reach a less biased view in the discussion of this issue in the future. To do so, two main themes are chosen for discussion in this paper: The Vietnamese army's involvement in toppling the Khmer, and the debate on "Second Birthday" rhetoric.

### **The Vietnamese involvement in the victory over Democratic Kampuchea**

Nowadays, the involvement of at least 100,000 Vietnamese troops in toppling the Khmer Rouge regime is a historical fact. Back in early January 1979, however, Vietnam did not acknowledge any role in the occupation of Cambodia, when the Vietnamese spokesman at the United Nations claimed the fighting in Cambodia was done by rebel forces.<sup>3</sup> According to Washington Post correspondent Elizabeth Becker, Vietnam gave the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation credit for capturing the capital, and they maintained this lie until February, when the PRK was officially in place and officially requested Vietnamese soldiers' presence in Cambodia for the national defense.<sup>4</sup>

There were reasons for such denial. First, although one could claim that the Vietnamese takeover of Cambodia saved the lives of the people, it was nonetheless an invasion of Cambodia's sovereignty in international law. Domestically, it was ironic that Cambodians were 'liberated' by those who could arguably be characterized as their traditional enemies.<sup>5</sup> It was

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<sup>3</sup> Thu-huong Nguyen-vo. *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Becker, *When the War was over: the Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), pp. 437-438.

<sup>5</sup> Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia weakened by internal dynastic disputes and external invasion from Siam (now Thailand) and Dai Viet (the former imperial state of Vietnam). The loss of Cambodian territory to Vietnam, and the

therefore imperative that the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation under the leadership of Heng Samrin (a Khmer Rouge defector from the Eastern Zone) was given the public role of saving Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge brutalities.

When the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was eventually proclaimed in January 1979, President Heng Samrin made no reference to the Vietnamese army taking over Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979. What he did mention about Vietnam was rather a deconstruction of the Vietnam's bad image in Cambodia: "They [Pol Pot – Ieng Sary clique] later intend to slander our people, contending that all Kampuchians are traitors and that Vietnam is guilty of aggression and the mass destruction of the people of Kampuchea. All these assertions glaringly contradict the real state of affairs."<sup>6</sup> He continued: "We owe this great triumph to the unity of our Kampuchean people and to our revolutionary armed forces, which fought under the banner of our glorious Front."<sup>7</sup> Later on, although Hun Sen (then and still the prime minister of Cambodia) acknowledged the involvement of Vietnamese troops, he argued that "although the victory of 7 January 1979 involved the combined national forces with the support of the volunteer forces of Vietnam, and the PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] had an important function in dispersing the Pol Potists, the forces of the Kampuchean revolution had the decisive function because for a revolution [to succeed] in any country, it must be the people of that country who are the ones to act and no other country can come and replace [them]."<sup>8</sup> In December 1997, when asked by his biographer in an interview about the Vietnamese invasion, Hun Sen reacted irritably: "How could I, a Cambodian, invade my own country?"<sup>9</sup>

Although the PRK attempted to bolster the nationalistic image of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (and at times undermine the involvement of the Vietnamese troops), it also tried to promote the image of solidarity between the Kampuchean communist revolution with that of Vietnam. Unlike the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) of the Khmer Rouge, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) that ruled the PRK dated its party history to 1951, as struggling side by side with the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) against French colonial rule. Likewise, unlike the CPK under Pol Pot, the KPRP did not mention its relation with the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of Thailand.<sup>10</sup>

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latter's mistreatment of Cambodian people during their rule over Cambodia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had given rise to the resentment of Cambodian political memory. For 'Vietnamization' of Cambodia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), Chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in E. V. Kobelev. *Kampuchea: from Tragedy to Rebirth* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworms Book, 2003), p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Harish C. Mehta and Julie B. Mehta. *Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd, 1999), p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> For historiography of the KPRP, see K. Viviane Frings, "Rewriting Cambodian History to 'Adapt' It to a New Political Context: The Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party's Historiography (1979-1991)," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Oct., 1997): pp. 807-846.

