

The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979 – 1989: A Draconian Savior?

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the Center for International Studies of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

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June 2009

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ABSTRACT

DETH, SOK UDOM, M.A., June 2009, Southeast Asian Studies

The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979 – 1989: A Draconian Savior? (129 pp.)

Director of Thesis: William H. Frederick

Arguably, January 7, 1979 has been the most controversial date in Cambodian history for Cambodian politicians and civilians alike. To some, the date signifies the liberation of Cambodian people from the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime which had killed approximately 2 million people between 1975 and 1979. To others, however, the date marks the invasion of Vietnamese army into Cambodia, after which the country was to be under Vietnamese occupation for a whole decade before their final withdrawal in September 1989. This thesis joins this debate, but it does so by going beyond the simplified political rhetoric of "liberation" vs. "invasion," and exploring the complexities of Cambodian society under the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Chapter 1 of the thesis deals with the historiography of the PRK. Chapter 2 looks at the re-emergence of urban life, market economy, as well as social and political rights under the PRK. Chapter 3 examines the people's lives in the rural areas, collectivization efforts by the PRK, military and labor conscription, and their impacts on Cambodian society during the 1980s, as well as their legacy for contemporary Cambodia.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my genuine gratitude to my thesis Chair, Dr. William H. Frederick, and my committee members, Dr. Carlyle A. Thayer and Dr. Haley Duschinski, who had spent much time and put a lot of efforts into guiding me from the early stage of my writing to its completion. Without their support, this thesis could not have come into existence. Their expertise in history, political science, and anthropology, respectively, helps shape my critical thinking to write a thesis that addresses a wide spectrum of readers.

Secondly, I would like to thank all my informants, who set aside their invaluable time to offer me the opportunities to interview them about their personal lives. My appreciation also goes to my family and friends in Cambodia who helped arrange all the interviews for me.

Last but not least, my thanks go to the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University, whose generous funding was particularly helpful for my studies, and whose faculty members and staffs have been very supportive throughout my three years of M.A. studies in Athens, Ohio.

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INTRODUCTION

“Neak Loeung, Prey Veng province - Standing in the center of town, the statue of Cambodian and Vietnamese soldiers embracing and marching ahead seems too simplistic.”

The Cambodia Daily Weekend, Saturday January 3, 2004.

Anyone who is even somewhat familiar with war-torn Cambodia would agree that the darkest chapter of its history occurred between April 1975 and January 1979 when the communists known as the Khmer Rouge ruled the country and renamed it “Democratic Kampuchea” under the leadership of Pol Pot. Despite the fact that it was the most short-lived one, Democratic Kampuchea was the most fatal regime, in which approximately 1.7 million out of about 7 million people lost their lives to mass execution, inhumane working conditions and starvation, so that every Cambodian who lived through the period lost at least a few members of their family. Collectivism and the breaking of family ties, as well as the total abolishment of the market economy and all kinds of civilian rights were the main aspects of Democratic Kampuchea. Alongside the execution of intellectuals and professionals, city and town dwellers were also evacuated to resettle in the countryside, where they became peasants to achieve the communist party’s (known to the population as *Angkar*) unrealistic Four Year Plan to transform Cambodia into a land of agricultural and industrial revolution.¹ The regime was also known to have purged tens

¹ Charles H. Twining, a former US ambassador to Cambodia, argued that “The emphasis on simultaneous agricultural and industrial modernization within a self-sufficient commune structure, the stress on irrigation, the desire to send unproductive urban elements to work in the fields, and the necessity for revolutionary haste all smack of Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution despite [DK Minister

of thousands of its own cadres suspected of being enemies of *Angkar*. Thus far, various scholars, as well as a great number of survivors of the regime, have written extensively on the barely imaginable horrors that took place during Democratic Kampuchea's rule.²

On December 25, 1978, some 150,000 Vietnamese troops backed by tanks and air forces, together with the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation comprising some former Khmer Rouge defectors to Vietnam and Khmer revolutionaries exiled in Vietnam, entered Cambodia and eventually took power in Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979.³ The fact that millions of Cambodian people were saved from the bloody hands of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese army presented an irony in Cambodian history simply because Vietnam had been considered a traditional enemy of Cambodia. Vietnam's control over the Cambodian court during the first half of the 19th century before the arrival of the French, and the resentment of the "loss of Cambodian territories to Vietnam" when

of Foreign Affairs] Ieng Sary's denial of the relevance of all outside models. See Charles Twining, "The Economy" in Karl D. Jackson ed., *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 111.

² See for example, Ben Kiernan. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). For survivors' memoirs, see Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing up under the Khmer Rouge: A Memoir* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); and Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000). Perhaps nothing brings a more vivid portrayal of the unfortunate fate of Cambodia than the Oscar-winning movie *The Killing Fields* (1984), which was inspired by the book written by the 1976 Pulitzer Prize winner New York Times correspondent Sydney Schanberg about the survival of his Cambodian assistant during the Khmer Rouge regime, titled *The Death and Life of Dith Pran* (1980). *The Killing Fields'* happy ending, which shows Dith Pran's successful escape to a refugee camp in the Thai border, however, leaves Cambodia behind in obscurity.

³ 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. Accessed January 10, 2009.

France granted independence to Cochinchina in southern Vietnam, make it hard for some Khmer nationalists to accept the idea that Vietnam had in fact liberated Cambodia.⁴ Eventually, many royalists led by Prince Sihanouk (who was imprisoned in his palace during Khmer Rouge rule) and republicans led by Son San would form an uneasy alliance with their former enemies, the Khmer Rouge, establishing the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in 1982. The CGDK gained support from China, the United States and ASEAN countries, who were against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. The PRK enjoyed support and recognition only from Vietnam, Laos, the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries. The only non-communist country to recognize the PRK was India. China, the US, and ASEAN countries of the time, strongly opposed the new regime, branding the new government a puppet of Vietnam thanks to the presence of Vietnamese troops, which were viewed as a threat to regional security and a violation of international law. For the entire following decade, the PRK did not have a seat at the United Nations, despite the fact that they were the effective government in Cambodia.

What is of great interest is the fact that to this day, politicians, civilians and scholars alike continue to disagree on the meaning of January 7, 1979. To some – namely the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which comprises mainly the core of the PRK's apparatus – the date signifies the liberation of the Cambodian people from a genocidal regime and a “second birthday” for Cambodian people to start a new life. In fact, after the

⁴ For Vietnam's colonialism in Cambodia, see for example, David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 113–136.

CPP won the 2008 national election, CPP lawmaker Chiem Yeap, who is also a member of the CPP's central committee, said the party had won its 90 seats legitimately because “Voters showed their gratitude to a party that liberated them from the Khmer Rouge, built peace, rebuilt the nation and its infrastructure and reduced poverty.”⁵ The opposition parties and critics of the CPP, on the other hand, see January 7 as the beginning date of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, and contend that although Cambodian people were liberated from the Khmer Rouge, they were nonetheless oppressed under the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which they simply saw as a puppet of communist Vietnam. These two contrasting arguments are not only relevant to Cambodia’s contemporary politics, but they also raise an important question about the nature of the PRK. Were Cambodians really liberated, or did they actually suffer at the hands of another socialist government, whose core members continue to be the leaders of Cambodia today? Interestingly enough, compared to the historiography on the Khmer Rouge regime, less scholarly attention has been paid to the lives of civilian Cambodians under the PRK, in spite of the highly controversial nature of this regime.

This thesis represents an attempt to answer these questions by going beyond the political rhetoric and characterization of a regime as simply a “liberator” or an “oppressor,” springing from my personal curiosity about the regime in which I was born (1985), but was too young to remember. By the time I was old enough to recall childhood memories,

⁵ *Voice of America*. “Many Factors Aided CPP’s Sweep: Monitors.” <http://www.voanews.com/khmer/2008-09-01-voa4.cfm>. Accessed Monday September 1, 2008. Hun Sen later went even further saying that “If you ignorant persons and extremists do not dare acknowledge the truth [of January 7, 1979] you are not humans, you are truly animals.” See *Malta Today*, “Dispatches from Cambodia.” <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/2009/01/11/david.html>. Accessed April 22, 2009.

Cambodia was already a country in transition from a socialist state to a market-oriented economy, with the United Nations' peace-keeping force roaming the markets, the streets and hotels. In fact, the reason I decided to cover the period 1979-1989, and not until 1991, stems simply from the fact that by late 1989, Vietnamese troops had already withdrawn from Cambodia. Even prior to the withdrawal, the Cambodian government had already announced a series of reforms that were widely popular, especially in Phnom Penh. The PRK renounced socialism, renamed itself the State of Cambodia (SOC), while the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK) was renamed the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Those reforms are well summarized by historian David Chandler:

These included revising the national anthem, changing the flag, amending the constitution to make Buddhism Cambodia's state religion, and abolishing the PRK statute that had limited monkhood to middle-aged Khmer. New laws also allowed farmers to pass title to land on to their children and householders to buy and sell real estate. The death penalty was abolished in response to criticism of Cambodia's human rights record. Although the PRPK remained in charge of Cambodia's political life, free markets and black markets flourished, traditional cultural activities revived, and collectivism was dead.⁶

To make any informed judgment of the PRK, it is imperative to look at what really happened inside Cambodia between 1979 and 1989. This thesis is an attempt to explore the complexity of people's lives under a socialist regime claiming to have liberated people from a former bloody communist government. It is divided into three chapters: the first surveys the historiography of the PRK and the Vietnamese occupation in Cambodia, whereas the second and the third chapters explore aspects of civilian life in the cities and

⁶ David P. Chandler. *A History of Cambodia* 4th edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), p. 235. But Chandler further noted, "The Cambodian government, on the other hand, remained unchanged. Hun Sen, who had become prime minister of the PRK in 1985, steadily consolidated his power." *Ibid.*, p. 235.

in the countryside, respectively. To be more specific, the re-emergence of a market economy, and access to education and health care as well as other basic civil rights, contrasting with the state's forced conscriptions and abuses of power, are the main themes of the discussion of the two above-mentioned opposing views. The choice to write two different chapters on the city and the rural is illustrative and not intended as an exhaustive comparison of cities with the countryside. Nevertheless, it is helpful to look at differences between the urban and rural experience in a new regime that just succeeded its predecessor which had annihilated city life almost four years earlier. As this thesis will show, regional factors also account for differences of experience of people living under the PRK.

This thesis relies on both primary and secondary data. It is far from the first to attempt to analyze the nature of the PRK, and any contribution it makes owes a great deal to earlier works by various scholars. Apart from journal articles, my secondary source on the PRK comprises mainly Cambodian history books from the Southeast Asian Collection at the Alden Library of Ohio University, as well as a few books loaned through OhioLINK. Such newspapers as the *Bangkok Post*, published during the 1980s, provide some accounts of life in Cambodia and serves as my primary data. Specifically, I rely on articles by the *Bangkok Post* columnist Jacques Bekaert, who occasionally traveled to Cambodia during the 1980s and wrote about the country's situation between 1983 and 1993. In addition, I also interviewed and had informal conversations with close to 20 people of various occupations, who lived in different regions in Cambodia during the

1980s.⁷ These interviews are very useful in helping to confirm and/or discard various claims made by earlier works on the PRK. This is not to say that all people's words are taken literally and are assumed to be totally reliable. Nonetheless, in spite of people's different attitudes toward the government, their testimonies provide information on some common social aspects of life which can be regarded as fairly reliable. At the same time, it is not the aim of this thesis to offer a definite answer about PRK rule, but rather to narrate the differences of people's experience so that one can go beyond dichotomous classification of a regime as simply "liberation" or "oppression" and appreciate the complexity of the time. The inclusion of people's narration therefore also serves partially to help us by looking at what really happened which tend to be washed out by political rhetoric.

Reading other works on the PRK reveals that the argument that January 7 signifies the liberation of Cambodia definitely has certain truth to it, but also neglects the sufferings of the people (or at least many of them) whether directly because of the state's policies or because of some other factors not within the state's control. By the same token, those who simply view the PRK's rule as simply oppressing Cambodian population are only partially right, and they fail to acknowledge achievements in various areas, not to mention the fact that, like it or not, without the presence of the Vietnamese army, Cambodia lived close to the possibility of the return of the Khmer Rouge. One very

⁷ My interviewees include two former teachers, one state official, two policemen, one nurse, one soldier, two students, four farmers and one merchant. I also had random conversations with at least five other people of similar occupations. The interviewees were men and women whose ages ranged from 40 to 70 years old. During the 1980s, they lived in such provinces as Kompong Chnang, Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, Battambang, Kompong Cham, Banteay Mean Chey, and Phnom Penh.

interesting aspect that most scholars who have written on the PRK fail to acknowledge is the fact that, looking back at the society they lived in during the 1980s, many Cambodians, whether or not they favor the PRK or the current government, seem to recall that despite the hardships such as lack of food, there was a sense of justice, a sense of security from social dangers like robbery, as well as the absence of social vices (e.g. gangsters, drugs, and the like), which are the main concerns of current society. This does not mean the PRK was a benevolent and non-corrupt government, as we shall see, but the fact that the people perceive it to be that way, at least in comparison with the current government, suggests that the history of Cambodia from the day that the Khmer Rouge took power to the present should not be viewed simply as a linear progression. In other words, while peace and the opening of Cambodia has brought economic development and international aid which improved the lives of many ordinary Cambodians, corruption, violence and social vices at unprecedented levels also mark the new society of Cambodia.

This thesis is in no way exhaustive in terms of its coverage of the PRK and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia; it is largely confined to domestic issues. Nor is it an attempt to reach an ultimate truth. The fact that the debate on January 7 has lingered on for over thirty years now suggests that any view of the PRK will be criticized by one side or the other. Nevertheless, it is worth allowing readers to have a more informed and critical approach to the original question of whether the People's Republic of Kampuchea actually liberated Cambodians or if it continued to inflict sufferings on the population, going beyond simplistic claims and appreciating the complexity of the regime by looking

at different aspects of life and ranging experiences of different regions. If this thesis promotes a rethinking of Cambodia's contemporary history, so much the better.

CHAPTER I: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KAMPUCHEA

A visit to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM) tells one how much has been written on Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Currently, the Center continues to host researchers, Khmer Rouge Tribunal personnel, interns and photographers from all over the world who are interested in Democratic Kampuchea, the state whose rule resulted in nearly 2 million deaths of people in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Such high interest in DK's history is not surprising since the regime had committed one of the worst crimes in world history. The period that followed, the People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979 – 1989 (henceforth, the PRK), however, has received less scholarly attention, despite the fact that it is more controversial in nature.

This chapter attempts to survey the historiography of the PRK, from its inception to the present. It does not claim or intend to cover everything that has been written on this regime, of course, but it does cover major propagandistic and scholarly works that dealt with this period then and in retrospect. Nor are all aspects of these works discussed; only those relevant to the authors' different views of the PRK will be presented, as chronologically as possible. The chapter can be viewed as a debate among scholars on such themes as the scope of Vietnamese control over Cambodia, political legitimacy of the PRK, human rights violations, as well as the legacy of the PRK rule. In doing so,

readers are also introduced to important works that have contributed to our understanding of Cambodia's history between 1979 and 1989.

Unlike the Khmer Rouge regime, there are no published memoirs of people living in the PRK, except the questionable biography of the current Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, written by the Indian journalist couple Harish and Julie Mehta titled *Hun Sen: The Strongman of Cambodia* (1999), in which Hun Sen recalled his defection from the Khmer Rouge to "seek Vietnam's support," to the day he became the dominating figure in Cambodian politics.⁸ A few factors might account for the lack of memoirs by people who have lived under the PRK. First of all, many intellectuals had perished under the Khmer Rouge's rule, and some of those who survived fled the country when Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Secondly, regardless of one's attitude toward the PRK, it is fair to say that any hardships he or she witnessed during this regime were overshadowed by the trauma experienced under the Khmer Rouge, so that a memoir of this period might not be considered as interesting to the publisher. Nor is it likely that anyone would write a pleasant autobiography about a regime that was constantly at war and under foreign domination. Last but not least, the fact that the ruling party of Cambodia currently

⁸ Harish Mehta and Julie B. Mehta. *Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd, 1999). Harish Mehta was also the author of Hun Sen's rival Norodom Ranaridh's biography titled *Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranaridh, Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd, 2001). Critics of Hun Sen, however, question the credibility of his stories. Some accounts from Cambodian refugees are available, but are limited to their experience during the first year or so under the Vietnamese occupation before their escape to the Thai border. See, for example, Someth May, *Cambodian Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber Limited, 1986). The author arrived at the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in early 1980s. Nonetheless, his book provides some interesting accounts about the early days of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, and will be discussed later in this thesis. A very brief memoir by Svay Ken offers a glimpse of his life from pre-war Cambodia to the year 2000. See Svay Ken, *Painted Stories: The Life of a Cambodian Family from 1941 to the Present* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001).

comprises mainly the core of the PRK's ruling apparatus, which is not always tolerant on critical media, makes it unappealing for anyone in the country to publish something that goes against the government, while writing otherwise might be viewed by critics as simply politically feeding the government. In terms of archives, the Bophana Institute in Phnom Penh holds some audio-visual collections on the period (mainly from French TV1 productions) which someone with French language background (which I do not have) can take advantage of.

Nowadays, the involvement of some 150,000 Vietnamese troops in toppling the Khmer Rouge regime is widely known and is not a matter of debate. 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.⁹ According to *Washington Post* correspondent Elizabeth Becker, Vietnam gave the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation Front 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. She wrote: "Even old friends of Vietnam like Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme were rebuffed when trying to force the Vietnamese to admit they had invaded Cambodia."¹⁰ Vietnam's initial denial of any involvement in the attacks was understandably an attempt to escape international condemnation, which it eventually

⁹ Thu-huong Nguyen-vo. *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992), p. 126.

¹⁰ 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.

faced anyway. While Vietnam tried to downplay their role in the invasion, the PRK's leaders were keen to show to the Cambodian people that they were truly nationalistic, and by no means Vietnam's puppets as alleged by the other Cambodian resistance forces outside the country during the 1980s, or by the opposition parties today. During the proclamation of the Republic, 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."¹¹ 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."¹² Later on, though 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

¹¹ Quoted in E. V. Kobelev. *Kampuchea: from Tragedy to Rebirth* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), p. 121.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

country can come and replace [them].”¹³ More recently, in December 1997, when asked by his biographer in an interview about the Vietnamese invasion, Hun Sen reacted irritatedly: “How could I, a Cambodian, invade my own country?”¹⁴ To other people, however, the involvement of the PAVN was not a point of debate, especially for Cambodian people who witnessed the presence of Vietnamese army fighting with the Khmer Rouge before their occupation of Cambodia. Even if the takeover had been planned by Cambodians, the fact remains that without the involvement of the Vietnamese army, the toppling of the Khmer Rouge would not have been possible.

What has invited more controversy among scholars, Cambodian politicians and civilians, however, is the significance of the date January 7, 1979, i.e. whether it was a date of liberation of the country or an invasion of a foreign power and continuation of oppression. The center of the debate was, and still is, focused on the nature of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea itself. From its very inception, the PRK was controversial. Cambodian resistance forces consistently repeated their attack on the regime as a Vietnamese puppet government, while the PRK and its patron Vietnam accused the former groups of being Western imperialist cliques. For the whole following decade, a war of accusation and propaganda (and, eventually, negotiation) from both sides dominated the media. No one had recorded it better than the *Bangkok Post*’s

¹³Cited in Margaret Slocomb. *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworms Book, 2003), p. 54.

¹⁴ Harish C. Mehta and Julie B. Mehta. *Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd, 1999), p. xi.