For ordinary Cambodians at the time, it mattered little that it was the Vietnamese who saved them. Given the horrors they experienced under the Khmer Rouge, they were grateful for whoever toppled that bloody regime. As one Cambodian civil servant explained it in an interview to Thomas Clayton, “At that time [January 1979], we were as if submerged under water. Someone came to us and held out a stick for us. We did not think at that time about who was holding the stick. We only knew that we needed to grasp the stick or we would die.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, the involvement of Vietnamese troops of the January 7 victory is so problematic that even if they helped get rid of the inhumane Democratic Kampuchea regime, the PRK only had the support from Vietnam, the Soviet Union, their eastern bloc allies, and India (the only non-communist country to recognize the PRK). It was condemned by other Cambodian resistance movements (including the Khmer Rouge), ASEAN, China, and the US, and lacked recognition from the rest of the world.

As the Khmer Rouge retreated to western parts of Cambodia in 1979, they were provided with military and financial support by China (through Thailand), who were both concerned about Vietnamese attempt to expand their hegemonic presence in the region. The United States also threw in their indirect support to the Khmer Rouge (and other resistance movements), especially after the Soviet Union’s (Vietnam’s patron) invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

Besides the Khmer Rouge, two other resistance movements were opposed to the PRK. One of them was FUNCINPEC, led by Norodom Sihanouk, a former king and head of state in Cambodia until he was deposed in 1970. The other movement was the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front, comprising former politicians and army commanders of the Khmer Republic (1970-1975), under the leadership of Son Sann. Although they were former enemies, the three resistance groups had one point in common: their opposition to Vietnamese presence in Cambodia. In 1982, the three factions agreed under the pressure from China and ASEAN to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) that was to retain the Cambodian seat in the United Nations General Assembly during the 1980s.

Throughout the 1980s, some 150,000 Vietnamese troops in Cambodia served as the main defending forces against the Khmer Rouge and other resistance groups.<sup>12</sup> Vietnam insisted that the presence of their troops in Cambodia was a necessary measure against the possible return of the Khmer Rouge to power in Cambodia, as the PRK’s armed force was still weak. With the Soviet Union as its main ally, Vietnam needed not bow down to international pressure, especially when China and Thailand insisted that any negotiation on the “Kampuchean crisis” could only go forward if the Khmer Rouge faction was included.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> Estimates by various scholars, observers, and foreign officials of the number of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia in late 1978 and during the 1980s ranged from 100,000 to as many as 200,000. For a detailed discussion, see Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: A Political Survey* (Phnom Penh: Editions Funan, 2007), pp. 20-32. Vietnam did not publicly reveal the number of its troops in Cambodia. But according to an interview Pen Sovann (first PRK prime minister) had with Radio Free Asia last year, General Le Duc Tho allegedly said to him in 1982 after he was imprisoned in Vietnam that “Our 150,000 troops are in your country, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” See Radio Free Asia, “Interview with Pen Sovann (Part 85),” [https://preview.rfaweb.org/khmer/program/krhistory/Road\\_To\\_Death\\_Field85-08222008064622.html?searchterm=None](https://preview.rfaweb.org/khmer/program/krhistory/Road_To_Death_Field85-08222008064622.html?searchterm=None). Accessed January 10, 2009.

While the PRK, and currently the ruling Cambodian People's Party, defended Vietnamese troops' presence in Cambodia as necessary to safeguard Cambodia from the return of the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam's refusal to leave Cambodia during the 1980s only helped to confirm Cambodian nationalists' suspicion of Vietnam's long-term hegemonic ambition to rule Indochina. It was therefore not surprising that the CGDK did not view Vietnam's attack on Democratic Kampuchea as liberation, but rather as invasion of Cambodia. The CGDK and the international community simply viewed the PRK as a puppet regime of Vietnam, whose "advisors" were placed in every ministry of the PRK and made sure that no policies were pursued against Vietnam's interests. When Pen Sovann, the first prime minister of the PRK, showed signs of independent-mindedness in dealing with Vietnam (e.g. by disagreeing over the presence of illegal Vietnamese immigrants in Cambodia, and wanted to establish direct contact with the Soviet Union, thereby over-passing Vietnam's authority), he was arrested in late 1981 and imprisoned in Vietnam for a decade. It was in such context that critics of the PRK claimed that Cambodia was being 'Vietnamized.'

Furthermore, for critics of the Vietnam's role in Cambodian history, it was not only Vietnam's occupation in Cambodia during the 1980s that was a problem. In his article "Jan 7, 1979, Is Frankenstein of April 17, 1975" posted on his own website in December 2008, Sam Rainsy, the current in-exile president of the eponymous opposition party in Cambodia, wrote:

[...] it is worth realizing that without April 17, 1975 (the date of the Khmer Rouge takeover and the beginning of the Cambodian genocide), there would be no need for Jan 7, 1979. And without the Vietnamese and Chinese communist massive intervention in the early 1970s to help the Khmer Rouge, the latter would not have been able to seize power and there would be no April 17, 1975. [...] Therefore April 17 and Jan 7 are inextricably associated: both of them are communist Frankensteins, Celebrating Jan 7 without having in mind a broader historical perspective, is playing into the hands of the current Phnom Penh regime whose only *raison d'être* was to free the Cambodian people from the Khmer Rouge with communist Vietnam's decisive but not unselfish help.<sup>13</sup>

It should be pointed out that the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia is not a simply a black-and-white issue as both political camps would like to portray. The PRK regime and the current Royal Government of Cambodia under the leadership of the CPP is right in that without the Vietnamese army, many more Cambodian people would have perished under DK rule. Although there were Cambodian resistance groups being set up along the Thai border, they were not in any strong position to counter the Khmer Rouge. Likewise, the United States had just pulled out of the Vietnam War a few years back under strong public pressure. As such, it was unlikely that an international intervention was forth-coming. In fact, accounts of the Khmer Rouge atrocities were not a public knowledge at the time. Even when stories from refugees who managed to escape from the regime circulated, they were usually dismissed as mere exaggeration

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<sup>13</sup> Sam Rainsy, "Jan 7, 1979, Is Frankenstein of April 17, 1975," <http://www.samrainsy.info/?p=147>. Retrieved October 9, 2011.

blown out of proportion. It was not until the regime collapsed that the extent of the sufferings became publicized. In the same way, no matter what their intention was, the presence of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia during the 1980s did help safeguard the return of the Khmer Rouge. Given the international cold war and regional hegemonic conflicts at the time, there could hardly be any international solution to guarantee Cambodia's security at that time.

On the other hand, however, to say that Vietnam liberated Cambodia would need some qualifications. As the critics of the PRK put it, Vietnam did not simply liberate Cambodia out of a humanitarian concern, but purely out of a strategic calculation. And as claimed by the critics, the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia allowed Vietnam to control Cambodia for maximizing Vietnamese interests. In addition to "friendship" treaties that gave advantages to Vietnam's claim over disputed territories between the two countries, Vietnam was also able to exploit Cambodian natural resources (mainly forest and fishery) and rice production through state policies. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Vietnamese illegal immigration was an issue that the PRK was not in a position to counter (although it would become a political asset in the future elections for the CPP in postwar Cambodia).

Yet again, the issue of 'Vietnamization' as alleged by critics at the time should be contextualized. As Cambodia expert Michael Vickery argued, the number of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia during the 1980s was actually lower than that in prewar Cambodia. And unlike the allegation that Vietnamese language was being forcefully taught in Cambodian schools or that Cambodian women were forced to marry Vietnamese men were largely unfounded. The Vietnamese language was in fact offered as elective language in high schools along with Russian for practical reason: for students who could eventually receive their tertiary education in those countries.<sup>14</sup>

### **The "Second Birthday" rhetoric**

In addition to the idea that the Vietnamese helped liberated Cambodia, the current CPP government also argues that January 7, 1979 represents the "second birthday" for all Cambodian people. For instance, in his speech (undated) at the victory meeting in Phnom Penh, Heng Samrin – then Chairman of the Central Committee of the Kampuchea United Front for National Salvation, and Chairman of the People's Revolutionary Council – declared that:

On January 7, 1979, more than on any other day, the entire Kampuchean people – boys and girls, old people, officers and men – experienced limitless joy; this was a day of historic importance, a day when they overthrew the reactionary and cruel social system headed by the insane

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<sup>14</sup> See Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1986). Soon after their defeat, the Khmer Rouge used a widespread propaganda that if Cambodian people returned to their villages, their stomach would be cut open and filled with dry hay by the Vietnamese. The people, having lived through the horrors under the Khmer Rouge, did not take such words seriously and were on their feet for several days or months returning to their pre-war residence across the country.

clique of the traitors Pol Pot-Ieng Sary, and saved our nation, completely liberating Phnom Penh and the entire country for the second time since victory of April 17, 1975.<sup>15</sup>

What is of interest here is the fact that the PRK government at the time still considered April 17, 1979 (the day the Khmer Rouge came to power) as the first liberation of Phnom Penh. In fact, it continued to celebrate 17 April for the next few years, although not in public, lest there would be reaction from the general population who still abhorred that date. Eventually, only the date January 7 (1979) is celebrated as the liberation day for all Cambodian people, and the second birthday for those who were saved from Khmer Rouge regime.