Belgian columnist Jacques Bekaert, who had the privilege to interview top officials from all sides of the conflict.¹⁵

It is not surprising, of course, that the PRK would present itself as the savior and legitimate ruler of Cambodia, condemning its opponents, and boasting the achievements under its own leadership. In 1985, the Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRK published a book titled *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea* exactly for that purpose. In this book, all the difficulties that the new regime faced were attributed to the legacy of the US "imperialist" war in Cambodia, and the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique. Though true to a large extent, the PRK leaders presented the problem in a way that showed they were totally detached from the causes of the tragedy, despite the fact that they took part in the communist revolution in Cambodia. An example would be the book's claim that "Few people ... realized then that the horror of the Pol Pot regime had been predetermined by the earlier interference of external forces into the affairs of Kampuchean people, and that the beginnings of the tragedy had to be sought in the tragedy of old Cambodia."¹⁶ The book continued: "Along with Vietnam, Kampuchea was turned into a proving ground for testing US chemical weapons. Today thousands of hectares of land, poisoned by toxic agents sprayed over it in the years of the US aggression, are still unsuitable for farming."¹⁷

¹⁵ Jacques Bekaert's *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997) and *Cambodian Diary: A Long Road to Peace 1987–1993* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998) were based on his weekly columns from the 1980s and early 1990s.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea* (Phnom Penh: Press and Information Department, 1985), p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Besides the condemnation of the US and Khmer Rouge atrocities, the book also tried to present a positive image of the Vietnamese army's presence in Cambodia, as well as the solidarity between the two countries. It posited that "During the rule of the Khmer Rouge, the ties of friendship and solidarity that had been formed in the years of joint struggle against US aggression between the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea were ruptured."¹⁸ The resistance forces, collectively known as the CGDK, on the other hand, were simply described as "the united anti-Kampuchean front of the forces of imperialism, expansionism, and international reaction,"¹⁹ thereby completely disregarding the nationalist character of these forces, meanwhile ignoring the fact that the PRK itself was also backed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In addition, the book also propagandized the breakaway of resistance forces to the PRK government, while in reality, the opposite was also true, and perhaps at even higher rate.²⁰

What was also interesting about the book is that the people of Cambodia were referred to as "Kampuchean" to include all ethnic groups in the country other than "Khmers." Such a category was necessary given the fact that ethnic Vietnamese were (re-)entering Cambodia after 1979. The inflow of ethnic Vietnamese had political significance since it was quite often exaggerated by the Cambodian resistance forces in Thailand, who propagandized it as a sign of Vietnam's attempt to colonize and annex Cambodia. Yet the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰ See for example, J. Bakeart, *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986*, pp. 51-54.

claim seems to be rejected by scholars who write about this period.²¹ My personal interviews with Cambodian people who had lived there during the 1980s also confirmed that there were actually fewer civilian Vietnamese in the country compared to the pre-Khmer Rouge time. Insofar as the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge was concerned, the book also mentioned that “The Kampuchean justifiably refer to January 1979 as a turning point in their history. The nation was saved from the mad cutthroats, intoxicated by the blood of millions of defenseless victims. The prospect for a national survival opened up before the long-suffering Kampuchean people.”²² Likewise, the book postulated: “It should be added that many foreign observers have attested that the Kampuchean population’s attitude towards the Vietnamese volunteers is marked by cordiality and a feeling of gratitude.”²³ More importantly, the book boasted: “The activity of the popular government in the field of public education had reached an unprecedented scope. Never before in the history of our country have so many children attended schools (over 1.8 million). Social life has become much more active, and national culture is being revived.”²⁴ Parallel to the book was a documentary produced by the Cinema Department of the PRK titled *La République Populaire du Kampuchea, 5 ième Année*.²⁵ These accounts above, though true to some extent, are undoubtedly biased and certainly fail to give the whole picture.

²¹ See for example, Jennifer S. Berman, “No Place like Home: Anti-Vietnamese Discrimination and Nationality in Cambodia,” *California Law Review* Vol. 84, No. 3 (1996): 817-874.

²² PRK, *Undeclared War*, p. 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁵ Audio-visual file, “La République Populaire du Kampuchea, 5 ième Année” (1984) [DDC_VI_000306]. Accessed December 20, 2008, Bophana Institute, Phnom Penh.

Nevertheless, the PRK also earned sympathy from outsiders. A well-known prominent supporter of both the PRK and Vietnam was British journalist John Pilger. Criticizing the Nixon administration and particularly Kissinger's policy and its legacy in Cambodia, Pilger described the difficult conditions in Cambodia and Vietnam after the war, but also praised Vietnam for its support for Cambodia despite its own difficulties at home by distributing rice to the Khmer people "from its own meagre rations."²⁶ He argued reasonably that "the Vietnamese army liberated the Khmer people from Pol Pot's charnel house; and I use the word 'liberated' in its purest sense, for while Anthony and I do not suggest in any way that the Vietnamese acted for altruistic reasons – and indeed, for any reasons other than those related to their own survival – every Khmer we met in Cambodia regarded the 'invasion', as it became known in the West, as having saved countless lives, if not the fabric of an entire nation."²⁷ He also regarded the PRK in the following way: "[the Khmer Rouge] regime of forced labor, of directed residence, without religion, or trade or a school system, has been replaced by one of uncoerced labour, decontrolled residence, religious observation, free individual exchange and a significant education programme."²⁸

²⁶ John Pilger and Anthony Barnett. *Aftermath: The Struggle of Cambodia and Vietnam* (Manchester: Manchester Free Press, 1982), p. 78.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79. Similarly, George McGovern, a former US Senator, who had opposed the Vietnam War and lost the 1972 presidential bid to Richard Nixon also pointed out this irony: "After all those years of predictions of dominoes falling and Communist conspiracies, it was Vietnam that went in and stopped Pol Pot's slaughter... They should have gotten the Nobel Peace Prize." Quoted in Benny Widyono, *Dancing in Shadows: Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge, and the United Nations in Cambodia* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2008), pp. 27-8.

The fact that John Pilger was *invited* to make a report in Cambodia in late 1979 was not altogether surprising. Geoffrey Gunn pointed out that “Hanoi obviously knew where Pilger stood on their invasion of Cambodia when they allowed him in to film ‘Cambodia Year Zero’ in August, a mere month after his [pro-Vietnam] ‘boat people’ article.”²⁹ This, however, should not lead us to think that Pilger stood alone in sympathizing the Vietnam’s military in Cambodia. Gary Klintworth, a former Defense intelligence analyst from Australian National University, also argued convincingly that Vietnam’s invasion could be justified because Vietnam’s attacks on the Khmer Rouge were in self-defense, in response to the Khmer Rouge’s attacks on Vietnam’s villages.³⁰ Furthermore, the fact that Cambodian people were liberated from the rule of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese army constituted a justification for the invasion based on “humanitarian” cause as well.³¹

Critics of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the PRK, even if they tacitly acknowledged that the invasion had saved Cambodian lives from the Khmer Rouge, postulated that Vietnam stayed to colonize Cambodia for a decade. “From 1979 to 1989 Vietnam imposed on Cambodia a painful and complete protectorate, against the will of

²⁹ Geoffrey C. Gunn and Jefferson Lee. *Cambodia Watching Down Under* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 1991), p. 107.

³⁰ Gary Klintworth. *Vietnam’s Intervention in Cambodia in International Law* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), chapter 2. Other scholarly accounts also agreed that the Khmer Rouge were the initiators of the 1977-78 Kampuchean-Vietnamese border conflicts. See for example, Kelvin Rowley and Grant Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War* (Norfolk: The Thetford Press Ltd, 1984); Marian Kirsch Leighton, “Perspectives on the Vietnam-Cambodia Border Conflict,” *Asian Survey* Vol. 18, No. 5 (1978): 448-457; Stephen Heder, “The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict” in David P. Elliot (ed.). *The Third Indochina Conflict* (Boulder: Westview, 1981), pp. 21-62; Joseph R. Pouvatchy, “Cambodian – Vietnamese Relations.” *Asian Survey* Vol. 26, No. 4 (1986): 440-451; and Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

³¹ Gary Klintworth. *Vietnam’s Intervention in Cambodia in International*, chapter 4, 5 and 6.

the entire population,” wrote Marie Alexandrine Martin – former Director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris – in her book *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*.³² Martin’s work, which was published in 1994, was of course not the first one to denounce the PRK, but is a very good albeit somewhat biased summary of earlier critics’ works on this regime.

One of the first scholars to write against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia was Stephen Heder, who had interviewed refugees fleeing Cambodia in the early rule of the PRK in his monograph *Kampuchean Occupation and Resistance*.³³ Heder wrote of “Vietnamese harassment” including arbitrary shootings of the Khmer population witnessed by refugees on the Thai border. The fact that the PRK’s authority did not permit civilian resettlement in Phnom Penh during the first few months in 1979 also led Heder to suppose that the PRK was planning to continue the exclusion scheme of civilian life in the city initiated by the Khmer Rouge some four years earlier. Heder’s accusations were countered by Michael Vickery’s 1984 book *Cambodia 1975 – 1982*, in which he dedicated the whole of chapter 4 to insisting that his interviews with residents inside Cambodia did not confirm any systematic Vietnamese mistreatment of the Khmer people.³⁴ With hindsight, Michael Vickery, an independent historian based in Cambodia, also rejected Heder’s view that the PRK was planning to evacuate the city once again, an issue I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter. My own interviews with

³² Marie Alexandrine Martin. *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (translated by Mark W. McLeod) (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 215.

³³ Heder, Stephen R. *Kampuchean Occupation and Resistance*, Asian Studies Monographs, No.027, Institute of Asian Studies, (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1980).

³⁴ Michael Vickery. *Cambodia 1975 – 1982* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), chapter 4.

people who had lived in Cambodia during the PRK's rule also supported Vickery's claim. This, of course, does not mean that Vietnamese harassment did not exist, for there were occasional abuses by ill-disciplined Vietnamese troops toward civilian Khmers. Actually, my father recalled that one time after playing volleyball with the *bo doi* (Vietnamese "voluntary" soldiers) based in his town in Kompong Chhnang province, they got into a fight, to the point that one of the *bo doi* picked up his rifle and began shooting to scare him off. Petty stealing or sometimes forced demand of a farmer's poultry also took place, but was not widespread. A more serious issue had to do with sexual harassment, which, again, was not considered prevalent in the country.³⁵ This is in no way a justification of whatever took place, for it certainly reflected the unequal power relationship between the foreign occupiers and the occupied Khmer population, but any claims of widespread "Vietnamese oppression" of the Cambodian population should be qualified and perceived with more care. If one is to look for references of anarchy, there seem to be more sad anecdotes among some refugees fleeing to the Thai border in small groups, who were abused not only by the Vietnamese soldiers, but also by some Thai soldiers and other Cambodian resistance forces.³⁶

In 1981, Ea Meng-Try, presumably a Sino-Khmer, published an article titled "Cambodia: A Country Adrift" and posited that: "Under the pro-Vietnamese government of Heng

³⁵ Occasional abuses of Khmer people by a few Vietnamese soldiers also confirmed by interviews with Vietnamese army deserters in Thailand. See Khien Theeravit, *Research Report on the Vietnamese Army Deserters*. Asian Studies Monographs, No. 037, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok: Pim Suay Co., LTD, 1987).

³⁶ Interview with N. T., who witnessed some Cambodian girls being dragged away for sexual abuse by some Thai soldiers. Another interviewee who was a former refugee to the Thai border confirmed this aspect as well.

Samrin, both *the growth and the identity of the Khmer population* are threatened following the country's incorporation into the 'Indo-Chinese federation.' The population has been decimated by war, famine, *repression, colonization, and assimilation* [emphasis added].³⁷ His biased views against the PRK, and even worse, lenient view toward Democratic Kampuchea, became more obvious when he wrote: "Under the regime of Pol Pot, although the diet was deficient, each person could eat in the cooperative, at least from 1977 on. Under the Vietnamese occupation, the Kampucheans lacked rice, and each person had to fend for himself."³⁸ Ea Meng-Try's concern about the famine in the early years of the PRK's rule was fairly accurate given, the circumstances of the war between the Vietnamese troops and the Khmer Rouge, and the widespread droughts during those early years. Pointing to the presence of "about 250,000" Vietnamese troops and "200,000 to 300,000" Vietnamese immigrants inside Cambodia in 1980, the larger population of Vietnam, and the incorporation of Cambodia into the Indochinese Federation, Ea Meng-Try also proposed that Vietnam was engaging in an assimilation process in Cambodia. He also cited an account from a refugee: "In May [1979], the Vietnamese decreed that if a Vietnamese soldier demanded the hand of a young Kampuchean girl, she had to accept. Kampuchean widows were obliged to remarry. But since the Kampuchean males were in short supply, with whom to remarry? ... In this way a major step was taken toward the Vietnamization of Kampuchea."³⁹

³⁷ Ea Meng-Try. "Kampuchea: A Country Adrift," *Population and Development Review* Vol. 7, No. 2 (1981): 218.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Thor Peng Leath, "La fuite devant l'occupation vietnamienne," *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 402 (1980): 1356. Quoted in Ea Meng-Try, "Kampuchea: A Country Adrift," *Population and Development Review* Vol. 7, No. 2 (1981): 223.

Michael Vickery refuted the “Vietnamization of Cambodia” accusation in his 1986 book *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, which projected a recovery in Cambodia under the PRK, on two important points.⁴⁰ His first point was in regards to the population of Vietnamese civilians in Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.⁴¹ The figure of Vietnamese civilians by mid-1983 given by the PRK was about 56,000 while that of the anti-PRK propagandists was estimated up to 200,000. Vickery’s comment was: “Of course, none of the figures is verifiable, but the only point which needs to be made here is that even the largest serious totals which have been suggested by Western enemies of the PRK are still within an acceptable range, given the pre-war population and proclaimed PRK policies [of toleration of ethnic minorities].”⁴² The second point against the “assimilation” allegation concerned the alleged teaching of Vietnamese language in Khmer schools and the imposition of that language on Khmer students. Vickery wrote: “Information elicited at all levels, from [Education Minister] Pen Navuth, to schoolteachers at work, and in private from students and parents met in chance encounters, confirmed the total falsity of this charge.”⁴³ Nonetheless, Vietnamese language was offered in tertiary-level education: “The Level 3 syllabus, as would be

⁴⁰ Michael Vickery. *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1986).

⁴¹ Under Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic (1970-75), tens of thousands Vietnamese civilians were massacred, while many were forced to return to Vietnam. Any Vietnamese civilians remaining in Cambodia after 1975 either perished under the Khmer Rouge or fled the country. For more details see Jennifer S. Berman, “No Place like Home: anti-Vietnamese Discrimination and Nationality in Cambodia,” *California Law Review* Vol. 84, No. 3 (1996): 817-874.

⁴² Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 165. My own interviews also support Vickery’s position. In fact, one person told me that there were no Vietnamese civilians in her town (Tmor Kol, Battambang province), since those who had managed to survive the Khmer Rouge regime also left for the Thai borders in hope of migration to a third country.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

expected, calls for four hours of foreign language instruction per week, in Russian, German, or Vietnamese – in that order – but it has not been implemented because of lack of teachers. It was hoped that the first classes might begin in the 1984-5 school year.”⁴⁴

Yet, even this was based on a pragmatic choice rather than an attempt to impose Vietnamese culture on Cambodian people. As Vickery convincingly put it:

The choices of foreign language for school instruction are in relation to those countries which are politically important for the PRK, and also those which have provided aid in its development, including aid for the reconstruction of the educational system. Vietnamese aid was particularly important in the Medical Faculty, because of the common French language which the older generation Vietnamese doctors shared with surviving Khmer medical students, and Vietnamese influence there was apparently crucial in reorienting Cambodian medicine in accordance with modern principles.⁴⁵

My interviews with Cambodian people living under the PRK also suggest that rumors of “forced marriages” alleged by enemies of the PRK were largely unfounded. Unions between Vietnamese soldiers and Khmer women, when they happened, were through consent rather than through force, as apparent from Someth May’s accounts:

“Vietnamese soldiers joined in [a wedding], dancing with their guns slung over their shoulders. The girls flirted with them and taught them *ram vong*, the round dance.”⁴⁶

In the political domain, however, Vietnam’s control over the PRK is widely acknowledged. Marie A. Martin, for example, pointed to the high number of Vietnamese “experts” (advisors) at all levels in the PRK regime, who had the last decision on all of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Someth May, *Cambodian Witness*, p. 247.

Cambodia's administrative affairs.⁴⁷ Every ministry had a Vietnamese "advisor," and all "administrative, political, and economic decisions had to have at least the endorsement of the adviser and were usually dictated by him."⁴⁸ Nothing was more evident than the incarceration of the PRK's first Prime Minister Pen Sovann (a Hanoi-trained revolutionary who was exiled in Vietnam before 1979), who was independent-minded and usually at odds with the Vietnamese.⁴⁹ Likewise, the PRK was also known to have been intolerant towards its political opponents. This has led Sorpong Peou, a Cambodian political scientist currently teaching at Japan's Sophia University, to characterize the PRK regime as "socialist dictatorship, simply because the regime did not employ terrorism to achieve perfect harmony among political leaders, the party, and the people, despite its adherence to communist ideology [as opposed to the totalitarian Khmer Rouge regime]."⁵⁰ In his view, "It is difficult to measure the extent to which individuals' freedoms and rights guaranteed by the Constitution were respected under the PRK/SOC. Although the regime did not violate human rights to the extent the Khmer Rouge or Lon Nol regimes did, there was no liberal democracy at work."⁵¹ Unlike Michael Vickery,

⁴⁷ M. A. Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, p. 217.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ For detailed discussion of Pen Sovann, see Evan Gottesman's *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003). In an interview with Radio Free Asia last year, Pen Sovann attributed his arrest and imprisonment by the Vietnamese to his complaints against Vietnam's domination over Cambodian politics, the flows of Vietnamese immigrants into Cambodia, and his contacts with the Soviet Union without consulting Vietnam first. See *Radio Free Asia*, "Interview with Pen Sovann (Part 85)," https://preview.rfaweb.org/khmer/program/khhistory/Road_To_Death_Field85-08222008064622.html?searchterm=None. Accessed January 10, 2009.

⁵⁰ Sorpong Peou. *Intervention & Change in Cambodia: Towards Democracy?* (New York: St. Martin's Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 63. In his book, Sorpong Peou defines a totalitarian state as "a sectarian state, whose primary function is to fight its internal and external enemies and to ensure the greatest and most enthusiastic unanimity possible." Ibid., p. 3.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 69.

who tends to dismiss allegations against the PRK's mistreatment of its political dissidents, Sorpong Peou argues that:

Michael Vickery is correct on several points (that human rights abuses during the period were blown out of proportion by ignorant Cambodian refugees, unfounded rumors, and media propaganda), but his defense is not totally convincing. Data from Cambodia should be treated as dubious. Furthermore, he overlooked or simply dismissed other human rights reports as “politicized”, namely not true.⁵²

According to the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (1992): “[Since] coming to power in 1979, the government ... has imprisoned thousands of persons for taking part in violent or non-violent activities on behalf of the Khmer Rouge or the non-communist opposition.”⁵³ According to Peou, other reports also confirmed individuals’ imprisonment without having had a chance to defend themselves, while arbitrary arrest, insensitive interrogation, and harsh torture methods (e.g. beating with rifle stocks, applying electric shock, or placing a plastic bag over a detainee’s head until he or she faints) also occurred.⁵⁴ He accurately concludes that any serious speculation against the PRK’s abuse of human rights would only risk being accused by its supporters as being propagandistic,⁵⁵ but the fact remains that “there is little indication that the central administration ... made any serious effort to prevent or punish torture, despite evidence

⁵² Ibid., p. 66.

⁵³ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. *Cambodia: The Justice System and Violation of Human Rights*, p. 37. Cited in Sorpong Peou, *Intervention & Change in Cambodia*, p. 68.

⁵⁴ Sorpong Peou, *Intervention & Change in Cambodia*, p. 68.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

that it is aware that torture is practiced widely on behalf of the state.”⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Peou interestingly tells us that:

My family and I left Cambodia [in mid-1979] because I was accused of conspiring with the “liberal front” on the Thai-Cambodian border. I was informed that Vietnamese troops were about to arrest me. I had not the faintest idea what the accusation was all about, for I never had any dealings with anyone involved with the so-called “liberal front”. I would not, however, argue that Vietnamese troops were ruthless. In fact, while still in Cambodia and taking part in the defence of my village, I had pleasant relations with many of them. They were far from bloodthirsty.⁵⁷

It should also be pointed that although Sorpong Peou agreed with Michael Vickery that the PRK regime “was no doubt more stable than the Lon Nol and Pol Pot ones,” he denounced Vickery for over-exaggerating the resistance forces’ weakness and the PRK’s strengths. Vickery had written earlier that following the [first-phase] official withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops in 1982, the PRK began to demonstrate self-confidence, and even posited that while able to “blow up bridges, attack civilian trains, and murder a few people here and there, their [resistance’s] military success was never impressive.”⁵⁸ Such a view, Peou soundly argues, is both “ahistorical and anti-structural”:

It does not address the conceptual issue of structural durability. Economic growth and internal political stability displayed by “Indochinese solidarity” were used as the best indicators for explaining the durable nature and structural soundness of the PRK. Conceptually, this argument itself proved to be weak simply because it is extraordinarily difficult to support the claim that war-shattered countries like Cambodia could become strong and stable in a few years’ time [especially without the support of close to 200,000 Vietnamese troops in the country and financial

⁵⁶ F. Abrams. *Kampuchea, after the Worst: A Report on Current Violations of Human Rights* (New York, NY: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1985), p. 36. Cited in Sorpong Peou, *Intervention & Change in Cambodia*, p. 68.

⁵⁷ Sorpong Peou, *Intervention & Change in Cambodia*, chapter 2’s endnote no. 61, pp. 111-112.