For the PRK and its successor, the governments boast their efforts in developing the country from empty hands to achieve one of the fastest growing economies in the region. Such argument has been consistently used for the past 3 decades to remind the people of the Cambodian government's achievements. A district in Phnom Penh is named "Khan Pram Pii Makara" ("7 January" District), and more recently, an overpass (known in Cambodia as "Sky Bridge") named "Spean Akas Pram Pii Makara" ("7 January" Sky Bridge) was inaugurated on the 6 January 2012, one day before the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the "Liberation Day."

This view is generally expressed by government officials. Given the fact that most, if not all, TV stations are pro-government, news anchors and comedians have also been active in promoting this message. According to this view, it could simply be summarized as follow: the Cambodian people were liberated from the Khmer Rouge on January 7, 1979, and they were able since then to lead their lives to a much better condition as of present. And all of this credit would undoubtedly have to be given to the Cambodian People's Party (successor of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party) that is ruling Cambodia today.

To their credit, without the PRK and the support of Vietnam, it is hard to imagine what could have happened to Cambodia with the continuation of Democratic Kampuchea's rule. When the Vietnamese troops and the KUFNS entered Cambodia, they encountered a nation of traumatized people who looked as if they had just emerged from hell. Despite the lack of international aid, the PRK strived hard to revive education, restore Cambodian society and culture, and grant people their basic rights, and many people are grateful for their liberation. It can be fairly argued that the Vietnamese invasion did liberate and save millions of Cambodian people's lives from the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. By 1991, before the arrival of UNTAC, Cambodia already had a functioning government and market economy, basic infrastructure and a population that was back on its feet after surviving the depredations of the previous eighteen years. This was despite international aid sanction for a decade (although aids did come from the Soviet Union and its allies).<sup>16</sup> As of today, thirty years after the liberation, Cambodia did achieve remarkable improvement and changes, even if not shared by everybody. Today, a former state youth group leader has become an NGO worker, while a former primary school teacher is now a jewelry store owner. And Cambodia's living standard, as even the World Bank has

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in E. V. Kobelev, *Kampuchea: From Tragedy to Rebirth* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> See Eva Mysliwicz. *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1988), p. 72. Eva Mysliwicz has been working for various NGOs in Cambodia since 1980, and is currently the Executive Director of Youth Star Organization in Phnom Penh.



acknowledged, has on average, improved remarkably. For most Cambodians, the fact that there is political stability after many decades of war is something to be thankful for.

Yet, to simply accept such ‘linear progress’ argument would also be too simplistic. Such claims by the CPP and their supporters are far from complete in portraying the whole story. First of all, the creation of the PRK as a single-party state has the advantage of enabling its successor, the State of Cambodia, and the current government under the CPP, to establish control throughout the country. When all factions agreed to participate in the UN-backed election in 1993, the FUNCINPEC under Norodom Ranaridh received the highest vote, even if it did not win a two-third majority. The Cambodian People’s Party, which came second, refused to honor the result. After a short period of political deadlock, Ranaridh agreed to share power with Hun Sen, and Cambodia was to have two prime ministers between 1993 and 1997. Power was also shared at ministerial level. Key ministries such as Interior, Defense, and Foreign Affairs had co-ministers, while smaller ministries were divided mainly among the two political parties. Nonetheless, despite their positions in government and the National Assembly, FUNCINPEC lacked the power base at the local level (such as village or commune chief, whose loyalty remained largely with the CPP). By July 1997, fighting erupted between the two factions that eventually led to CPP’s victory and consolidation of power politically and militarily ever since. In the most recent 2008 national election, the CPP managed to win up to 90 out of the 123-seat National Assembly, granting it virtually total control in the country.