⁵⁸ M. Vickery. *Kampuchea: A Political Survey*. No. 14. (Australia: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1994), p. 2. Cited in Sorpong Peou, *ibid.*, p. 97.

and material support from the Soviet bloc]. Only Pol Pot and his loyalists seemed to have made the insane claim that their revolution could progress by leaps and bounds.”⁵⁹

Another point raised against the PRK was related to the issue of political indoctrination. Like other regimes of the socialist bloc, the PRK felt a need to disseminate Marxist-Leninist doctrine in the society, especially among its civil servants. Given Vietnam’s relationship with Cambodia, political education includes not only socialist ideas and propaganda against the resistance groups, but also the solidarity between Cambodia’s and Vietnam’s communist parties, as well as the commemoration of Vietnam’s “liberation” of Cambodia. On this issue, William Shawcross, author of the widely-known book *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*,⁶⁰ criticized the PRK, particularly in the health sector, in the following way in his 1984 book *Quality of Mercy*: “Politics took precedence over health; those few Cambodian doctors and nurses who did exist were constantly forced to neglect their duties to go to political study sessions. There was daily indoctrination, and there were frequent longer courses. Patients died as a result.”⁶¹ While political education was certainly integral to the PRK’s ruling apparatus and was even taught at elementary schools,⁶² Shawcross’s claim might be slightly misleading. My interviews with a few former civil servants under the PRK did confirm such political education, but they also consistently told me that political education did not

⁵⁹ Sorpong Peou, *Intervention & Change in Cambodia*, *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶⁰ William Shawcross. *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1979).

⁶¹ William Shawcross. *Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust, and Modern Conscience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984), p. 400.

⁶² An elementary school teacher told her interviewer from TV Française 1 (TF1) that, besides math, literature and science, she also had to teach “moral politics,” namely about the “liberation of Indochina” and the “solidarity with Vietnam” to her students. Audio-visual file, “Cambodge: La Renaissance” (1983) [INA_VI_000129]. Accessed December 20, 2008, Bophana Institute, Phnom Penh.

take much off their working time, and not all staff would be required to go to the workshop. Instead, staff of a particular institution would take turns going, while the rest would be left in charge. Shawcross also pointed out that one of the reasons that more than half a million Cambodians left after the Vietnamese invasion in late 1978 was because:

[...] they saw no future for themselves under Vietnamese administration ... Others, who had been prepared to work with the Vietnamese, were disheartened when they found that their new ruler often gave preferment to former Khmer Rouge cadres rather than to middle-class survivors. Many people disliked having their work overseen by Vietnamese advisers. Moreover, it became gradually more clear that even though Vietnamese policies were by no stretch of the imagination [like those of the] Khmer Rouge, they were nonetheless communist.⁶³

Sorpong Peou added: “Those who stayed did so because they had no choice. Passive support out of necessity is no support out of loyalty, and momentary enthusiasm could still lead to long-term disappointment.”⁶⁴

Although the Vietnamese occupation was largely a push factor for many refugees, particularly among middle-class Khmers, the fact that international aid was available on the Thai border also helped trigger the exodus of refugees seeking relief. Eva Mysliwiec, an American aid worker in Cambodia during the 1980s, wrote for instance, that “between 1979-81, US\$663.9 millions in aid from Western donors were channeled through the UN agencies, the ICRC and smaller non-governmental agencies to mount a major emergency relief operation ... This aid programme was administered from Thailand to benefit a fluid

⁶³ William Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 305.

⁶⁴ Sorpong Peou, *Intervention & Change in Cambodia*, p. 99.

population of about one million, including remnants of the beaten Khmer Rouge.”⁶⁵ As the title of her book *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* might suggest, Mysliwiec took a sympathetic stand towards the PRK and blamed international political factors for the continuation of the sufferings of Kampuchean people: “It is as if the Kampuchean people were being punished for the Vietnamese presence in their country. On the one hand, they are accused of being puppets of Vietnam; on the other, by isolating Kampuchea, Western nations are creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.”⁶⁶ She even went on to postulate that “It is within the power of the Western and ASEAN nations and China to stop the killing now. If Vietnam withdrew its forces from Kampuchea tomorrow the Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for atrocities between 1975-78 would be likely to seize power. On the other hand, if support for the coalition ended tomorrow, the killing would cease but there could be disagreement over the timetable for Vietnamese withdrawal.”⁶⁷

Mysliwiec’s view, however, was criticized by Laura Summers, a reviewer of *Punishing the Poor* in 1988, who wrote that Mysliwiec’s “sentiments reveal her to be a well-meaning, but not a very circumspect observer.”⁶⁸ Summers, stated her criticism, which I would like to quote at length here:

Punishing the Poor fails to provide a very accurate or useful guide to the Kampuchean political landscape. Lacking in historical political

⁶⁵ Eva Mysliwiec. *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1988), p. 72. Eva Mysliwiec has been working for various NGOs in Cambodia since 1980, and is currently the Executive Director of Youth Star Organization in Phnom Penh.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁶⁸ Laura Summers. Review of “Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea” by Eva Mysliwiec in *Vietnam’s Kampuchea. Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct., 1988): 1647.

perspective, it confuses cause and effect. The international isolation of the PRK is one of the effects of the intense contest for power in Phnom Penh, a contest which Vietnam joined in 1979. To view the failure of the world community to recognise the PRK as the cause of human hardship in Kampuchea is fundamentally mistaken. Further economic development in Kampuchea as well as peace depends upon a resolution of the contest for power in Phnom Penh and over Kampuchea. Logically, the elements of any resolution would include the withdrawal of all Vietnamese occupation forces, as well as negotiations between the PRK and the DK which lead to an orderly redistribution of administrative power, liberalisation of the economy and the preparation of a new constitution. Provision must also be made for the orderly return and resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees and exiles, especially the tens of thousands of Kampuchean technocrats whose skills and sense of public duty will be absolutely vital for the success of post-war development programmes. It is utopian to imagine that diplomatic recognition of the PRK will lead either to peace or to social stability or to believe that a peace settlement which excludes any of the Kampuchean parties can possibly endure. A lasting peace requires that diverse social interests find expression in the new state order and that the new state refrain from the heavily repressive ways of all previous constitutional regimes. While it seems likely that some form of political settlement will be agreed in the near future, the uncertainties and difficulties of everyday life and politics in Kampuchea will not be resolved for many years to come.⁶⁹

In addition, Laura Summers also criticized Eva Mysliwec for failing to point out the difficulties of NGO workers in Cambodia under the PRK during the 1980s.⁷⁰ Although

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 1649.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 1647. In my recent conversation with Eva Mysliwec, she told me how she looks back at those years in the following way: “The aid community did face many challenges, both from the PRK and because of the embargo. But we were able to get meaningful work done to help Cambodian people, even if this was not in our “conventional” way of working. It was an extraordinary time that required NGOs to find creative ways of working in spite of restrictions. And we did. It would have been virtually useless for NGOs to do their own thing here and there in Cambodia when the country was so devastated. It was important for us to help get the public services working as they could reach many more people than we could have. As things began to improve a bit around 1985, and we moved from relief to reconstruction, we also started to shift our way of working as restrictions were gradually loosened. We did not view the government as “the enemy” but as a partner whom we needed if we were to be effective in our “aid” work. While we may have had different ideologies, we were all interested to get people back on their feet, food production going again and basic health and education services functional. That was the strong common goal that made it possible for us to collaborate. Our Cambodian friends here know well that this does not mean that we agreed with everything the regime did or said. I cherish those years. In sharing people’s

Laura Summers was right in denouncing Mysliwicz's "naiveté" in terms of the structure of political struggles among Cambodian elite, as well her idealist solution to the "Cambodia problem," as it became known (had the Cold War not ended), one cannot help think that had the international community put political consideration behind people's needs as Mysliwicz desperately suggested, international aid could have reached the population and improved the situation. It is not unreasonable to think that Vietnam continued to occupy Cambodia on the pretext that the Khmer Rouge would otherwise return to power. It seemed, however, that the PRK, under Vietnam's control, was far from being an evil regime. The PRK permitted aid agencies to operate so that the population could benefit. However, it is also true to state there was bureaucratic sluggishness, as well as the partial appropriation of aid by government employees. This appropriation should be understood in the context that the PRK did not levy high taxes during these difficult years and thus did not have sufficient finances to compensate civil servants adequately.⁷¹

The two most recent books to deal relatively thoroughly with the PRK were written by Australian Marxist historian Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot*, and American lawyer Evan Gottesman's *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, who were probably not even aware of each other's work before their simultaneous publications in 2003. Both authors claimed they were able to have access to official documents of the PRK, albeit with discrepancies on how

struggle we developed trusting relationships which are a blessing to me in my work in Cambodia today," (email response, April 2, 2009).

⁷¹ Eva Mysliwicz, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 16.

and where they found them. While Slocomb tells us that the minutes of meetings, circulars, laws, reports and memos from the PRK's Council of Ministers and the Council of State are housed and accessible at the State Archives of Cambodia, Gottesman described his encounter with the documents rather accidentally: "in my wanderings through Cambodian government buildings, I came across thousands of documents from the PRK and SOC: internal reports, secret telegrams, draft laws and regulations, and most important, hundreds of minutes of meetings of high-level Communist Party and state institutions. Unsorted, uncatalogued, and left to gather dust, they were the product of a bureaucracy that was adept at recording its own activity but extremely disorganized."⁷² Such discrepancies can perhaps be explained by the fact that Gottesman started his research in 1996, and it was possible that Slocomb did so later when those archives had already been housed and were more easily accessible. I take some time to discuss the nature of the circumstances of their access to these sources because it reveals that the current Cambodian government is not very interested in keeping its previous internal records (which used to be secret during the 1980s). Nonetheless, many of the highest-level Party documents, in particular Politburo documents, are still inaccessible because as one Party official told Gottesman, Vietnamese authorities took many Cambodian Communist Party documents to Vietnam in 1989 when they withdrew from the country.⁷³ But as Gottesman claims, "Much of the Party's decision-making process is nevertheless apparent from the documents that are available."⁷⁴

⁷² Evan Gottesman. *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. xii.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Although both Margaret Slocomb and Evan Gottesman acknowledge the efforts of the PRK, they hold different levels of sympathy toward this regime and thereby reach a similar but ironically opposite conclusion about the transition phase from the People's Republic of Kampuchea to the current Royal Government of Cambodia, run at the top mainly by leaders of the former. Reading Margaret Slocomb's book, one cannot fail to notice the similar tones of sympathy for the PRK voiced earlier by one of her PhD dissertation's advisers – Dr. Michael Vickery (the other was Dr. Martin Stuart-Fox of the University of Queensland).⁷⁵ Slocomb argues that despite its failure to sustain the revolution (due to various factors including the lack of committed communist cadres on the government's part, and people's mistrust of, indifference to, or even evasion of socialist ordeals as a result of the Khmer Rouge's revolution that was marked by ruthless and constant purges, as well as by starvation and negligence of the masses), the PRK gave Cambodians back their life.⁷⁶ In her view, "Cambodia was rebuilt by the PRK, not as is often assumed by the international peace-making effort led by the United Nations in the early 1990s."⁷⁷ If Slocomb is right on this point, in the sense that the PRK had re-established a working government which granted basic civilian rights and tacitly permitted the existence of a market economy, she goes a bit too far to suggest that "the people's lives had resumed a level and rhythm not vastly dissimilar from what they had been prior to the outbreak of the war in 1970 which preceded the revolution."⁷⁸ It was unlikely that Cambodia, a decade after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, could be in a

⁷⁵ Margaret Slocomb. *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), p. viii.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

position anywhere near pre-war Cambodia. The country lacked extensive international aid, an educated populace, was constantly at war, and had an economy mainly dependent on its socialist partners with the possible exception of Thailand.

Referring to the PRK's leaders, Evan Gottesman, on the other hand, asserts that "As for Cambodia's new leaders, put to work in an empty capital overgrown with weeds, they kept calling what they were doing a 'revolution.' But there was nothing to overturn, just an emptiness to fill."⁷⁹ Gottesman maintains that: "Too frequently, opaque regimes are assumed to be monolithic. Absent evidence of internal deliberations, we are unable to attach individual responsibility to state action. We are also deprived of historical theater [such as the clashes between former Khmer Rouge cadres and revolutionaries returning from Vietnam]. Fortunately, in this case, the documentary sources have given us a cast of characters."⁸⁰ Gottesman accordingly places more emphasis on this topic than Slocomb does. Slocomb tends to look more into the lives of the population in relation to the PRK's policies. In a sense, their works can be seen as complementary.

It is noteworthy that Gottesman acknowledges: "As it turns out, most of the arguments that I and other foreigners had been making, especially about human rights, had been the subject of extensive internal debate for years. I found this revelation reassuring because it confirmed that human rights was not a foreign concept." But he continues: "It was also depressing. Cambodia's top leaders were clearly familiar with the concepts of human

⁷⁹ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. x.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

rights and the rule of law. Having thought through their political and legal options and having already made what they felt were informed policy choices, they were unlikely to alter the way they governed the country merely in response to Western advisors.”⁸¹

While Margaret Slocomb praises the PRK for having rebuilt Cambodia before peace actually arrived, Gottesman rightly points out that apart from the fact that a number of the PRK’s leaders continue to retain their power after the peace settlement, “Cambodia military authorities enjoy the autonomy they achieved under the PRK, selling timber and other natural resources and extorting money from the civilians.”⁸² Furthermore, “The legacy of the war [during the PRK’s rule] can also be seen in the state’s obsession with internal security, its continued violations of human rights, and its reluctance to accept a loyal opposition.”⁸³ Nothing is more evident of this than the fact that in spite of their loss in the 1993 UN-sponsored election to the royalist FUNCINPEC Party, the Cambodian People’s Party – successor to the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea – managed to force the winner to share power with them (Cambodia was the only country where two prime ministers ruled the country with co-ministers in important ministries). Following the uneasy alliance, the CPP staged a bloody “coup” in July 1997, after which Cambodian politics was once again dominated by the CPP, despite the emergence of the fairly popular albeit weak opposition Sam Rainsy Party in 1998.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁸² Ibid., p. 237.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ The fighting between the CPP and FUNCINPEC in July 1997 has been viewed by the mainstream media as a coup staged by the strongman Hun Sen against FUNCINPEC’s leader, Norodom Ranaridh. The CPP’s position after the events was that it had been an attempted coup by FUNCINPEC who had sought alliance with the Khmer Rouge. This position was supported by Tony Kevin, Australian ambassador to Cambodia,

Perhaps the most unpopular aspect of PRK rule had to do with the implementation of the “K5 Plan” in the mid-1980s as hundreds of thousands of civilians were conscripted to labor in malaria-infected, landmine-infested zones, clearing forests, constructing roads and building earthen walls along the Thai border to seal off the two countries’ boundaries. Any discussion of the repercussions of the K5 Plan (which I will talk about in more detail in Chapter 3) has to acknowledge the publication in French by foreign medical professional Esméralda Luciulli who worked for Médecins Sans Frontières in Cambodia at that time, titled *Le Mur du bambou* (The Bamboo Wall).⁸⁵ Of great interest here is the fact that the high death rate of laborers and the high number of landmine victims for which the K5 Plan was responsible have forced people who are sympathetic to the PRK to admit that thanks to its implementation the regime was resented by the people in spite of its other achievements, while those who are critical of the PRK are quick to highlight this unpopular aspect of the regime.

As we have seen, the historiography of the PRK tends to be polarized. This might partially have to do with the sources of information scholars obtained. Perhaps with the exception of Esméralda Luciulli, critics of the PRK more often than not seemed to write from outside Cambodia, and their interviews were conducted mostly among defectors from the PRK whose views were essentially against the regime for one reason or another.

who was in Phnom Penh at the time. See various interpretations of the events, see Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: A Political Survey*, pp. 159-166.

⁸⁵ Esméralda Luciulli. *Le Mur de bambou: Le Cambodge après Pol Pot* (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1988). This book has been quoted extensively in English in a number of books, by such authors as Margaret Slocomb, Evan Gottesman, and Marie A. Martin.

At the same time, they were also the ones who were more susceptible to rumors and/or anecdotal information rather than well-founded facts. As we have seen, people like Michael Vickery and Eva Mysliwicz, who spent some years in Cambodia at that time, tended to be more sympathetic to the government (this certainly is not to say that everyone who had served in Cambodia then reached the same conclusion). Yet the main factor that causes such divergence of views probably has more to do with how much one is willing to tolerate the PRK's manner of ruling the country, judging it on the basis of such concepts as "liberal democracy," "human rights," "sovereignty" and the like. Presumably, the more strictly one applies universal judgment, the more he or she is at odds with the regime, and vice versa.

This thesis does not claim to arrive at a completely objective treatment of the PRK either. After all, given my background, I am not without biases either – in fact, contradictory ones too. Back in the early 1990s, prior to the UNTAC-supervised national election, my family held the view that the CPP had saved Cambodian lives from Khmer Rouge brutalities, and voted accordingly. After 1998, however, my parents' political affiliation has shifted toward the opposition, perhaps stemming from the idea that the corrupt CPP has not done much for the country, and on the contrary, has ruined the country. My father's job as a critical NGO Director, and my affiliation with city friends, who tend to hold a view against the CPP, only helped to confirm my view of the PRK as nothing but a Vietnamese puppet government capable of inflicting pain on its population. My reading of Michael Vickery's, Eva Mysliwicz's, and Margaret Slocomb's books, whose accounts

are generally confirmed by my interviews with various people, has done much to alter my view about the PRK. Though not accepting it as a totally benign regime, I also acknowledge the efforts and achievements of the PRK during the 1980s, as discussed in the next two chapters. My choice of references will reflect my efforts to balance my views of the PRK. This thesis therefore does try to discuss major aspects of people's lives from both positive and negative sides, so that a more informed analysis is reachable.

CHAPTER 2: RE-EMERGENCE OF URBAN LIFE

The US secret bombing missions to destroy the Vietnamese communists' sanctuaries inside Cambodian territories during the first half of the 1970s not only resulted in a few hundreds of thousand civilian casualties and caused some Cambodian peasants to join the Khmer Rouge in the jungle, but they also forced a high influx of rural refugees to Phnom Penh, swelling the city population possibly close to three million.⁸⁶ By early 1975, attacks from the Khmer Rouge effectively cut off Phnom Penh from the rest of the country and the world, except for the US supply flights which ferried food, ammunition and medical supplies to the city.⁸⁷ When the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, the new leaders not only mercilessly took the lives of the officials of the defeated regime, but they were also to stage a bizarre revolution in Cambodia by evacuating city dwellers to settle in the rural areas. In the new leaders' minds, Cambodian people were to rebuild Cambodia through agricultural revolution, a "Super Great Leap Forward," which in turn would allow modernization and industrialization of the country in a short period of time.⁸⁸ For at least the following four years, former Cambodian urbanites were to live as peasants – a way of life they were quite unaccustomed to. Those who managed to escape execution lived in a state of misery, starvation, and faced

⁸⁶ John A. Tully. *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 165. Estimates of the total death toll from bombing vary from 150,000 to the probably inflated figure of 750,000 by the US historian Chalmers Johnson. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁸⁸ See, for instance, Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 12.

constant contempt from their illiterate immediate rulers now that they were regarded as the “new people.”⁸⁹

Once the Khmer Rouge were effectively in power, Phnom Penh (like other provincial towns) was virtually deserted and largely left in ruins, to the point that it was usually referred to as a “ghost town” between 1975 and 1979. In reality, Phnom Penh continued to serve as the capital of the new central leadership of the communist government, with the presence of a few factories and a small number of embassies of socialist countries friendly to Democratic Kampuchea, not to mention the operation of the infamous interrogation center S-21 (known to local Cambodians as “Toul Sleng”). Furthermore, the new government also kept a number of former residents with some engineering skills to maintain the city’s minimal infrastructure running.⁹⁰ Even so, the total population of Phnom Penh of close to three million before 1975 was reduced to about 20,000-40,000.⁹¹ And those who stayed to work for the government were put to live in barracks-like quarters and regarded with constant suspicion.⁹²

Insofar as civilians were concerned, one can indeed talk about an annihilation of urban life under Democratic Kampuchea. Given this context, this chapter attempts to discuss

⁸⁹ Essentially, anyone who did not join the revolution before 1975 were considered “new people.” Therefore, even the rural population who were non-communist also held the same status.

⁹⁰ Milton Osborne. *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2008), p. 153.

⁹¹ A report by a Yugoslav television team to Cambodia in March 1978 estimated the population of Phnom Penh at no more than 20,000 (Osborne, *Ibid.*, p. 162), while other estimates are higher. See for example, Wynne Cougill, *Stilled Lives: Photographs from the Cambodian Genocide* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2004).

⁹² Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History*, p. 153.

the recurrence of urban life, particularly in Phnom Penh as a city emerging from being a “ghost town.” Phnom Penh is specifically chosen for a number of reasons. Not only was it the biggest city in Cambodia, but also by and large the only one we could characterize as “urban.” Most provincial towns in Cambodia were (and still are) too small to be considered cities. The existence of markets and people’s livelihoods in most provincial towns were in fact closely linked to villages a few kilometers away. This chapter will therefore examine the development of a market economy, mainly in Phnom Penh, under the new government which was an avowedly socialist regime. It will also look at the state efforts to provide people’s welfare and health care, as well as the revival of education in Phnom Penh (and some provincial towns, where information allows). It will also examine the scope of civil rights such as freedom of movement, practice of religion, and political freedom under the PRK.

Liberation

The victory of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS) in Phnom Penh was so sudden for the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea that it was not long before the arrival of the invaders that they made their last escape. Ieng Thirith – Minister of Social Affairs and wife of Minister of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary, described the bewildered situation in the following way: “We only packed a few of our clothes ... We left all of our papers, everything, in Phnom Penh because we thought we would be back shortly. We thought we were temporarily

evacuating.”⁹³ Even so, the executioners of S-21 managed to take the lives of 14 more victims on the morning of January 7 before their escape.⁹⁴

When the PAVN and the KUFNS entered Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, they encountered an empty city that was largely left in ruins, “with deserted streets, buildings that had been important to the departed regime ringed with barbed wire, and the debris of wrecked cars and items such as washing machines and refrigerators still piled on pavements.”⁹⁵

When the People’s Republic of Kampuchea was proclaimed in Phnom Penh on January 19, 1979, the new leaders felt it was necessary to restore the capital city. According to Nayan Chanda of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the lack of Cambodian population in the city to undertake such an urgent task prompted Vietnam to send thousands of its citizens into Cambodia to bring Phnom Penh back to life while at the same time a smaller number of Cambodians was sent to Vietnam to be trained in the basic elements of

⁹³ Elizabeth Becker. *When the War was over: The Voices of Cambodia’s Revolution and It’s People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 438.

⁹⁴ So many people lost their lives at S-21 (at least 12,000 in total) that the foreign discoverers were alerted to its existence by the stench of decaying bodies coming from a compound enclosed behind an iron fence. See Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, p. 181. For a detailed discussion of Toul Sleng, see David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). While the former high school-turned-prison was made into a genocidal museum, records of interrogation and “confessions” were archived and preserved by the new government. Although critics can argue against the PRK and their Vietnamese patrons of utilizing these documents for their political denunciation of their enemy, the Khmer Rouge, the fact remains that it was thanks to those early efforts that a history of S-21 and Democratic Kampuchea itself could be better understood. Recently, in February 2009, Vietnamese cameramen Dinh Phong and Ho Van Tay, who were among the first to witness the crimes at S-21, donated their footage to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, and hailed the trial of the director of S-21, Kaing Kek Iev (alias, Duch), as a step toward justice for Cambodians. However, their documentary was denounced by Duch’s Cambodian lawyer Kar Savuth as “politically-motivated.”

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

running a modern state.⁹⁶ Such restoration efforts by Vietnam are rarely acknowledged, if known at all. Furthermore, it is a common resentment among Cambodians that early in 1979, Vietnam looted the city. Nayan Chanda, for instance, reported that: “Convoys of trucks carrying refrigerators, air conditioners, electrical gadgets, furniture, machinery and precious sculptures headed towards Ho Chi Minh City. All these had been left behind by a population brutally evicted from city in 1975 and had gone untouched by the Khmer Rouge rulers, who loathed these artifacts of bourgeois decadence.”⁹⁷ Nobody could say they actually witnessed the looting by the Vietnamese, since the trucks that were allegedly carrying those items were always fully covered. Yet, returnees to Phnom Penh could feel the absence of their belongings, and as one informant told me, eventually things that people could recognize as the ones that were in use before 1975 (e.g. Japanese television sets etc.) poured in back to Cambodia from Vietnam as second-hand products with the eventual establishment of trade between the two countries. In fact, Pen Sovann, an exiled Vietnam-trained revolutionary who served as the first prime minister of the PRK in 1981 only to be sent to jail in Vietnam the following year for over a decade, confirmed such allegations in his recent interview with Radio Free Asia.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Cited in Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History*, p. 183. For original discussion see Nayan Chanda. *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

⁹⁷ Nayan Chanda. *Brother Enemy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 370-71. In the movie *The Killing Fields*, however, many Khmer Rouge soldiers were very fond of watches (taken from civilians) that they wore many on their arms.

⁹⁸ *Radio Free Asia*. “Interview with Pen Sovann (Part 85),” https://preview.rfaweb.org/khmer/program/krhistory/Road_To_Death_Field85-08222008064622.html?searchterm=None. Accessed January 10, 2009. As Nayan Chanda rightly noted, “The booty from Phnom Penh might have brought some money to Hanoi’s coffers, but it left a deep scar in Khmer psyche; it reinforced prejudices about the detested *yuon*. It would also remain a large blot on the Vietnamese role as “savior” of Cambodia.” See Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, p. 371.

During the first few months following the liberation of Phnom Penh, Cambodians were once again on the move across the country, seeking lost relatives, returning to former homes, or simply avoiding the continued fighting between the Vietnamese army and retreating Khmer Rouge. Those people who were former residents of the city were travelling on ox-carts or on foot with any possessions they could grab back to their homes before the 1975 evacuation. If the lack of transportation did not do enough to prolong the people's journey, their grief-stricken, weak, mal-nourished physical condition only made it worse. It is not surprising that most people spent months on the road before they could reach their provincial towns or Phnom Penh. Cheng Hi, a former resident of Phnom Penh and a judge before the Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Penh, told Evan Gottesman that his wife was so sick that they could not travel more than a kilometer a day, but there was fighting nearby and they had no choice but to flee, although on some occasions they were able to ask for rides from Vietnamese soldiers on their way to provincial towns.⁹⁹

Upon their arrival in Phnom Penh, many former residents found the city still inaccessible, with the guards patrolling check points on the city's outskirts. The blockade of the city had actually led some observers to jump to the conclusion that the new government was simply maintaining their predecessor's city evacuation scheme. Yet, as Pen Sovann pointed out, the rationale behind the early blockade into the city stemmed from the efforts of the new government to restore the city's ruined infrastructure before it could absorb

⁹⁹ Evan Gottesman. *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 4.

the incoming population.¹⁰⁰ This was indeed a pragmatic policy, but there was also an ideological reason behind this. After all, the PRK was another socialist regime, and it was always vigilant about who could be accepted into the city. Only those who were willing to serve as civil servants in the new government were allowed early access into the city. Furthermore, Gottesman explained that:

The leadership and its Vietnamese advisors were still suspicious of urban culture, which they considered degenerate and counterrevolutionary, and were still contemplating evacuations of ethnic Chinese from Phnom Penh. Nevertheless, they were not so unrealistic as to believe that it was possible or desirable to prevent people from living in towns. Governing Cambodia thus required a clearheaded acknowledgement that towns existed and that an expanded bureaucracy was necessary.¹⁰¹

With the city still blocked off by Vietnamese soldiers, returnees to Phnom Penh “built shanties or camped in the open air, searched for family and friends, exchanged rumors about the new regime and the Vietnamese, and engaged, for the first time in almost four years, in relatively open trading of rice, consumer goods, and gold.”¹⁰² It was from these camps that the government was able to find former teachers, lawyers and other civil servants to fill in positions.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the PRK also required that these new officers undergo “re-education,” i.e. political education in socialism before they could take up their profession. In exchange, civil servants were given choices to live in houses on a “first come first served” basis, unless the buildings had been marked out as prohibited by

¹⁰⁰ *Radio Free Asia*. “Interview with Pen Sovann (Part 85),” https://preview.rfaweb.org/khmer/program/khhistory/Road_To_Death_Field85-08222008064622.html?searchterm=None. Accessed January 10, 2009.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40. People had to pass a certain level of literacy tests before they could fill in state positions. Given the PRK’s desperate need for people to serve as civil servants, it is presumable that standard of those tests were not high, although they might vary according to positions.

the government for official purposes. Because at least close to half of the urban population before 1975 had perished under Democratic Kampuchea, availability of housing in those early days was a non-concern for the new-comers.¹⁰⁴ But instead of choosing big houses separately, those people preferred to live together in those early days. As Honda Katuiti, head of the Japanese research team to Cambodia to investigate the Khmer Rouge's genocide noted:

Cambodians are so attentive to the needs of their relatives and kinsmen and help one another, that some relatives would be sure to come seeking help. So it was not serious whether the person was one of the staff of a public enterprise or not ... They like to live with their relatives, which is better than living alone as a small family in a large house and feeling lonely. At this time there were few families whose members had survived, so there were unoccupied large houses...¹⁰⁵

On this point, two women told me that, as widows, they were afraid to live far from others for fear that they could be harassed by Vietnamese soldiers. "They never did anything to us, but we were just afraid," they remarked. Furthermore, people's experience with the Khmer Rouge made them indifferent, if not reluctant, about accumulation of property; survival was the primary concern. What is of great interest here is the fact that the booming and lucrative real estate business in today's Phnom Penh, which has only been slowed down by the late 2008 economic crisis, caused some people who were

¹⁰⁴ In his response to an interview before the July 2008 election about land disputes in Cambodia by the host of Al Jazeera's *East 101* program, Teymoor Nabili, Prime Minister Hun Sen said that in 1979 the value of land in Cambodia was zero, and one could even take "one or two hundreds of villas" if they wished, and that only with the opening of the economy did land ownership become a problem. See *Al Jazeera English*, "101 East – Interview with Hun Sen – 26 June part 2." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6B9TBMFWwo>. Accessed Monday March 4, 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Honda Katuiti. *Journey to Cambodia: Investigation into Massacre by Pol Pot Regime* (Tokyo, Japan: Committee of "Journey to Cambodia", 1981), pp. 16-7.

among the first to come to Phnom Penh in the early 1980s to look back in retrospect and regard their decisions not to occupy big houses in those early years as “foolish.”¹⁰⁶

The State and the Re-emergence of a Market Economy

There is no doubt that the legitimacy of the PRK’s administration relied largely upon their defeat of their enemy, the Khmer Rouge. However, as Michael Vickery pointed out: “The formation and history of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea cannot be studied in isolation from its predecessor, Democratic Kampuchea; and although the PRK leaders quite correctly emphasize the dramatic break with DK ... their regime nevertheless has its ultimate origins in the same revolutionary victory of 17 April 1975 as does the rival Pol Pot DK group.”¹⁰⁷ Not only had many PRK officials served under DK, but they also continued to celebrate April 17, 1975 as a revolutionary victory against Lon Nol and US imperialism. In fact, April 17 was even accorded a national holiday, although it had also been given decreasing public attention, for the leaders understood that for most of the population the date had exclusively negative connotations.¹⁰⁸ In other words, the PRK was essentially proclaiming the continuity and defense of socialism, while at the same time attributing all that went wrong between 1975 and 1978 to the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique. Nonetheless, one of the major breaks from Democratic Kampuchea was the

¹⁰⁶ Interview with T. A. and A. S., December 2008. Ownership of real estate also became a problem, as in the case of the most recent eviction in January of the Dey Krahom community in Phnom Penh by 7NG Group Co. Ltd. Residents were forcefully sent out of their homes without receiving proper compensations that they sought. The eviction has attracted criticism from local NGOs as well as international media attention.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Vickery. *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 25.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

restoration of the market economy, which was completely abolished in DK's time.

Nothing was a better testimony of this than the presence of markets once again in Phnom Penh.

It must be emphasized here that it was Cambodian civilians themselves who revived the market economy, albeit with the tacit approval of the state, in Gotteman's words, "to trade with the enemy" – namely Thailand. Before the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities, some Cambodians who had reserved gold managed to hide their property by burying it somewhere – and if lucky enough were able to retrieve their valuable belongings after the liberation, which not only allowed them to exchange for basic needs, but more importantly to invest in trade. Someth May wrote that:

And then there were the gold-diggers, who wandered round the outskirts of the village searching for corpses and graves. Most Cambodians had gold-capped teeth, so these men became known as the millionaires. With astonishing speed – this all happened in a matter of three weeks – the gold-diggers had motorbikes, brand new Hondas which they had bought along the Thai border. They had amazing watches, gold chains round their necks, shirts open to the waist, [and] Thai cigarettes. But they still had Ho Chi Minh sandals. Footwear was not a priority among the smugglers.¹⁰⁹

In the months following the liberation and onwards, many Cambodians were travelling back and forth over the Cambodian-Thai border to buy foodstuff, utensils, clothes, electronics and other consumer goods into the country. Many of these new merchants were Sino-Khmers who either had old trading partners or discovered new ones.

¹⁰⁹ Someth May. *Cambodia Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber Limited, 1986), p. 245.

The PRK and their advisors who harbored deep qualms about the re-emergence of capitalism understood that the Thai-Cambodian trading was enriching networks of merchants whose contacts extended from Bangkok to Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, while at the same time allowing resistance agents to enter the country.¹¹⁰ They were therefore viewed as capitalists, but also suspected as being agents of Beijing.¹¹¹ But as John Pilger noted: “Without doubt the Vietnamese-supported administration was in no position to close the borders. It had the military strength, but not the economic leverage to provide the badly needed items, or the food, which was also being shipped in from Thailand.”¹¹²

Not only that, after taxation was levied in 1982 when the national currency, the riel, was stabilized, the government began to generate revenues from the private sector, though limited in amount and counter-productive to its efforts to build socialism.¹¹³ However, those who managed to feed off the market even more were the local authorities who were reported by the Council of Ministers to “have issued, by themselves, revenue-generating plans of differing types ... checkpoints on roads used for transporting goods in order to collect some money or seize and confiscate goods and use them however they wish and

¹¹⁰ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 89.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

¹¹² John Pilger and Anthony Barnett. *Aftermath: The Struggle of Cambodia and Vietnam* (Manchester: Manchester Free Press, 1982), p. 77.

¹¹³ Evan Gottesman. *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 190.

without any policy.”¹¹⁴ Robbery from merchants by Vietnamese or PRK soldiers, and even Thai authorities along the border also took place occasionally.¹¹⁵

The availability of products from Thailand and Vietnam made it possible for Cambodians to conduct trade in Phnom Penh and provincial towns. When there was no national currency before mid 1980 to regulate the market, Cambodians traded by using gold and rice as the main forms of exchange, as well as Thai baht and Vietnamese dong. But trading did not exist totally outside of state control. In fact, article 11 in Chapter 2 of the constitution adopted by the PRK on June 27, 1981 stated clearly that “the national economy is under state leadership.”¹¹⁶ In practice, although the state was not always the main actor in the trade sector, it regulated and influenced the market activities in a number of ways. For example, while it was prohibited to open a stall on main streets in Phnom Penh, it was also compulsory to ask for government’s permission to open a shop in the city’s markets.¹¹⁷ The main priority was given to families of the staff of public enterprises, although it was also possible for someone who received the permission to let his or her relatives use the shop instead. The government’s rationale behind this was not only to reciprocate civil servants, but also to keep the population from growing too fast by indirectly forcing some people to go back to their native provinces and help increase

¹¹⁴ Report, Council of Ministers, Oct. 27, 1982, p. 1 (*Doc. 14-11*). See Evan Gottesman. *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 190.

¹¹⁵ Interviews with N. T. and K. C., who were robbed by Vietnamese soldiers on their way back from Thailand, and claimed to have witnessed Thai authority “confiscating” people’s properties, as well as sexually abusing female refugees. (December, 2008).

¹¹⁶ Michael Vickery. *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 92.

¹¹⁷ Honda Katuiti, *Journey to Cambodia*, p. 18.

agricultural production.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, in addition to their minimal salary, state employees also received subsidized rations of certain commodities such as sugar, rice, cigarettes, kerosene, vegetables and even meat, which could be sold for profit in the market. Thus, it was not uncommon for salaried people to live together and pool their income, where one or more household members traded in the market or engaged in handicraft manufacture or the like.¹¹⁹ In some cases, state employees themselves had to engage in other activities to raise more income. For instance, one former elementary school teacher who lost her husband during Khmer Rouge rule had to make Khmer desserts during her free time to sell on the streets to support her three children.¹²⁰

Unlike the pre-1970 period when state employees in Phnom Penh made a comfortable living, the PRK was not in a position to offer that luxury. Immediately after the formation of the new regime, without a national currency, civil servants were given their salary in the form of rice, with bonuses for each dependent in the family. A former elementary school teacher told me that she received about 100 kg (approximately 220.5 lbs) of rice per month, because she lied by increasing the number of her family members. When the riel came into circulation, state salary ranged from 120 to 500 riel depending on one's occupation. For example, in November 1984, state salaries were: teachers – from 160 for a new teacher to 482 for a principal of a secondary school; doctors – 300 for an M.D.; pharmaceutical factory employees – 170-200 (specialized worker), 370 for the factory director; tire factory employees – 140 (unskilled worker), 400 for the director; textile factory workers – 140 (unskilled worker), 230 for semi-trained, and 300 for a fully-

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 132.

¹²⁰ Interview with R. A., December 2008.

qualified machine operator, all with extra allowances.¹²¹ Market prices in that same year, on the other hand, reveal how low such salaries were: pork – 45/kg; chicken – 16/kg; beef – 40/kg; rice – 4-6/kg; a single egg – 2; a pair of rubber sandals – 30+; cloth for dress – 120/meter; and a piece of laundry soap – 12 riel.¹²² Since salaries did not increase at any remarkable rate throughout the 1980s, it was presumed that there was no possibility for state employees to become a privileged stratum through salaries and minimal extra benefits. Even today, civil servants continue to receive the lowest salaries. The difference, however, is the income gap between low-level employees and their chiefs, thanks to corruption in the forms of appropriation of national treasure, international aid and/or multi-million dollar business deals, usually at the expense of the population. This has led some people to reminisce about the relatively much less corrupt PRK regime, with a sense of more justice in working environment and society as a whole.

This of course should not mislead one to think that the PRK was a totally benevolent and uncorrupt regime. As Brian Eads noted in the *Observer* in May 1983: “The sight of ragged children picking over a hill of garbage might suggest that the ‘emergency’ continues. But [the] sight of policemen in a popular French restaurant, quaffing bottle after bottle of Soviet champagne, each costing four times their monthly salary, suggests a new era.”¹²³ Furthermore, different levels of authority entailed various privileges, or the lack thereof. For instance, ministers of the PRK took over the houses of pre-war

¹²¹ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 131.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹²³ Quoted in William Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust, and Modern Conscience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984), pp. 397-8.

millionaire businessmen, and those further down the official hierarchy have smaller quarters. Official cars were also privileges for people in high positions. Yet, what is of importance here is the fact that the gap of wealth between the elite and the low-level state employees and the rest of the populace under the PRK was never large enough to cause resentment among the people as it does today. Vickery wrote of an interesting experience on this particular aspect:

I was struck, however, on my one visit to a minister's private quarters which was incidentally the largest private dwelling I have ever entered in Cambodia during any regime, that the only great advantage he possessed was space. His furniture was as simple and as sparse as that in many poorer houses, we drank the cheapest local liquor, such as any worker might have offered guests, and the minister's wife was cooking over charcoal pots like those used in the homes of ordinary workers or low-level officials.¹²⁴

If anyone were to benefit from the market economy, it was those who had the capital to invest in trade, or at least had the capacity to engage fully in the private sector. According to Michael Vickery, "Artisanal or small-scale technical work, manufacture of small commodities, repair work and photography constitute a lucrative sector."¹²⁵ In fact, some people who knew foreign languages could even teach private classes with monthly fee of 30 to 50 Riel for an hour in the evening after official hours, in spite of the fact that opening such classes was not formally authorized.¹²⁶ Vickery wrote that:

[In late 1984] the most prosperous urban group are those who live by the market, many of whom, through family membership or association, also contribute to the support of state employees ... their relative prosperity is apparent from their stock of goods, general notoriety, and the circumstances that the numerous eating and drinking places in Phnom

¹²⁴ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 58.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

Penh are heavily patronized by people who can only afford such expense by engaging in some kind of private business.¹²⁷

The accumulation of wealth was facilitated further by the relatively low taxes. For example, an employee in one of the largest and most popular Phnom Penh restaurants told Vickery that their monthly tax was about 10,000 riel, on a gross income of 8,000 on ordinary days and 20-30,000 on Sundays.¹²⁸ Smaller vendors did not seem to complain about their tax rates either.¹²⁹ Similarly, Eva Mysliwicz also noted that:

The collection of taxes on private sources of income began in 1983 and remained minimal until 1985. In 1986 the state identified this as a significant source of potential income and taxes rose considerably. While this action forced several small Chinese restaurants to fold up, prompting allegations of racial targeting and discrimination, in general it does not seem to have discouraged or adversely affected market activity, which remains dominated by ethnic Chinese.¹³⁰

It is noteworthy that the “free market” during the PRK’s rule was not without restraint. Buying and selling land was not allowed by the constitution. As Vickery explained, “To be sure, market traders would make profits, but these could not be used to acquire agricultural land, industrial property, or real estate for rental income. Such profits could only be reinvested in continued market trading or in personal consumption.”¹³¹ Furthermore, while the *laissez-faire* market economy enabled people to meet needs not

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 135.

¹²⁹ Ibid. My interviews also confirmed Vickery’s accounts about low tax rates.

¹³⁰ Eva Mysliwicz. *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1988), pp. 36-37.