Secondly, the “liberation” (and “development”) discourses failed to acknowledge the disastrous policies that had carried been carried out in the past. Recently, after the tragic stampede that killed more than 350 people during the Water Festival in Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen said on TV: “This is the biggest tragedy in more than 31 years since the Pol Pot regime.” Such statement implied that since the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, there had been no number of deaths in the country on that scale. The statement intentionally undermined the scale of human loss during the mid 1980s, when the PRK carried out its disastrous defense policy that came to be known as the “K5 Plan” (Phaenkar Kor Pram in Khmer). Under the plan, the PRK (under the supervision of Vietnam) attempted to seal off its border with Thailand from where the Khmer resistance factions would infiltrate into Cambodia. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians from all over the country were conscripted for the mission to clear the forest, plant landmines or demine them without proper training and facilities. The consequence was atrocious, as tens of thousands of the draftees became victims of landmines and malaria.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, by elevating themselves as the saviors of the country, the former Khmer Rouge CPP leaders largely neglected the roles of other revolutionaries in the PRK (such as Pen Sovann, who had been jailed by Vietnam for his independent-minded tendency). More importantly, in boasting about the development in Cambodia with the catchphrase “under the wise leadership of Samdach Akka Moha Sena Thebadei Techo Hun Sen,” the government rarely acknowledges the role of international that is worth hundreds of millions of US dollars every year since the 1990s (not to mention the fact that part of the money also flowed into the hands of corrupt officials). Carol Rodley, a recent US ambassador to Cambodia, urged the Cambodian government to halt corruption, and said corruption cost the government an estimated \$500 million a year, draining money from public coffers, and “often makes international businesses

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<sup>17</sup> See Sok Udom Deth, “The People’s Republic of Kampuchea,” pp. 109-115.

think twice” before investing.<sup>18</sup> The availability of wealth after the opening of the country entailed widening social and economic gaps between the haves and have-nots, between the urban and the rural poor whose daily life standard has changed little in the past decades – or from Angkorian period, for that matter.

## Conclusion

To this day, different Cambodian political factions continue to disagree over the meaning of January 7, 1979. Every year, while it is celebrated with lavish ceremony and hailed as the “second birthday” for Cambodian people by the ruling Cambodian People’s Party, political opponents and critics of the CPP simply dismiss the date as the date of Vietnamese invasion to Cambodia. This paper attempts to present the valid points and weaknesses of both sides of the argument.

It should be acknowledged that without the People’s Army of Vietnam and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, the tragedies in Cambodia could have been much worse, and one would have to ponder whether there would be an alternative source of salvation from other nations, at least soon enough before it was too late. Likewise, despite its limited resources and restrict international aid, the PRK was able to restore the country back to life. Westerners who were working in the country during the 1980s generally acknowledged this effort, especially in the fields of education and health service. Needless to say, the quality of those services dire, but it should be appreciated within the context of the country that just got out of a virtual destruction. Thirty years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia has been able to achieve a high economic growth (especially in the last decade). The country now enjoys political stability, foreign investors’ confidence, and remarkable urban development. The country’s infrastructure and people’s life standard, on average, have improved.

On the other hand, the role of Vietnam’s liberation of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge should be judged within the context of securing a geopolitical strategic interest, rather than a humanitarian intervention. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia did secure Cambodia from the return of the Khmer Rouge, but it also meant that Vietnam was able to exploit Cambodia’s natural resources and impose unfair treaties or unpopular policies on the country. Furthermore, the firm grip of power of the current Cambodian government means that the rights of the people, especially political dissent, have not always been respected, as guaranteed by the constitution. The opening of the country’s economy also brings about a higher level of corruption. Most recently, as land becomes a luxurious commodity, land grabbing by powerful officials and cronies has become an-everyday news.

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<sup>18</sup> Kong Sothnarith, Voice of America, “US Ambassador Renews Calls to Halt Corruption,” <http://www.voanews.com/khmer-english/news/US-Ambassador-Renews-Calls-To-Halt-Corruption-129881963.html>. Retrieved November 13, 2011.

In my view, January 7, 1979 should be commemorated as a liberation day, but a day that should no longer be exploited for political gains, especially during election campaigns. After all, January 7 is a liberation day from the brutalities of the Khmer Rouge, but it also came at a price that Cambodians had to pay, and they continue to live its legacy. Even if gratitude is to be shown, it should not be in the form of ballot-casting solely for that reason, for a vote is supposed to be an analysis of the present and a ticket to a better future. However, given the nature of Cambodian politics, the debate on January 7, 1979 will carry on for a long time to come.

**Recommended readings on this topic:**

Bekaert, Jacques. *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997.

Gottesman, Evan. *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.

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