¹³¹ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 55.

offered by the government, it also allowed the importation and sale of harmful products such as counterfeit drugs etc., a problem that is much wider in scope in the present.¹³²

Welfare and Health

When the PRK was proclaimed, its leaders inherited a severely traumatized population that had been tortured and malnourished by the Khmer Rouge. The year 1979 was especially difficult for civilians. The Vietnamese invasion disrupted the rice harvest and planting, resulting in a great deficiency in rice supply for that year. A fear of famine had caused concerns among international aid agencies like the ICRC and UNICEF, but their access to Cambodia was not allowed until July 1979. Until then, some aid from Vietnam and the Soviet bloc helped stave off the massive famine predicted by Western aid agency personnel and journalists.¹³³ Yet, unlike the meager portion of aid in the form of rice from Vietnam, the Soviet Union provided maize, which was a foreign diet and disliked by Cambodians, though it nevertheless helped temporarily prevent starvation.

When the ICRC's envoy François Bugnion and UNICEF's representative Jacques Beaumont arrived in Phnom Penh in July 1979 to assess the needs for aid in Cambodia, they were taken to the Seventh of January Hospital, where they witnessed only three doctors for over eight hundred patients, half of them on the floor. The lack of soap, sterilizers, surgical equipment, and especially electricity only made the conditions worse.

¹³² Ibid., p. 130.

¹³³ Eva Mysliwicz, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 15.

The two Frenchmen were also shown an orphanage where hundreds of children were in a pitiful condition, without food, without drugs, near death. In fact, even their interpreters from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed so weak from lack of food that they occasionally fainted.¹³⁴

The resumption of rice planting the following year meant that there was more food, although Cambodia still relied largely on international aid.¹³⁵ In July 1979, the PRK asked for 129,000 tons of food to feed 2.25 million people who were thought to be at risk of starvation.¹³⁶ But Western aid only arrived in February 1980, after overcoming PRK bureaucratic sluggishness. By the end of 1980, the Joint Mission of UNICEF and ICRC delivered about 100,000 tons of rice, while 7,000 tons came from Oxfam, 10,000 tons from World Council of Churches and tens of thousands of tons from the socialist bloc.¹³⁷ William Shawcross recounted from his trips in the early 1980s in Cambodia that “There had been deaths from starvation. But no one to whom I talked spoke of a catastrophe such as many of us in the West had feared in the fall of 1979.”¹³⁸ Nobody knows the exact figure of aid distributed to the people and how much was appropriated by the government. As far as Phnom Penh was concerned, the US Embassy in Bangkok calculated that by the end of September 1980, Phnom Penh had received 32.7 percent of the international food assistance, while the city accounted for only about 7 percent of the

¹³⁴ William Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 113.

¹³⁵ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 15.

¹³⁶ William Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 365.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

population.¹³⁹ Hea Mean Nuont, the president of the committee to distribute aid in Phnom Penh until he left Cambodia in late 1979 for fear of arrest after his open protest to the Vietnamese, told Marie A. Martin and a French journalist, Roland-Pierre Paringaux, that only 4 to 5 percent of the international assistance to Cambodia went to the provinces, while Heng Samrin's soldiers along the border apparently reported that "twenty to thirty Vietnamese trucks come from Phnom Penh two or three times each week and move toward Saigon, loaded with sacks of rice and other foodstuffs bearing the insignias of the UNICEF or the ICRC."¹⁴⁰

By the end of 1981, humanitarian assistance from ICRC, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP and FAO to Cambodia totaled 366.7 million US Dollars. But thanks to the international isolation of the PRK, Western aid to Cambodia during the 1980s was very limited in scope. For the whole decade, the majority of Cambodians in urban areas who did not own land for agricultural production would only have enough to eat through hard work on their part. Such was the case that the vice-president of the Committee for the Reception of Humanitarian Aid and Advisor to the Prime Minister on Agricultural Affairs and Minister of Agriculture 1981-85 Kong Sam Ol said to Eva Mysliwiec in July 1986: "Please tell donors that all we want is peace, security and enough to eat. We do not want luxury – just enough to eat for our children's sake."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 367.

¹⁴⁰ Marie Alexandrine Martin. *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (translated by Mark W. McLeod) (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 219.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 51.

Besides food security, Cambodians were also facing health problems. Malnutrition, tuberculosis, diarrhea (especially among children), and malaria were the most significant health hazards in Cambodia during 1980s.¹⁴² While most health problems perpetuated from Democratic Kampuchea's time, malaria specifically, was largely a direct result of the PRK's policy of national defense in which hundreds of thousands of civilians were conscripted to clear forest in highly malaria-infected areas – a policy that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Dr. My Samedy, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, estimated in 1987 that up to 2.5 million (of some 7.6 million people) had been infected with malaria, and about 200,000 with TB.¹⁴³ Even today, malaria and TB are still among the main health problems in Cambodia, although health officials have recently been alarmed by Axios International's report which draws attention to the fact that cancer now kills more people each year in developing countries than either HIV/Aids, tuberculosis or malaria.¹⁴⁴

Of the 450 doctors in Cambodia before 1975, only 45 remained in 1979, 25 of whom left the country.¹⁴⁵ By 1987, the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy had trained up to 352 doctors, 550 medical assistants, 198 pharmacists and 26 dentists.¹⁴⁶ Relatively speaking, the availability of more doctors and hospitals in urban areas meant that access

¹⁴² Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 42.

¹⁴³ Ibid. The Population of Cambodia in 1979 was estimated by UN Food Aid Organization (FAO) at 6,339 thousands with a 3% growth, and by 1986, the number rose to 7,603 thousand. See the table in Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁴ *Phnom Penh Post*. "Cancer study alarms govt, hospital officials." <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2009022624446/National-news/Cancer-study-alarms-govt-hospital-officials.html>. Accessed Monday February 26, 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 42.

¹⁴⁶ Eva Mysliwiec's interview with Dr. My Samedy, Oxfam, UK, July 1987.

to health care was higher than in rural areas, where residents had to rely on local shamans and traditional healing methods.¹⁴⁷ Certainly, the quality of health care in Cambodia is never to be equated with that in the West. As Eva Mysliwiec wrote: “Visitors to Kampuchea today [1987] are often appalled by the glaring health and sanitation needs and problems, especially when comparing Kampuchea to developed countries or other developing countries.”¹⁴⁸ Yet, as she acknowledged: “But considering that eight years ago the entire country was on the verge of famine and emerging from a nightmare of unprecedented proportions, one can only marvel at the miracle of recovery and what it says about the Kampuchean people.”¹⁴⁹

Education

According to the Chair of English Department at University of Kentucky, Thomas Clayton, “In 1969, before the Khmer Rouge insurgency began to have a significant impact, Cambodia's educational system comprised 5,275 primary schools, 146 secondary schools, and 9 institutes of higher education.”¹⁵⁰ In urban areas in pre-war Cambodia, not only were teachers highly paid, but they were also accorded high social status.¹⁵¹ But

¹⁴⁷ To my surprise, one woman from a village in Kampong Chhnang province told me that Vietnamese military doctors also occasionally provided treatments to rural patients as well.

¹⁴⁸ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Clayton. “Building the New Cambodia: Educational Destruction and Construction under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979,” *History of Education Quarterly* Vol. 38, No. 1 (1998): p. 5. Thomas Clayton is also the author of *Education and the Politics of Language: Hegemony and Pragmatism in Cambodia, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, 2000).

¹⁵¹ Margaret Slocomb. *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), p. 168. This is a widely-known claim, and the fact that currently teachers in public schools have very low income led a famous Cambodian stand-up comedian, Prum Manh,

under the Khmer Rouge, teachers and educated people in general were often targeted for execution. Schools were emptied, destroyed, or were used as prisons. For instance, Tuol Svay Prey high school was turned into the infamous S-21 prison, while “the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Higher Technical Institute in Phnom Penh, a 1964 gift from the Soviet Union, was turned into the Khmer Rouge's Central Political School; this school also served as a prison for Cambodians returning from abroad after the communist victory, many of whom were ultimately killed.”¹⁵² The Khmer Rouge also emptied libraries, burned all their contents, and destroyed almost all school laboratory equipment.¹⁵³ According to the Information Agency of the PRK, in 1979 about 80 percent of teachers were killed, while the Soviet Union estimated the loss up to 90 percent.¹⁵⁴ Eva Mysliwec’s interview with the Minister of Education in 1987 offered a slightly higher number of teachers who survived the Khmer Rouge. Of the 22,000 teachers in Cambodia at the beginning of 1970, 7,000 remained in 1979 but only 5,000 returned to teaching. Since then up to 1987, the Ministry claimed to have trained and retrained 50,000 teachers.¹⁵⁵ Thomas Clayton also noted that: “The death toll for university professors was particularly high. According to the University of Phnom Penh, “out of 1000 academics and intellectuals in the university, only 87 survived.” All but one faculty member of the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Higher Technical Institute in Phnom Penh were killed.”¹⁵⁶

to come up with the punned sentence, “in the past teachers had good wives, now [teachers are] poor and the wives complain” (*bpii-mun kruu brapun l’or, eylov gror brapun l’uu*).

¹⁵² Thomas Clayton, “Building the New Cambodia,” p. 7

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁵ Eva Mysliwec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

In addition to the devastation of the facilities and human resource done by the Khmer Rouge, the PRK faced further challenges when some of the former teachers who survived the Khmer Rouge either fled to Thailand – simply to seek better life or out of frustration with their new socialist masters – or preferred to engage in private enterprise when they saw little reward working for the new government. Nevertheless, proponents of the PRK have consistently admired the efforts of the PRK to re-establish the education system in Cambodia after four years of anarchic rule of the Khmer Rouge. For instance, as Eva Mysliwiec noted: “The most significant revival has occurred in education, which like many other sectors in Kampuchean life, has had to start almost from scratch. Even more impressive is the fact that most improvements in this sector have been achieved in the absence of major aid and are due to the resourcefulness and hard work of the Kampuchean themselves.”¹⁵⁷ Not long after Phnom Penh was liberated, schools in the city were re-opened and former teachers or people with some education were employed to teach. As far as secondary-level schools were concerned (especially high schools), students could have access only in urban areas like Phnom Penh and other provincial capitals, and to less extent in some towns. A look at the statistics provided by the Minister of Education of the PRK of the number of schools, teachers and students in Cambodia between 1979 and 1984 is indicative of the presence and growth of education in Cambodia after Democratic Kampuchea’s rule¹⁵⁸:

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁵⁸ See Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 155.

Table 1: Education under the PRK between 1979 and 1984.

| | 1979-80 | 1983-1984 |
|-----------------------|---------|-----------|
| Level 1 (grades 1-4) | | |
| Schools | 5,290 | 3,005 |
| Pupils | 947,317 | 1,542,825 |
| Teachers | 21,605 | 33,479 |
| Level 2 (grades 5-7) | | |
| Schools | 14 | 200 |
| Pupils | 5,104 | 146,865 |
| Teachers | 206 | 4,329 |
| Level 3 (grades 8-10) | | |
| Schools | 1 | 13 |
| Pupils | 301 | 6,969 |
| Teachers | 20 | 277 |

Given the modesty of the figures, especially those of the middle and high schools, the data seem fairly reliable. What is interesting here is that the number of elementary schools in 1979-80 was higher than that of 1983-84. This stemmed from the urgency to resume schooling with whatever human resource and material available, so that a “school” was wherever any instruction was taking place, even if it was just one teacher and a group of students beneath a tree. But as organization improved, those *ad hoc* “schools” were consolidated and formalized, which explains the drop in the number of elementary schools in 1983-84.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, most of the “teachers” in 1979 were not professionals, but literally anyone with some literacy which they could pass on. The urgent need for education prompted the new administration to follow the pragmatics that those who knew a lot could teach those who knew little, and those who knew little could teach those who knew nothing. In addition to general education, the PRK also launched

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

complementary education, which was primarily for young adults whose primary and post-primary education had been disrupted by the Khmer Rouge regime to ensure that there was no “lost generation” of Pol Pot adolescents, as occurred in China after the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶⁰ According to Margaret Slocomb, many of the next generation of Cambodia owed their good fortune to the opportunity provided by complementary education.¹⁶¹

In addition to being the center for lower-level education, Phnom Penh was the only place where tertiary-level schools were available, though relatively limited. The Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy and the Kampuchea-Soviet Technological Institute were among the first institutions to reopen in 1980, and 1981 respectively, thanks to the aid of Vietnam, the Soviet Union, Western NGOs and UNICEF.¹⁶² Given the high need for doctors and health practitioners, 606 students were enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy.¹⁶³ Vietnamese aid was particularly important in the Medicine Faculty, since the older generation of Vietnamese doctors shared the French language with Khmer students from early 1970s.¹⁶⁴ The Technical Institute, with over eighty Soviet teachers, offered courses in construction, electricity, irrigation and mining, as well as, industrial chemistry.¹⁶⁵ The Higher Pedagogical Institute, which supervised the other seven pedagogical centers in a few provincial towns (such as Battambang, Kandal,

¹⁶⁰ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 169.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 40.

¹⁶³ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 173.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, pp. 157-8.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, Takeo and Stung Treng), was also located in Phnom Penh.¹⁶⁶ There were also five other Professional Institutes reopened: Agriculture, Languages, Technical Engineering, Economics and Administration.¹⁶⁷

However, due to the lack of qualified teachers for higher, professional, and technical education, only about 30% of secondary school students were able to continue with higher education in Cambodia (only in Phnom Penh, with the exception of pedagogical training) or abroad. Throughout the 1980s, several thousands of Cambodian students were sent to study in Vietnam, the Soviet Union and eastern bloc countries. According to Michael Vickery, there were over 2,800 Khmer students abroad, mainly in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.¹⁶⁸ In fact, quite a handful of the civil servants of the current Cambodian government gained their skills from their training abroad during the PRK's rule. A former Khmer student to Cuba also confirmed that every year close to 1,000 Khmer students received scholarships to study in countries friendly to the PRK. But a few other former students I interviewed also resented that there was corruption in the higher education placement system. For example, a certain quota was alleged to be set aside for children of the politburo members and wealthy families who could afford to bribe the officials.

Given the great deficiency in facilities and human resources, revival of the education system in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge was a difficult task for the new regime. The

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁶⁷ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 40.

¹⁶⁸ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, pp. 158.

quality of education, therefore, was quite low compared to the pre-war period. Education under the PRK was also heavy with socialist doctrine that reflected the ideology of the PRK. In fact Article 6 of the PRK constitution stated that the educational curriculum was to be based on “political consciousness, revolutionary morality, basic knowledge for competency in modern labor skills, production, agriculture, craft, and industry appropriate for the real situation of the Kampuchean revolution.”¹⁶⁹ As one of the slogans went, “Every Teacher is a Revolutionary Fighter,” and teachers were urged to “educate themselves and forge themselves according the needs of progress and development.”¹⁷⁰ Starting from elementary school to universities, teachers were given political training which they would pass on to their students at schools. For instance, an elementary school teacher interviewed by a TV Française 1 (TVF1) team said that in addition to general subjects like math, literature, science, and civics, she was required to teach moral politics as well. These lessons would focus on the liberation of Cambodia and Indochina, as well as Cambodia’s solidarity with Vietnam.¹⁷¹ Unlike the pre-1970 curriculum, history of the royalty was excluded. From middle school upward, the history of the Cambodian revolutionary movement and the left-wing struggle against the French, which was not included in pre-war education, was now taught.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Margaret Slocomb. *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 166.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁷¹ Audio-visual file, “Cambodge: La Renaissance” (1983) [INA_VI_000129]. Accessed December 20, 2008, Bophana Institute, Phnom Penh.

¹⁷² Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 157.

On the whole, the revival of education system by the PRK was impressive, and by 1987, 83% of Cambodia's population was claimed to be literate.¹⁷³ And to my surprise, one person also told me that as one of the top 30 best math students in Phnom Penh, he had received some monthly allowance throughout his high school years, a system that does not exist in Cambodia today. It thus seems that in terms of education, the PRK was genuinely concerned with education, although the lack of resources meant that the achievement was largely confined to urban areas only, particularly in Phnom Penh.

Social and Political Rights

“Cambodia is coming back to life. The sense of growth is palpable, especially in Phnom Penh, which now has over a quarter of a million inhabitants. Its degree of normalization, which is not reflected in the provinces, is far from complete, but nonetheless impressive,” wrote John Pilger in early 1980.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, *Bangkok Post's* Belgian correspondent Jacques Bekaert remarked in 1983: “The city is back to life. It is obvious from the thousands of bicycles, tricycles and pedestrians filling the streets from 5:30 in the morning until nine at night. From the two main markets where business is booming and products more abundant than in Hanoi or Beijing!”¹⁷⁵ The “coming back to life” Pilger and Bekaert referred to, included not only the re-appearance of markets, access to health care and education, but also social freedom – the basic social rights that were deprived

¹⁷³ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁴ Pilger and Barnett, *Aftermath*, p. 76.

¹⁷⁵ See “A City Coming Back to Life” (15 May 1983) in Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986*, p. 30.

under Democratic Kampuchea's rule. Under the Khmer Rouge, Cambodian civilians lived – if they managed to survive – in basically an open concentration camp. Life under the PRK, however, was much better. All forms of social freedom – freedom of movement, marriage, practice of religion etc. – were restored, although not without constraint from the new socialist government. Since social rights were stated in the constitution, all citizens – urban and rural alike – were to have equal rights.

Religion was a very good example of the degree to which the PRK was willing to tolerate the freedom of the population. After the liberation, Cambodians once again had the right to practice their religion, which was guaranteed by article 6 of the constitution, as long as religious activity was not used to “endanger security, public order, or the general welfare.”¹⁷⁶ Adherence to Buddhism by a majority of Cambodians was respected by the PRK, although not everyone could become a monk. Michael Vickery's informants and people I interviewed offered the same account that usually only men over 50 were allowed to be ordained as monks, thanks to the need for youth in productive activities.¹⁷⁷ Only occasionally did people see younger monks, and officials explained such relaxation of the rules by a disinclination to offend the feelings of the local population on a sensitive issue when there was a strong demand for a young man's ordination.¹⁷⁸ Even by mid-1980s, there were on average only two to four monks in each *wat* (Buddhist temple).¹⁷⁹ Likewise, not all Buddhist ceremonies were allowed. For instance, *Bon Kathen*, which

¹⁷⁶ Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 92.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

used to be a big annual celebration to raise funds and donation for monks, was not allowed by the state, which viewed it as not benefiting the society. *Bon Phka*, on the other hand, was strongly encouraged since the ceremony – despite being religiously-rooted – helped raise funds to build roads, schools and other public places.¹⁸⁰ Unlike in pre-revolutionary Cambodia, the aristocratic Thomayuth sect was not revived along with the Mahanikay sect, and Cambodian Buddhism was now simply referred as Theravada.¹⁸¹

Other important significant festivals such as the Khmer New Year were also celebrated as in the pre-revolutionary days. Insofar as the state was concerned, however, maintaining security during this special occasion was important. In 1986, the council of ministers of the PRK instructed “all officials and ministries and the entire population to do everything to make this a time of general rejoicing in the whole country.”¹⁸² But the official broadcasting agency SPK also called for “vigilance to ensure security and to foil all perfidious acts of sabotage of the enemy.”¹⁸³ The general staff of the PRK armed forces also issued an “order on combat readiness to defend the traditional new year,” with the instruction to “strictly maintain combat readiness, seek always to attack the enemy, and appropriately punish all reactionary forces that cause chaos during the traditional new

¹⁸⁰ Interview with a policeman, December 2008.

¹⁸¹ Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 162.

¹⁸² Quoted in “Best Wishes from Phnom Penh” (9 May 1986) in Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997), p. 272.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

year.”¹⁸⁴ The state even offered to “increase the award for misled people bringing weapons.”¹⁸⁵

As a matter of fact, Phnom Penh – and to a lesser extent other provincial capitals – enjoyed quite a high level of security. Rarely did armed robbery take place, according to some people I interviewed. This was not true for provinces in the western part of the country, however, due to the frequent attacks from the Khmer Rouge and occasionally from the other resistance forces. Even in Phnom Penh, security came with a price: curfew. In the city, the curfew time was 9 p.m., and in order to stay out later, one was supposed to have a police-issued pass. Jacques Bekaert also wrote an anecdote of going to a restaurant at 8:30 p.m. but could not get his food because the chefs had to rush home to beat the curfew deadline.¹⁸⁶ Nonetheless, the rule was not always strict. As Bekaert explained, “Several times I walked back to the hotel long after curfew had started. It never came to more than a salute and an occasional cigarette, always my offer, for it was never requested, to the young policemen sporting old AK47 rifles and a rather loose collection of uniforms.”¹⁸⁷ Phnom Penh was safe not only from local crimes, but also from external attacks by resistance forces, given the strong hold of the PRK. Such was the case that many people felt rather secure and not threatened by Khmer Rouge presence along the border.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ The term “misled people” was used by the PRK to refer to people who joined resistance forces. Throughout the 1980s, there were indeed people who took advantage of these offers (for instance, in the form of land), although the reverse flow also took place. See Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986*, pp. 272-3.

¹⁸⁶ See “Sorry, it’s curfew” (1 May 1988) in Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary: A Long Road to Peace 1987–1993* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998), p. 99.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

Many observers, however, would agree that without the presence of the Vietnamese Army (at least prior to mid-1980s), the return of the Khmer Rouge – the strongest faction in the CGDK – was very likely, before the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Armed Forces could be effective enough to stand on its own. Given the politics of the Cold War of the 1980s, it was also unlikely that a neutral international peace-keeping force could be deployed to Cambodia before 1989. Nonetheless, relations between Vietnamese soldiers and the local Khmers in the city were at least peaceful to a large extent, if not harmonious, as the former intruded little into the latter’s private lives.¹⁸⁸

During the 1980s, traveling from one province to another, or even within a province was also not without restriction. One had to get a letter of approval that detailed one’s purposes of travel and length of stay from their local authority and present it at the check points of their destinations.¹⁸⁹ A policeman who worked for the PRK and the current government since 1980 explained to me the rationale behind such requirement that it was necessary to ensure there was no infiltration of resistance forces inside the country. It is not clear, however, whether the people viewed or appreciated the restriction in the same way.

¹⁸⁸ One spectator at the ceremony for the final withdrawal of Vietnamese troops on 26 September 1989 apparently told Margaret Slocomb tearfully that: “it is true that we Cambodians hate the Vietnamese, but we love the Vietnamese soldiers.” See Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 269. It is doubtful, however, that this spectator’s view was representative of the rest of Khmer population. I was told by a former resident in Battambang province that sometime in 1989, Hun Sen visited her commune and asked the crowd whether they were willing to fight the Khmer Rouge on their own if the Vietnamese troops leave Cambodia, to which they enthusiastically yelled “Yes!”

¹⁸⁹ Interviews with three participants formerly resided in Phnom Penh, Kampong Chhnang and Battambang provinces, December 2008.

The biggest restriction was, however, in the realm of politics. Despite its claim to be a representative of the people, the PRK was essentially a socialist regime with a single ruling party: the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK). A national election was held in 1981. Out of the 3,280,565 people with the right to vote, 3,209,583 or 97.83 percent exercised the right.¹⁹⁰ The election was generally derided by foreign commentators. But as Margaret Slocomb puts it, "Certainly this was not a liberal, multi-party election. It was never intended to be. The candidates who stood for election had been pre-selected by the Front and by the party and their names were placed at the head of the ticket. To this extent, the result was a foregone conclusion."¹⁹¹ It was simply "a consecration ceremony for the new rulers, and most voters fulfilled their obligation to vote with a shrug," reported Nayan Chanda in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.¹⁹²

While the continuation of socialism was a factor that Cambodians disliked, the Vietnamese authority over Cambodia was another cause for resentment, especially in urban areas. As John Pilger said:

If there is coherent opposition to the Vietnamese presence within Cambodia, its main concentration is in Phnom Penh, especially among government workers. Those who come into contact with Vietnamese authority, from schoolteachers obliged to cast historic relations between the two neighbors in a favorable light, to trained administrators from the Lon Nol and Sihanouk period, resent and may privately speak out against Hanoi.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 82.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² *FEER*, 8 May 1981, p. 15. Quoted in Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 83.

¹⁹³ Pilger and Barnett, *Aftermath*, p. 108.

Similarly, Evan Gottesman noted that:

The dilemma for the [PRK] regime was that the Cambodians whose defections it could afford least were the ones most likely to flee. Newly installed civil servants whom the regime desperately needed to staff the bureaucracy, were likely to interpret the promotion of uneducated Cambodian communists as a continuation of the policies of the Khmer Rouge.¹⁹⁴

In addition to the limitation of political rights, the PRK was also not reluctant to punish its dissidents. In fact, Phnom Penh was home to T-3 – a well-known and the largest among several other prisons in the country – where “tens of thousands” of political prisoners were held without trial and tortured there alone.¹⁹⁵ A former inmate described his experience the following way:

In September 1980 I was confined in political prison T-3; since I didn't want to work for the government, I was accused of being anti-Vietnamese. I was released in 1983 ... I had irons on my ankles day and night. For meals, 230 kernels of corn ... I remember one month in which there were ten deaths; they died after mistreatment [during interrogation] ... Some prisoners died of illness ... I spent one year in a dark cell. They starved us to make us talk; I said anything at all that came to mind ... We had showers every ten or fifteen days. We had no right to communicate. Some had broken jaws from being hit; I still carry marks from it. It was the Vietnamese who beat me. The Khmers began it; they struck really hard, but then, when the Vietnamese got mad, they took over and hit even harder.¹⁹⁶

It seems that violations of human rights such as arbitrary arrests, detention without trials and abuse of state's cadres' power on civilians did occur in this period, and nothing was

¹⁹⁴ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 41.

¹⁹⁵ Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, p. 226. According to her, *T* is the initial letter for the Vietnamese word for prison, *tu*. The other principal prisons T-1 and T-2 were located in Vientiane and Ho Chi Minh respectively, altogether forming the “Indochinese” prisons.

¹⁹⁶ The accounts were published in *Kampuchea: After the Worst* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1985). Quoted in Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, p. 226.

more convincing than a long report drafted by anonymous bureaucrats inside the PRK's Council of Ministers in 1985 which complained about those very acts:

Arbitrary searches, arrests, detentions, and imprisonments occur practically everywhere ... Officials abuse their power, frequently assaulting people over small matters. Recently in Phnom Penh a cadre drew a pistol at a merchant in his house simply because the merchant refused to sell him a case of beer. After they argued face to face, the cadre beat him, breaking his face and his mouth and sending him to the hospital. That didn't satisfy him; the cadre used his personal influence to get the Phnom Penh police to arrest the merchant in hospital, where he was still receiving serum ... In Kampot the chief of the provincial military beat a commerce cadre from Chhouk district and injured one of his eyes because he didn't provide some goods on time ... In Kampong Chhnang a policeman used his own gun to shoot and kill a schoolteacher over a case involving the teaching of children ... In Kratie a district police cadre shot and killed someone merely on suspicion of having connections to the enemy, and another police cadre in the province shot and killed another person while arresting four people drinking beer ... The two offenders remain at their jobs and at the same positions.¹⁹⁷

Not that such violations should be justified, but it is noteworthy that the records of PRK's violations of human rights were nowhere near those of the Khmer Rouge, as enemies of the PRK might want to believe. Another point worth mentioning is the fact that it is misleading to believe that anyone who refused to work for the government was necessarily thrown in jail, for there were actually educated people who simply preferred to work in the private sector without any troubles from the government.

¹⁹⁷ See Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 239 - 40.

Conclusion

In early 1979, Cambodia barely existed as nation. Phnom Penh immediately after its liberation resembled nothing like the city it used to be in pre-war Cambodia, when it was sometimes referred to as the “Pearl of the Orient.” Gradually, however, signs of life such as busy markets, restaurants, schools, hospitals, and basic freedoms, as well as reunions of families once again marked the re-emergence of urban life under the PRK. Unable to support its population by itself, the state tacitly allowed privatization through the black market to flourish against its efforts to build socialism. The flow of products through the “black market” offered a decent form of life for many urban dwellers, and even luxury for those who could afford – something that did not exist under Democratic Kampuchea. Access to education and health care was mostly available in urban areas only, and was of low quality by the developed world’s standards, but nonetheless an achievement worth remarking. Also to the PRK’s credit, the rare occurrence of crimes such as armed robbery and absence of social vice such as youth gangs in the cities, particularly in Phnom Penh, were something that urban residents appreciated, even if occasional abuses from the authorities did take place.

The isolation of the PRK and lack of international aid meant that life was not always easy for Cambodians. Likewise, for a poor government like the PRK, priorities could not be given to physical infrastructure so that public properties (such as museums, parks etc.) and even government buildings looked old and dull, while lack of electricity and clean

water were also problems. Even cows and horses, water buffaloes and pigs could be seen on the streets of Phnom Penh. Political exclusion and the dominance of Vietnamese authority definitely caused resentment for people, but having survived through the Khmer Rouge, many Cambodians were happy enough to start new lives, as in the words of one person replying to Jacques Bekaert: “I survived. This is a true miracle. I don’t care much about the new regime but if they leave me in peace, I can take it.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary: Tales of a Divided Nation 1983–1986*, p. 31.

CHAPTER 3: LIFE IN THE RURAL AREAS

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 Front, 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 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, 1975.¹

From a political perspective, it made perfect sense that January 7, 1979 was celebrated by the PRK as liberation of Cambodia, for it was the day Democratic Kampuchea fell to the KUFNS and PAVN in Phnom Penh. Reality on the ground, however, was of course more complicated than that.²

As mentioned in chapter 2, the PRK was supposed to be a socialist regime which would carry out the revolution but was “hijacked” by Pol Pot’s faction. This chapter aims to discuss the reconstruction of rural life under the PRK, as well as the difficulties related in the process. It will talk briefly about the situation in the rural areas immediately after Phnom Penh’s liberation, the implementation and eventual collapse of the collectivization

¹ E. V. Koblelev. *Kampuchea: From Tragedy to Rebirth* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), p. 115.

² Although Phnom Penh was liberated on this day, the Khmer Rouge still manage to control parts of Cambodia, especially on the northwest. Battambang, Siem Reap and Oddar Meanchey, for instance, were held until July or August before the Khmer Rouge finally withdrew to the Thai border. Even so, control over the northwest still remained tenuous for the next five years. See, Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), p. 53.

system (*krom samaki*), the general condition of the people, as well as the state's exercise of power in the forms of military conscription and the unpopular labor corvée, known as the "K5 Plan."

Liberation

Advancement of the KUFNS/PAVN did not encounter much resistance from the Khmer Rouge forces who were posted along the border with Vietnam. Provincial capitals were also easily taken over, for they had been virtually empty for the past three years.

Wherever possible, the retreating Khmer Rouge would round up the controlled population and drive them along toward the Thai border. According to Nayan Chanda, some three hundred thousand people were forced to join the retreating Khmer Rouge into the forest.³ In some places the KR cadres would also set fire to granaries and the rest of the harvested rice crop, and destroy roads and bridges behind them as they escaped.⁴ My interviews with people and accounts from other historians reveal that people in different areas seemed to have different experiences of their liberation. In some places, not long after the liberation of Phnom Penh, Vietnamese military operations would disperse the controlled population. While the KR cadres were escaping, the civilians would head off to their old villages or towns. In areas with less brutal KR cadres, people were actually allowed to leave at their own risk to the "enemy's" zones, but the Khmer Rouge also spread the rumor that the Vietnamese would catch any Khmer people, cut their stomach

³ Nayan Chanda. *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 370.

⁴ Ibid.

open and fill it with dry hay, or would simply burn them alive. Despite the propaganda, many Cambodians were not reluctant to return to their former residence after having been deeply traumatized by Khmer Rouge rule. In less fortunate places, such as in Battambang, the population was strictly controlled by the KR cadres. If a family member escaped, the whole family would be executed.⁵ Similarly, Margaret Slocomb offered some chilling accounts:

Stories from people in different parts of the northwest at that time tell of the final atrocities committed before the withdrawal. At public meetings, the remaining family groups were told to select the strongest among them to send on a foraging mission to gather food for a long journey they would take together and on this pretext, they were led to the pits already filled with the rotting bodies of previous victims of their own execution. Another acquaintance, then a child, spoke of huddling in a corner of his shack and hearing grown men scream for their mothers as their throats were slit the night before the Vietnamese soldiers arrived. Like bridges, roads, and a ripe harvest, human assets had to be destroyed to spite the conquerors.⁶

In places where foodstuffs were not destroyed after the withdrawal of the KR cadres, people emptied granaries and slaughtered pigs and chickens and indulged themselves with hearty meals for the first time after almost four years of starvation. Packing whatever they could possibly take, Cambodians were now once again on the move, but this time voluntarily in search of their lost relatives or simply returning to their homes before the 1975 evacuation. The length of their journey back home varied, depending on their place of former residence. People who were originally from the eastern provinces

⁵ Interviews with people who lived in Prey Veng, Pursat, Kampong Chhnang, and Battambang provinces before their liberation.

⁶ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, pp. 53-4.

but were evacuated to settle in the western region spent several months travelling back home, so that even by July 1979, Nayan Chanda still witnessed returnees on the road.⁷

Resettlement in Villages and Demographic Change

After more than four years of the DK's mobile work teams and communal living in what were basically open concentration camps, Cambodian people could begin to speak of "villages" as social and political units once again, as more and more people came to their home village. In most cases, people preferred their old residence, even if it meant traveling a long journey across the country without any means of transportation besides ox-carts, if they actually possessed one. The local authorities did not intervene in people's efforts to reclaim their old homes. In some instances, which were not always common, returnees would find their houses occupied by someone else. In such circumstances, the village chief would rule in favor of those who managed to occupy the house first, while the late returnees would try to find shelter in different places wherever vacant houses were available. Generally, villages that had been abandoned or destroyed during the previous years were repopulated and rebuilt. Other communities that had remained undamaged but were interrupted by the influx of new people from other parts of the country returned to more stable conditions similar to the pre-war time.⁸

⁷ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, p. 370.

⁸ See May Ebihara, "Revolution and Reformation in Kampuchean Village Culture," in David A. Ablin & Marlowe Hood (eds.), *The Cambodian Agony* (New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), pp. 33-4.

However, the fact that many people had died under Democratic Kampuchea meant that the constitution of families after 1979 was no longer identical to that of the pre-war period. The number of widows and orphans was remarkably high, so that it was not uncommon to see orphans nurtured by relatives or adopted by other families who were willing to raise children. In rural Cambodia children are not necessarily a burden, for they can also become assets helping with farming and house chores. Extended families, in this sense, included not only immediate kinsmen beyond one's own children or siblings, but even nonrelatives who were left on their own, as in the case of my mother, who was an orphan and was adopted by some families until she got married to my father.⁹ According to demographer May Ebihara, comments in various accounts indicate feelings of homesickness or yearnings to find lost relatives.¹⁰ The nature of DK's rule of separation made it unclear sometimes whether one's relatives were definitely dead, although in most cases, such was the assumption. Even years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, it is nonetheless usual to see some people still searching for lost relatives on TV or radio.¹¹ As aid worker Eva Mysliwiec noted in 1987, "Even today, eight years later, many

⁹ My father's father was murdered by the Khmer Rouge, while his mother died of a disease a few years after the liberation. In 1979, my 17-year-old father was left with four other siblings, who together strived hard to survive on the farms in a village in Kompong Chhnang province, sometimes at the mercy of their uncles and aunts. My mother was born in Battambang province, but was adopted by distant relatives in Sihanoukville since she was a baby. When the Khmer Rouge came to power, her adoptive father was murdered since he had worked as a government official. She and her mother were evacuated to Kompong Chhnang province, although the latter would soon die of starvation, leaving my 11-year-old mother to survive on her own throughout DK's rule. After 1979, she was subsequently adopted by a number of families in the same village of my father's until they got married. To this day, both my parents still show gratitude to their (adoptive) relatives in the form of minimal financial support, as well as donations to the village's facilities such as local pagodas etc.

¹⁰ May Ebihara, "Revolution and Reformation in Kampuchean Village Culture," p. 38.

¹¹ In my mother's case, it was not until sometime in mid-1980s that she was able to find relatives who could inform her real mother of her whereabouts she was. Her father was murdered by the Khmer Rouge; her eldest brother died from starvation, while her third brother had sought refuge in France after the liberation.

Kampuchean still do not know whether relatives are dead, or alive in another part of the country; whether they were killed or died under Pol Pot, or if they escaped and live in refugee camps or abroad.”¹²

Under the PRK, now marriage was again based on one’s consent or sometimes perhaps through family arrangement. Despite the fact that there were now more widows thanks to the shortage of men following DK, Khmer women were not so keen on resorting to the idea of polygyny, and many remained widowed.¹³ But according to Chanthou Boua, there were cases of premarital and extramarital sexual activity, following the rigid segregation of the sexes in DK’s time, although such license was greater in the city given the difficulties of keeping anything secret in small communities.¹⁴ Eva Mysliwiec similarly noted that “Women complain of increasing problems of marital infidelity from their husbands caused by the disproportionate ratio of women to men and the high number of widows.”¹⁵ Similarly, divorce was now again permitted. In fact, after the liberation, there were divorces rather than reunions of spouses, especially among women who had been forced into distasteful marriages under the DK regime.¹⁶

¹² Eva Mysliwiec. *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1988), p. 11.

¹³ This is not to claim that Khmer society was a puritan, monogamous society. From early history, Khmer kings and wealthy official, more often than not, tended to have one than one wife, not to mention concubines and mistresses. Only on September 1, 2006, did Cambodia’s parliament pass a law criminalizing polygamy, incest, and adultery. The first conviction was charged on March 17, 2007 against Prince Ranaridh, who had an extramarital relationship with former Apsara Dancer Ouk Phalla. The charge seemed to be more politically-motivated, given the fact that other officials, including those of the CPP, were also alleged to have extramarital affairs yet never faced the same investigation.

¹⁴ See Chantou Boua, “Women in today’s Cambodia,” *New Left Review*, Jan-Feb (1982): 45-61. Quoted in May Ebihara, “Revolution and Reformation in Kampuchean Village Culture,” p. 39.

¹⁵ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 11.

¹⁶ May Ebihara, “Revolution and Reformation in Kampuchean Village Culture,” pp. 38-9.

Worth noting about the early phase of the resettlement of villagers was the settling of blood debt. In some areas, Khmer Rouge cadres who were not able to escape lost their lives to angry crowds who gruesomely took justice into their own hands, as witnessed by Someth May making his way across northwestern Cambodia in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnamese invasion:

A young woman ran across my path, pursued by a group of men armed with *parangs*, axes and sticks. She ran quite a good distance before she fell to the ground, screaming. ‘No, it wasn’t me, I was told to do it. Please don’t kill me. Please don’t kill me...’ It took them five seconds to kill her and cut off her head. The man with the axe held it up by the hair. He yelled into her face, ‘I’ve got you now. Why did you starve me and my children? I’ll get your husband next.’ He took the head with him and went off with the group.¹⁷

Accounts from other Cambodians recall similar spontaneous acts of violence. Given the mayhem immediately after the liberation, the newly-installed government had neither the will nor an established mechanism to prevent civilians’ extrajudicial punishment of Khmer Rouge cadres. In most cases, however, former Khmer Rouge cadres were allowed to reintegrate into society after the demise of Democratic Kampuchea. Foreign workers in Cambodia during the 1980s were actually impressed and moved by the spirit of forgiveness some Khmers have shown toward those who once inflicted suffering on them during the Khmer Rouge regime. When a former teacher was asked how he felt about this, he responded, “I do not seek revenge against the Khmer Rouge. They were peasants;

¹⁷ Someth May. *Cambodia Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 241.

they were ignorant. They did whatever they were told to do without thinking. Besides, if we felt revenge, perhaps there would soon be no more Khmers left in our country.”¹⁸

Collectivization: *Krom Samaki* (Solidarity Groups)

The nearly four years of rule by the Khmer Rouge caused a large loss of male labor, leaving behind many widows, orphans and elderly. Vietnam’s attacks in late 1978 on the Khmer Rouge also disrupted harvesting. Seeds for planting had also been consumed following the invasion in certain places, so that in 1979 Cambodia was facing a real famine. Demographer Ea Meng-Try speculated that “throughout the country, 5 – 10 percent of the population, amounting to 325,000 to 625,000 people, may have died of starvation ... food shortages continued in 1980.”¹⁹ It is hard to verify or disprove this estimated figure, but I believe that it might have been a little exaggerated. Accounts from other foreign visitors to Cambodia as early as 1979, and my interviews with survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, though suggesting the plight, did not indicate a widespread death from starvation.

Under the circumstances, The PRK initially attempted to put socialist practices into place, including the collectivization of agriculture even though such practices were out of favor

¹⁸ Mennonite Central Committee Report, 1984. Quoted in Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 48. When my father was told that the murderer of his father was coming down to his village, he also apparently declined to take revenge. The need for national reconciliation was the basis of the creation of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which originally planned to bring only top 5 Khmer Rouge leaders to court. Recently, disagreements have emerged between international and Cambodian co-prosecutors as to whether the Tribunal should bring more former Khmer Rouge cadres to court.

¹⁹ Ea Meng-Try. “Kampuchea: A Country Adrift,” *Population and Development Review* Vol 7, No. 2 (June, 1981): 219.

with large sections of the peasantry.²⁰ This socialist policy was implemented by forming the “solidarity groups for increasing the harvest” – the *krom samaki bongkor bongkaun phal*, and hereafter *krom samaki*. As the PRK’s Central Committee issued a reminder on August 3, 1984:

1. The leadership is that of the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea which is pure, proper and splendid;
2. The land is the property of the state; the management and use of that land is appropriate, ensuring its good quality and building new relations of production according to objectives advancing towards socialism.²¹

My interviews and accounts from other writers seem to suggest that there were differences of the types and length of the practice of the *krom samaki*. In fact, in certain areas, the system was not even implemented by the government but initiated by the people themselves. In some remote places in Battambang, for example, I was told that immediately after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, people who separately owned seeds, cattle, or utilities would come together and form *ad hoc* groups to plant rice and share the harvest among themselves.²² In the villages of Prey Veng province in eastern Cambodia, a farmer told me that collective farming took place for only a few months, and ceased to exist afterward. In most cases, however, the *krom samaki* system was implemented for at

²⁰ Collectivization under the PRK, however, should not be confused with that carried out under Democratic Kampuchea. Between 1975 and late 1978, “Cambodians of all races and classes worked long hours, without wages or leisure, on projects in which they had no say. Subjected to military discipline, most lived in thatch huts or barrack-style houses, with couples usually separated from other family members and, as [DK’s Minister of Social Affairs] Ieng Thirith explained, often even apart from spouses. Work teams took meals in separate shifts in mess halls.” See Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 164.

²¹ Decision of the 9th party plenum concerning the management and use of agricultural land, cited in Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 108.

²² Interview with N. T., December, 2008.

least another one or two years, during which the state's intervention was substantial.

These differences were also pointed out by May Ebihara:

In the early days of the People's Republic of Kampuchea there was evidently great variability among villages as to how government directives were carried out regarding land allocations to *krom* [group] and households and work arrangements. This was due sometimes to genuine confusion and sometimes "interpretations" of policy according to the political sentiments of local officials and residents. Thus in 1980 some villages continued more or less collective farming, others allocated all paddies to households, and still others combined communal and household plots.²³

The different types of *krom samaki* are discussed in more detail in Margaret Slocomb's *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979 – 1989*. In generic terms, the *krom samaki* can be described as follows. Each village in the rural areas would comprise a number of groups, each of which were made up of fifteen to twenty families.²⁴ Under the system, able-bodied members from all the families in the group, which was supervised by an appointed group leader, would engage in collective farming and harvesting. Once the produce was at hand, rice was distributed equally among all family members of the group, including the elderly and babies who did not take part in the cultivation phase.

The collectivization of agricultural production which reflected the socialist ideals of the PRK was indeed a pragmatic mechanism of social welfare for the general population, without which individual families with the burden of unable members would not have been able to feed themselves. On the other hand, the *krom samaki* also created jealousy

²³ Ebihara, "Revolution and Reformation in Kampuchean Village Culture," p. 37.

²⁴ Before December 1979, each *krom samaki* consisted of up to forty families, but the difficulty of supervision prompted the reduction in size of the groups. See Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 96.

among certain families all of whose members took part in farming but received only a similar amount of rice compared to those with many disabled, and/or elder members. This meant that the incentives for production were low.

According to Viviane Frings, in 1984 and 1985, propaganda missions were organized and state employees were required to spend three months in the countryside to encourage collectivism among peasants.²⁵ Furthermore, hundreds of model villages were also created in the same years to encourage collectivization. The main problem related to the creation of those model villages, as admitted by a senior official of the Ministry of Agriculture to Frings, was nepotism. The choice of village was made according to family ties by staff of the ministry's Department of Political and Economic Management.²⁶ This stemmed from the fact that those villages which were chosen as model villages received rice mills and water pumps, adequate fertilizer and high quality seed rice, all provided by foreign assistance. Furthermore, Frings argued, for the most part, the designation of "model village" was meaningless "since the central government lacked the resources to support so many villages and the *khum* (commune) were not able to do anything by themselves."²⁷

It can be argued that jealousy within groups created by the system and a lack of interest in socialism on the farmers' side, coupled with other factors such as incompetency and

²⁵ Viviane Frings, "The Failure of Agricultural Collectivization in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979—1989)" (Working Paper 80, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1993), p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

corruption of local authorities, prompted the failure of the PRK's attempt to follow the socialist path of collectivization. Consequently, by mid-1980s, the system eventually ceased to exist in Cambodia. This was well summarized by Margaret Slocomb:

Without some form of agricultural collectivization, the PRK leaders could hardly claim that they were advancing towards socialism so, to this end, the solidarity groups, the *krom samaki*, were the very wheels of the revolution. By the end of 1984, they had served a useful purpose in helping to restore normalcy to the lives of Cambodian farmers. They had also provided important means of social welfare and support for the thousands of widows, orphans, and the debilitated created by the Pol Pot regime, and they had helped to bring order to the countryside. Once this was achieved, the *krom samaki* had little further benefit and therefore no longer made sense, because the real purpose of the *krom samaki*, collectivization of agriculture in the name of social revolution, meant nothing to the rural people. In many parts of the country even the pretence of collectivized agriculture had disappeared well before the end of 1984 ... Moreover, by the end of 1984, as [Minister of Planning] Chea Soth had already admitted, corruption, greed, and malpractice were already creeping back into the administration system. Theory and practice were diverging, and instead of extending its ideological hegemony, the PRK government seemed to be satisfied with maintaining its popularity with the masses through low taxation and rural credit schemes.²⁸

Once the collectivization system collapsed, agricultural lands were eventually distributed among settlers according to the number of family members, including newly-born babies. The amount of land divided among each member varied from one region to another depending on land availability and population density.²⁹ What is of significance, however, was the fact that as a result of such system, large families received large portions of land. From the perspective of small families, especially those who used to own a lot of lands in pre-war Cambodia, there was a disadvantage. As a Khmer adage goes, “*Neak-mien kom aal awe, neak-kraw kom aal phe*” (literally, “Rich people shall

²⁸ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, pp. 110-11.

²⁹ For instance, in her village in Prey Veng province, O. N. told me that each member of the family would receive half a hectare of land for agricultural production. Interview in December 2008.

not be happy yet, poor people shall not be worried yet”). This old saying was particularly true for post-1979 rural Cambodia, specifically in the matter of agricultural land ownership. In fact, not only were lands divided. In provinces where palm products (e.g. palm juice, sugar and wine) contributed to the local economy, palm trees were also shared accordingly.³⁰

Welfare

Before the Vietnam War, Cambodia was a rice-exporting country. U.S. bombing missions undoubtedly disrupted cultivation during the 1970s, particularly in the areas east of the Mekong River. Under Democratic Kampuchea, rice was allegedly exported to China in exchange for weapons while people were left to starvation.³¹ Under the PRK, Cambodia was trying to attain its pre-war status. Yet, the civil war, lack of manpower and tools, the presence of landmines, as well as natural calamities made that goal hard to achieve. It’s probably fair to say that, on average, people produced barely enough to survive. Having survived the hardships under DK’s rule, the people’s perseverance allowed them to survive despite shortages, or as Evan Gottesman put it, “to contend with pockets of malnutrition.”³² Nonetheless, by the mid 1980s, the situation was much better than in 1979. A production chart by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is useful here:

³⁰ Interviews with farmers in Kompong Chhnang province, December 2008.

³¹ According to Ben Kiernan, many refugees and survivors, and some former KR soldiers, reported that rice was exported to China. DK’s Ministry of Commerce records did not confirm this allegation. But in 1978 DK officials claimed to have exported 100,000 tons of rice the previous year to Yugoslavia, Madagascar, and Hong Kong. See Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, pp. 379-80.

³² Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 151.

Table 2: Rice Production and Needs from 1979 – 1986.

| Year | Population (in thousands) | Consumption | Required Production | Actual Production | Shortfall |
|-------|------------------------------|-------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| 79/80 | 6,339 | 1,471 | 1,692 | 538 | - 1,154 |
| 80/81 | 6,535 | 1,516 | 1,743 | 1,564 | - 179 |
| 81/82 | 6,737 | 1,563 | 1,797 | 1,351 | - 446 |
| 82/83 | 6,946 | 1,611 | 1,853 | 1,646 | - 207 |
| 83/84 | 7,161 | 1,661 | 1,910 | 1,617 | - 293 |
| 84/85 | 7,382 | 1,713 | 1,970 | 1,385 | - 328 |
| 85/86 | 7,603 | 1,764 | 2,029 | 1,996 | - 33 |

Source: Adapted from FAO Report, 1986¹, Rice Paddy Needs (thousand tones).

¹ Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, p. 25.

It is obvious from the table above that shortage of rice was highest for the years 1979/80, although the consumption was not remarkably different from the following years, perhaps due to the availability of international aid. The next year saw a high increase in production as the population more or less settled and began cultivation. By 1985/86, the actual production almost matched the required amount, which meant that the people had relatively more to eat. But as Eva Mysliwiec pointed out in 1988: “Nine years after the ousting of the Khmer Rouge, Kampuchea is still struggling to achieve self-sufficiency in food. Agriculture has still not attained pre-war levels of production and the country is not yet self-sufficient in its staple, rice ... In fact, [Oxfam] reports from Phnom Penh of severe drought during May, June and July 1987 signalled serious food shortages in 1988.”¹

What the above table does not reflect, of course, was the variation of yields in different areas of the country. For instance, Battambang and other areas around the Tonle Sap Lake that have fertile lands presumably had higher yields than more mountainous areas or plateaus in the north and northeast. Civil war also interrupted cultivation along the Thai border. In areas where yields were high, citizens were encouraged to sell rice to the state, an act the state defined as “patriotism.” In theory, there was no compulsion to sell rice to the state: “the farmers have the right to sell, exchange, transport and use all those products freely, keep for use in the family or sell in order to get money to buy other

¹ Ibid., 52.

things according to their own needs, without anyone having the right to force them.”² In addition, the state was also willing to “buy according to the market price and will hand over money immediately.”³

However, what was disturbing for Cambodians, including low-level cadres of the PRK, was the fact that despite the shortage inside Cambodia, rice was exported to Vietnam as part of an economic “friendship” between the two countries.⁴ Ironically, though not surprisingly, this was done in spite of the PRK’s condemnation of Pol Pot for having sent between 100,000 and 150,000 tons of rice to China in the late 1970s.⁵ According to Evan Gottesman:

Although it is unclear whether exports from the PRK to Vietnam ever reached comparable levels, government reports show that the Ministry of Commerce sent 23,000 tons of rice to Vietnam in the first half of 1981, with another 17,000 tons planned for the remainder of the year. By late 1982, rice exports had become an integral part of the Cambodian-Vietnamese economic relationship, in part because Cambodia lacked warehouses in which to store its rice and could export it to Vietnam in exchange for consumer goods but mostly because Vietnam was looking to alleviate its own rice shortages.⁶

Fisheries, another important sector in Cambodian people’s survival, also faced a problem due to the lack of tools. A report from UK-based Wetlands International mentioned that:

“In the past, the fishery resources have provided up to 70% of the protein requirement of

² Draft Report, “Concerning the purchase of staple food in the 1980—1981 wet season and selling manufactured goods to the farmers,” Phnom Penh, 25 July 1980. Quoted in Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 106.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 151.

⁵ Howard J. DeNike, John Quigley, and Kenneth J. Robinson (eds.). *Genocide in Cambodia: Documents from the Trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 538.

⁶ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 151.

[the] Kampuchean people. However, the fishery industry has suffered drastically from the recent wars. Fishery production at the Great Lake has fallen from an estimated 110,000 tons at the end of the 1960s to an estimated 63,000 tons in 1984.”⁷ Like rice, fish was also exported to Vietnam, and Cambodian bureaucrats from the Ministries of Agriculture and Commerce resented that the Vietnamese “stole” from Cambodia by charging for “quality certificates,” “stamps of exchange,” warehouse, transportation, fuel, and port expenses.⁸ In addition, some Cambodian civilians and lower-level Cambodian officials also complained about the re-emergence of Vietnamese fishing villages, now known as “Fishing Solidarity Groups,” as well as “the government’s inability to control the coming and going of larger Vietnamese fishing vessels and the fishing activities of Vietnamese military units posted along the Tonle Sap lake.”⁹

Despite the shortage of food (in certain areas) and emotional trauma, many Cambodian peasants were at least content with the freedom after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea. Once again they were able to be with their families, practice their religion and other basic social rights granted by the PRK. People once again enjoyed festivities at temples during the Khmer New Year and Moon Festival (*ork ombok – sampeah preah khae*). Almost every person I interviewed raised the point that there was much more fun in rural parties

⁷ Wetlands International. “Kampuchea.” <http://ramsar.wetlands.org/Portals/15/Kampuchea.pdf>. Accessed Wednesday April 1, 2009.

⁸ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 155.

⁹ *Ibid.* Under the Khmer Republic 1970-75, thousands of Vietnamese civilians were forced to flee. Ethnic Vietnamese fishermen and traders were driven out of Cambodia; thousands of those who remained were massacred, their bodies dumped in the Mekong River, while other killings took place in Phnom Penh and in the villages as well. See Jennifer S. Berman, “No Place like Home: Anti-Vietnamese Discrimination and Nationality in Cambodia,” *California Law Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (1996): 831; and David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 203-4.

during special occasions during the 1980s. This was because there was no gangster violence, no teenagers killing each other, something that appears on the media rather frequently nowadays. In fact, a former youth group's leader in Kompong Chhnang province who is now an NGO worker even claimed: "The first days following the liberation, every day was like a Khmer New Year's day. There were only metal water containers and sticks in place of real drums, but we still enjoyed dancing a lot."¹⁰

Security

It is difficult to generalize about security in the countryside under the PRK's rule. Provinces along the Thai border especially were particularly insecure. Before 1985, the PRK did not have full control over those provinces. Other parts of the country were occasionally attacked by small units of Khmer Rouge operating inside the country as well. As Evan Gottesman points out:

Toward the end of each year, each spring, as the rains stopped and the muddy roads dried out, the Vietnamese army went on the offensive ... Then, each spring, as the rains resumed, the resistance would strike back, destroying railroads, bridges, and fuel facilities and forcing the now immobilized Vietnamese to defend hard-earned territory. Such was the case in early 1984, when the Khmer Rouge burned buildings around the outskirts of the provincial capital of Siem Reap, and units of various resistance forces launched attacks in Pursat, Kampong Thom, Kompong Chhnang, and Koh Kong provinces.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview with K. S., December 2008.

¹¹ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 223. See also, Michael Eiland, "Kampuchea in 1984: Yet Further from Peace," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1985): 106-7.

The Vietnamese 1984-85 dry season offensive was probably the largest and most successful one because Vietnamese forces overran all the three resistance groups' base camps in "liberated zones" astride the border. In effect, however, it also drove some additional 230,000 refugees over the border into Thailand.¹² Furthermore, the victory also changed the nature of the war. Now unable to defend territories inside Cambodia, resistance soldiers were divided into many minor units that infiltrated the countryside. According to PRK estimates, 15,300 "enemies" were operating inside Cambodia, while the number rose to 21,000 in 1987.¹³ The following years were not free from occasional attacks either. Provinces like Battambang, for instance, were subject to Khmer Rouge violence and banditry even during the UNTAC administration and afterward, more or less until the Khmer Rouge Commander-in-Chief Ta Mok was arrested in 1999.¹⁴ My childhood memory from the early 1990s in Battambang province, where I grew up, is painted with the occasional sounds of bombs that blew up bridges, when towns like Tmor Kol in the west was vulnerable to Khmer Rouge or banditry attacks (known to Cambodians as *ja-o haa-rooy*, literally "50-100 robbers").

Younger people who travel from Battambang to Phnom Penh nowadays might take for granted the security and ease of travelling. Back in the 1980s and early 1990s, damaged

¹² Peter Schier. "Kampuchea in 1985: Between Crocodiles and Tigers," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1986) (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 140-41.

¹³ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 224.

¹⁴ See David Ashley, "The Nature and Causes of Human Rights Violations in Battambang Province," in Steven Heder and Judy Ledgerwood (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia: A Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-Keeping* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996). David Ashley summarized that human rights violations in Battambang under UNTAC were due to: 1) resumed armed struggle of the Khmer Rouge; 2) election-related violations by the State of Cambodia (PRK); 3) arbitrary violence against the population by those, on any side, with authority or weapons. See p. 159.

roads, occasional attacks from the outlawed Khmer Rouge guerillas, and illegal military checkpoints aimed at extracting money from passengers, were some major problems for passengers.¹⁵

In other areas, however, I was told rather consistently that villagers also enjoyed fairly high security in their localities. As in the cities, robberies were rare. When they did happen, sometimes perpetrators who were caught could face harsh extra-judicial punishment at the hands of local civilians or village guards, perhaps with tacit permission from the authorities. The PRK's ideological and political concern meant that the state's arrests were usually in the name of the criminal act of "betraying the revolution". In fact, even the Justice Minister Uk Bunchheuan and other ministry officials complained "frequently and specifically about the lack of substantive criminal law concerning violations of public order, theft of state property, rape, and prostitution, as well as the absence of any distinction between felonies and misdemeanors."¹⁶

For some hundreds of thousands of Cambodian peasants, however, rural life was rather tough. Thanks to the defense strategy of the PRK advised by Vietnam, many people perished and others became victims through military conscription and the K5 Plan, which is discussed below.

¹⁵ Whenever there were bridges or roads cut off that caused long traffic jam on national roads, it was sometimes alleged that the destruction was done by local villagers who took the advantage to boost their sales of foodstuff to the passengers.

¹⁶ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 244.

Military Conscription

A government requires its own armed forces. When the PRK was proclaimed, its very existence relied heavily on some 150,000 Vietnamese troops stationed on Cambodian soil and a small number of Cambodian soldiers of some thirty battalions that comprised the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation.¹⁷ Once the country began to come slowly back to life, the government felt a need to form its own army that would protect itself from the Khmer Rouge and other resistance forces. According to Tim Carney, “immediately after victory the army seems to have undergone a crisis, with massive desertions and uncoordinated efforts at expansion ... The end of 1979 and the beginning of 1980 seems to have marked a turning point, a fresh start toward creating a military establishment.”¹⁸

The director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM) Youk Chhang told me that, following the liberation of Phnom Penh, he had fled to the Thai border because his mother had urged him to for fear that military conscription would soon be introduced. At the time, he did not personally foresee that possibility, and he fled only because his mother told him to.¹⁹ In 1984, Vietnamese General Le Duc Anh, one of the architects of the 1978 invasion and commander of the Vietnamese “volunteer forces” in Cambodia pointed out that: “The success of the Cambodian revolution would be decided by the

¹⁷ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 127.

¹⁸ Timothy M. Carney, “Heng Samrin’s Armed Forces and the Military Balance in Cambodia,” *International Journal of Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1986): 160. Quoted in Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 127.

¹⁹ Conversation with Youk Chhang, in Athens, Ohio, spring 2008.

Cambodian people themselves ... Building the KPRAF [Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Armed Forces] was 'an urgent strategic demand' of the Cambodian revolution."²⁰

In theory, the army was supposed to be the vanguard of the revolution, and from the state's point of view, joining the army was a sacrifice for the nation. The army wanted "young people with revolutionary ideals and a militant core who are absolutely courageous and unafraid of suffering and dare to give up their lives for the revolution, for the people, and for supreme glory."²¹ However, early attempts by the PRK to recruit people to join the armed forces were largely unsuccessful. Many factors accounted for this failure. First of all, after enduring difficulties under the previous regime, most people just wanted to live simple lives with the remaining members of their families. Secondly, the idea that Khmers should join the army under a government controlled by Vietnam was not an attractive idea to many people. In fact, one of the most successful pieces of propaganda used by the resistance forces against the PRK was the appeal for "Khmer not to fight Khmer."²² Similarly, the KPRAF was accused of helping Vietnam swallow Cambodia.²³ In addition, unlike in pre-war Cambodia where soldiers received higher pay, the PRK was not able to provide such compensation, which led many soldiers to extort tolls from people or merchants, or even became smugglers themselves. As Chea Sim –

²⁰ *FBIS: AP*, 4 January 1985, "The VPA and Its Lofty International Duty in Friendly Cambodia," from *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, December 1984. Quoted in Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 228.

²¹ Document 362, Army, General Ministry of Politics and the Military, undated (*Doc. 8-42*). Quoted in Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 227.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²³ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 127.

the then President of the National Assembly – acknowledged, “When the military smuggles, it smuggles big.”²⁴ This meant that the army was not popular among the people and morale was low, so that defection was high. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese army was doing almost all the fighting against resistance forces.

Unable to recruit volunteers, the PRK now turned to conscription to meet its defense strategy. In 1979, there were about 600 soldiers and the number rose to 3,000 in 1980 and to 5,000 in 1981.²⁵ It was only in 1982, however, that “the Council of Ministers issued instructions to local authorities to take men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, as well as a few unmarried women.”²⁶ By April 1985, internal Vietnamese reports claimed that 80,000 Cambodians were enlisted in the army to counter the resistance’s estimated 40,000 Khmer Rouge troops, 14,000 KPNLF troops, and 10,000 troops of the Armée Nationaliste Sihanoukienne.²⁷

To meet the quota, it was not uncommon to hear stories of soldiers chasing people in rice paddies to force them to join the army. A few former soldiers from Kompong Chhnang province told me that before they were enlisted in the army, they spent time sleeping on their houses’ roofs at night to avoid soldiers who came to seize them. Eventually they relented and became soldiers. Marie A. Martin was also told by some refugees that:

²⁴ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 230.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²⁷ “Report on the Situation in Cambodia,” [Vietnamese] Expert Group, Political Committee, 1985, pp. 3-4. Cited in Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, p. 227.

A group of about twenty of Heng Samrin's soldiers and five Vietnamese came looking for us at school. Out of one thousand students, they took twenty. They already had a list of names. They told us we were changing schools, without specifying which one. We weren't allowed to go home to say goodbye to our families ... In Kandal province, they conscripted eight hundred fifty students. They took all of us to Srok Kien Svay for training ... Then we were taken to Nam Sap, near the [Thai] border [which was a dangerous place for these youths, exposed on the front line, often without arms, to Khmer Rouge soldiers].²⁸

Marie Martin speculated that levies of students “did not occur in Phnom Penh, probably because the authorities wished to conceal them from Westerners there who, in order to remain in their posts, obligingly ignored the levies’ deadly consequences.”²⁹ In reality, military conscription did take place in Phnom Penh, albeit at a lower rate. As one former student in Phnom Penh told me, “Students would be required to show student ID cards. The failure to produce them to the soldiers meant that they would be drafted into the army. But toward the end of the 1980s, especially after the Vietnamese withdrawal, being a student did not necessarily mean one was totally safe, especially when the soldiers were trying to meet the quota.”³⁰ Perhaps a better explanation as to why fewer people were conscripted in Phnom Penh could be the fact that the PRK did give priority to higher education in the city. A policeman who worked with the PRK since 1982 also explained to me that under tighter state scrutiny and with limited contact with resistance forces, youths in Phnom Penh were considered by the state as less vulnerable to joining the “enemy.”³¹

²⁸ Marie Alexandrine Martin. *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (translated by Mark W. McLeod) (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 225-26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁰ Interview with I. S., February 2009.

³¹ Interview with N. T., December 2008.

Even if it could be justified that military conscription was necessary for national defense, the inevitable consequence was the decline of the PRK's popularity, which the leaders were well aware of, not to mention the loss of lives on the battlefield and a high number of injured soldiers thanks to fighting and/or landmines. The legacy of the civil war is still strongly felt in Cambodia today. Bun Na, a beggar in Phnom Penh with no right leg and no left eye told Thailand-based freelance journalist Kate J. Coates that he strongly resented the government's lack of compensation for its war veterans.³² Bun Na is only one of the many people with similar fates and is certainly not alone in his disgruntlement. Recently, the Association for Development of Handicap and Army (ADH) also voiced their concerns that in spite of the community land given to them by the government, access to quality schools and healthcare, and even basic services such as clean water and housing, are lacking.³³

The K5 Plan

The biggest resentment among Cambodians with the PRK, however, had more to do with a detrimental policy which came to be known as the "K5 Plan" (*Phaenkar Kor Pram*), initiated sometime around March 1984. According to Canadian journalist Robert Karniol, who spent three weeks with Cambodian resistance forces inside Cambodian territory in 1986, the K5 Plan was Vietnam's blueprint to end the Cambodian conflict. These

³² Kate J. Coates. *Cambodia Now: Life in the Wake of War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), p. 16.

³³ *Phnom Penh Post*. "Mine victims say they are forgotten." <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2009022424372/National-news/Mine-victims-say-they-are-forgotten.html>. Accessed February 24, 2009.

included the destruction of the border bases, sealing off the border with Thailand, mopping up resistance units in sweep operations, consolidation of the PRK regime, and the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia by 1990.³⁴ Margaret Slocomb, on the other hand, contends that “K5” refers specifically to the second phase listed by Karniol. She wrote that “By definition, ‘*kor*’ (the first letter of the Khmer alphabet) referred to the initial syllable of ‘*kar karpier*’ (defense). K5 was therefore the fifth defense plan, which was the plan for the defense of the Cambodian-Thai border.”³⁵ Whatever it was, the meaning of the K5 Plan’s codename remains obscure to many Cambodians today.

In January 1984, General Le Duc Tho chaired a political seminar for the PRK’s Council of Ministers, which focused on “the urgent task of consolidating the grassroot[s] infrastructure of the PRK regime, the imperative need for a definitive solution to eliminate the Khmer resistance movements, and the all-around integration of Kampuchea into the Indochinese Socialist Bloc.”³⁶ Later that same year, the Politburo in Phnom Penh discussed “the mobilization of several hundred thousand Cambodian civilians to “chop down forests, construct more roads, and lay down hundreds of kilometers of earthen walls, two-and-a-half-meter-deep spiked ditches, barbed wire, and minefields.”³⁷ Evan Gottesman stated that the plan’s ultimate motive was to “build a Berlin Wall of sorts that

³⁴ See Robert Karniol, “Rebels on the march” *FEER*, 23 October 1986, p. 20. Cited in Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 229.

³⁵ Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 229.

³⁶ “The Military Occupation of Kampuchea,” p. 2. Quoted in Margaret Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 229.

³⁷ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 231.

would stretch along the Thai-Cambodian border and prevent resistance soldiers from infiltrating.”³⁸

The attempt to seal the 829-Km long Cambodian-Thai border presumably required a great number of laborers. In fact, in the first phase alone, 90,362 laborers were involved in building the defense line.³⁹ At the end of 1985, Vietnamese officials estimated the total number of K5 workers for the year at 150,000.⁴⁰ There seemed to be no clear figure of the total number of people conscripted for the K5 Plan, but Margaret Slocomb estimated the total number conscripted between late 1984 and mid 1987 at 380,000.⁴¹ Evan Gottesman also suggests a figure of between 146,000 and 381,000 laborers.⁴²

Like military service, the K5 Plan necessitated conscription. Some people who were conscripted for the K5 Plan informed me that they were supposed to work for three months to fulfill their corvée requirement. One woman from Kompong Chhnang province, who volunteered to replace her elderly father who was enlisted to go clear the forest, told me that before taking off she was provided with a mosquito net and a blanket by the provincial authority. After traveling by truck for a few days, she was required to work for a few weeks with sufficient food supplies, until she was infected with malaria

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 231.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 236.

⁴² Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 231. Civil servants, especially medical staff, were also sent along with conscripted civilians for the K5 Plan. Yet, they were better equipped and were charged with supervising or providing medical care to the laborers, rather than performing the actual tasks of clearing forest and planting landmines.

and was sent home.⁴³ Her experience, however, was probably rather benign compared to many others who were also conscripted. Gottesman summarizes Esméralda Lucioli's interviews with returning K5 workers in the following way:

Throughout the country, convoys of trucks transported K5 workers to the border. Dropped off wherever the roads ended, the conscripts walked for two or three days until they arrived at their worksite. Guarded by Vietnamese or Cambodian soldiers, they labored for eight to ten hours a day, cutting down trees, digging trenches, mining and de-mining, building roads, and transporting ammunition, equipment, and corpses. Twice a day, they ate together, although there was rarely enough food.⁴⁴

One K5 worker described the situation as follows: “There was no shelter, and it was useless to look to build oneself a hut, because we moved every day. Some had hammocks, others nothing. They slept on the ground, on a piece of plastic or even on the dirt.” Another person complained about food shortages in the following way: “At the end of two weeks, nothing came... When new workers arrived, we were forced to share whatever was left with them. There was less and less to eat. A number of people died of starvation. It was like under Pol Pot.”⁴⁵

Another major challenge to K5 workers was malaria. Even the PRK Ministry of Health estimated that about 80 percent of the workers were infected with malaria.⁴⁶ Reports from the Central K5 Committee acknowledged that “high rates of malaria have seriously

⁴³ An interesting anecdote came up during my conversation with her. Several months after being cured at the hospital, she had a relapse of malaria. She told me she recovered only because a Vietnamese soldier, who was her mother's “son,” gave her a traditional prescription (mashed raw crab meat). According to her, Vietnamese soldiers were encouraged by their supervisors to be part of local peasant families.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 233-34. See also, Esméralda Lucioli. *Le Mur de Bamboo: Le Cambodge après Pol Pot* (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1988), pp. 113-18 (translated from French by Evan Gottesman).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, quoted in Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 234.

⁴⁶ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 235.

debilitated the workforce, and there are places where there have been deaths from malaria.” Yet, they continued with optimism: “We already know that in some areas around the border, there is malaria and that this has an effect on the health of the workers, but in fact, there are some [military and K5] organizations working in dangerous areas whose workers and soldiers remained healthy. In sum, even though there are difficult and complicated situations, if we have a careful policy of protecting and curing [the workers], we can in fact reduce illnesses.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Hun Sen suggested that “It’s true that there is a lot of malaria, but it is easy to cure.”⁴⁸ Estimates of deaths from malaria run into the tens of thousands. Gottesman contends that, “If the mortality rate was a conservative 5 percent and if half a million Cambodians participated in K5 (some estimates are twice as high), then 25,000 died of malaria.”⁴⁹ One defector from the Ministry of Defense who arrived in Thailand reported that 30,000 K5 workers had died.⁵⁰ In fact, so many workers were suffering from malaria in provinces like Takeo, Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, Kompong Thom and Battambang that conscription was delayed briefly to counter the shortages of healthy men to produce rice.⁵¹ In fact, many hospitals in provincial towns were occupied by malaria-infected patients during these few years.⁵²

What was also disturbing was the presence of corruption during these difficult times. For instance, anti-malarial medicine imported by the Ministry of Health with the support of

⁴⁷ Report 52, K5 Committee, July 4, 1985, pp. 9-10 (*Doc. 11-41*). Quoted in Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 234.

⁴⁸ Minutes 37, Cabinet, Council of Ministers, December 25, 1985, pp. 2-5 (*Doc. 12-61*). Quoted in Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 235.

⁴⁹ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 236.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-6.

⁵² Conversation with some residents from Kompong Chhnang and Prey Veng provinces.

international humanitarian organizations did not always make it to border, as much of it was diverted into private hands and appeared in the markets for sale.⁵³ In some cases, a few families who could afford to bribe the authorities managed to avoid the conscription, which meant that the duty fell to others, usually poor peasants. In certain places, some people were re-conscripted for another term to fill in the village quota, since many people had fled.⁵⁴

Apart from malaria, landmines also became a source of tragedy for K5 workers. As Gottesman also points out, “The other great danger was landmines, which K5 workers both removed and laid, depending on whether they were constructing barriers or advancing on minefields laid by the resistance. De-mining is a complicated, delicate task, yet there was little technical instruction. Invariably, deaths and injuries occurred.”⁵⁵ In fact, landmines were used not only by the PRK, but by all sides in the conflict.

The history of planting landmines dates back to the Vietnam War when Vietnamese Communist forces planted landmines to protect their sanctuaries in Cambodia’s soil. The Khmer Rouge also set up mines during the early 1970s to seal off their “liberated zones” against the Khmer Republic’s army, and along the borders with Vietnam and Thailand once they were in power. The number dramatically rose during the Vietnamese occupation, especially after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese army from Cambodia in

⁵³ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 235.

⁵⁴ R. A. told me she bribed the authority in Phnom Penh with only MSG to have her son freed from K5 conscription.

⁵⁵ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 236.

1989, which left the Phnom Penh government to defend itself against the CGDK's forces. With little fighting between soldiers actually taking place among the Cambodian protagonists after the Vietnamese withdrawal, Eric Stover (a freelance writer and consultant to Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights) and Rae McGrath (director of the Mine Advisory Group) wrote a report in 1992 and referred to this process of heavy planting of landmines by all fighting forces as "The Coward's War."⁵⁶

The impact of landmines has continued to haunt Cambodia even twenty years after the war. It is not known exactly how many landmines are left in Cambodian soil, but most estimates put the number between 4 and 6 million.⁵⁷ According to Prak Sokhon, a secretary of state of at the Council of Ministers, between 1992 and 2008, local and international demining teams have cleared land mines from 486 square kilometers, destroying 820,000 anti-personnel mines, 20,000 anti-tank mines and 1.77 million pieces of unexploded ordnance.⁵⁸ According to a recent statement by the leading demining organization Cambodia Mine Action Centre (CMAC), the number of people suffering from mine injuries has dropped from 450 in 2006 to 266 in 2008.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion on the use of landmines, see Asia Watch, *Landmines in Cambodia: The Coward's War* (United States: 1991).

⁵⁷ Karen J. Coates. *Cambodia Now: Life in the Wake of War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2005), p. 15.

⁵⁸ *Phnom Penh Post*. "Mine Clearance Needs Time."
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2009041025334/National-news/Mine-clearance-needs-time.html>. Accessed April 10, 2009.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* For other reports on landmines in Cambodia, see Landmine Monitor at <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2008/countries/cambodia.php>.

Conclusion

After the liberation of Phnom Penh in January 1979, Cambodians in different regions experienced different fates. While some were able to return to their old villages after a few months, others continued to suffer at the hands of the retreating Khmer Rouge. While some preferred to travel en masse to their old residence, others preferred or were forced to seek refuge along the Thai border. The year 1979 was a difficult period for everyone, given the shortages of food in the country thanks to the destruction under Democratic Kampuchea and the disruption of rice planting owing to the Vietnamese invasion. Nonetheless, having lived through the Khmer Rouge brutalities, many people were grateful for their survival and the return of basic rights under the new regime. Many struggled hard to reconstruct their lives, enduring physical and emotional troubles that had robbed virtually everything from them. To the PRK's credit, despite all the hardships, it was under its rule that rural life slowly returned to something near the normalcy of pre-war Cambodia.

The PRK's early attempt to direct the rural population toward socialism through the collectivization of labor force and resources through the *krom samaki* were only successful to the extent that they served as welfare mechanisms to support a shattered society composed of many widows, orphans and childless elders. People's lack of interest in, or even abhorrence of socialism, which created jealousy among people, the lack of

facilities, as well as corruption in the government's resource distribution ultimately resulted in the failure of the PRK's collectivization and other efforts toward socialism.

By 1985, the food situation had improved remarkably. For some people, however, the tragedy was not over. The fact that the Khmer Rouge was still a threat to national security meant that national defense was imperative. Given the lack of volunteers, the PRK resorted to coercive military conscription and the adoption of corvée labor to implement the widely unpopular K5 Plan. As one of my informants put it, "Unfortunately, some people who had been liberated were later sent to die." Although the PRK had created a self-sustaining strategy which could deter the Khmer Rouge threat after the Vietnamese withdrawal in September 1989, the high cost of human lives in military conscription and especially the K5 Plan greatly undermined the popularity of this already-feared government.

CONCLUSION: THE PRK AND CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIA

Every year on 7th January the Cambodian media is flooded with comments by government officials and opposition figures respectively lauding the anniversary of liberation from Khmer Rouge rule or condemning it as the anniversary of foreign occupation. Ordinary Cambodians offer their different views on the radio, while Cambodian bloggers and internet users around the globe fervently debate this issue online. Thirty years after the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea, people still disagree over whether to describe the Vietnamese military takeover of Cambodia as a “liberation” or an “invasion.” Instead of fading away, the debate is actually getting more heated than ever.

This thesis was born out of an attempt to be part of this debate. Yet it also tries to move beyond the simplified political and rhetorical dichotomy of “liberation” vs. “invasion” by exploring the different aspects of Cambodian civilian lives in different regions of Cambodia during the ten-year rule of the Vietnamese-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea 1979 - 1989. As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, the answer to the question “liberation” or “invasion” is not a quick and simple one, if indeed there can be any single answer to this question.

Had it been the US or France who was the invader of Democratic Kampuchea in late 1978 and toppled the Khmer Rouge rule, interpretations of the event would have been

quite different. When Vietnam was unable to reach a diplomatic solution with the Khmer Rouge following Cambodia-Vietnam border clashes and finally decided to invade Cambodia under the cover of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, it only confirmed Khmer nationalists of the “long-term ambition” of communist Vietnam to absorb Cambodia into what was once French Indochina, now to be ruled by Vietnam. A common question is why Vietnam did not simply leave Cambodia after the “liberation” in 1979? It should be recalled that without the presence of the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, the return of the Khmer Rouge was very likely. Understandably, Vietnam could not have accepted an international solution when China and the United States insisted on the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in the negotiations. Apart from their symbolic alliance, even the non-communist factions of the resistance complained of attacks of the much stronger Khmer Rouge army on their forces. Given global Cold War politics during the 1980s, the idea of forming an international peace-keeping force in Cambodia was also not practical. As a result, Cambodia was trapped by its own geopolitical position embedded in larger regional and international conflicts. Cambodian civilians had to endure another civil war as they tried to return to normal lives in a country that had been torn apart since 1970 and reached rock bottom during the Khmer Rouge period.

For the resistance movements during the 1980s, the current opposition parties, and critics of the PRK, accepting that Vietnam had liberated Cambodia is something very unpatriotic, perhaps even treasonous. In the early stage of the Vietnamese occupation, the

resistance forces tried their very best to propagandize it as simply evil, sometimes relying on rumors and distortion of the reality of what was actually happening in Cambodia. For instance, the accusation that Cambodia was undergoing “Vietnamization” was largely untrue, despite the fact that the country was under political supervision from Vietnam. Yet, when the PRK failed to recruit volunteers to join the army to counter the resistance forces, it resorted to forceful conscription – a necessary yet unpopular strategy that civilian Cambodians tried hard to avoid. The adoption of the K5 Plan, which cost tens of thousands of civilian lives, only proved to the PRK’s critics that it was after all an oppressive foreign-occupied socialist regime rather than the liberator of the Cambodian people. The questionable popularity of the PRK was severely undermined as a result.

For the current government under the ruling CPP, January 7, 1979 has been consistently referred to as the “liberation” and “second birthday” of all the Cambodian people. To their credit, without the PRK and the support of Vietnam, it is hard to imagine what might 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. As one Cambodian civil servant explained it in an interview to a writer on Cambodian affairs, 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."⁶⁰ 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. 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 acknowledged, has on average, improved remarkably.⁶¹

Nonetheless, 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. Secondly, the "liberation" (and "development") discourses failed to acknowledge the disastrous policies

⁶⁰ Quoted in John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 216.

⁶¹ *Phnom Penh Post*. "A Personal Grasp of Poverty." <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/National-news/A-personal-grasp-of-poverty.html>. Accessed April 3, 2009.

of the state as in the case of the K5 Plan. Furthermore, by elevating themselves as the saviors of the country, the former Khmer Rouge CPP leaders not only neglected the roles of other revolutionaries in the PRK (such as Pen Sovann, who had been jailed by Vietnam for his independent-minded tendency), but more importantly the hundreds of millions of US dollars' worth of aid granted by international donors every year, that partially flowed into the hands of corrupt officials. In fact, the availability of wealth after the opening of the country entailed widening social and economic gaps between the haves and have-nots, the absence of which many ordinary Cambodians witnessed under the PRK. Similarly, under the PRK, people also recalled the absence of social vices such as widespread corruption, youth gangs, armed robberies, harmful drugs, prostitution, and AIDS etc., which are problems of today's Cambodia. In this sense, it is rather ironic that while the PRK obviously failed in its attempt to move Cambodia toward socialism with its revolutionary slogans and propaganda simply because Cambodians had had enough under the Khmer Rouge, it seems as if in retrospect it did not fail entirely in the eyes of the people.

Given all these complexities, how can one then analyze the role of the PRK? Perhaps the answer to this question is to look at an analogy given by one of my informants: "The PRK is like a parent who adopted a dying child. But should we be grateful to a parent who raised but also abused the child?"⁶² The extent to which the PRK could be perceived as "abusing" its subjects varied from region to region, or even perhaps from person to person. On average, an urban settler could have at least limited access to more services

⁶² Informal conversation with M. C., April 15, 2009.

available in the cities, including health care, education, and benefits from the presence of the market economy and better security. Peasants, on the other hand, did not have such privileges, and were more subject to such state measures as military conscription and the labor *corvée*, which unfortunately resulted in tens of thousands of deaths. (This is not to say that an urban dweller is necessarily better off than a peasant, for it was also likely that a peasant with good harvest had more to eat than a poor city person.) In other words, for those who were not interfered with much by the state, the PRK could be viewed as actually pragmatic, if not benign. For those who either suffered at the hands of state violence or were directly caught up in the civil war, life under the PRK was simply another tragic period in Cambodian history.

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.

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For this research, I selected people from various regions and backgrounds to reflect the differences of their life experiences under the PRK. That was not too difficult given the fact that most of my relatives had lived in different regions in Cambodia during the 1980s. My maternal aunt and grandmother (a nurse and a local pharmacist, respectively), were from Battambang province in western Cambodia. My uncle lived in Phnom Penh and worked as a policeman. My parents at the time lived in Kompong Chhnang province, and most of my relatives from my father's side whom I interviewed, including two farmers, one soldier, and one state official, were also from there. I also had a chance to interview two housemaids at my home in Cambodia, both of whom were farmers back in the 1980s. One of them was from the northwestern part of Cambodia, while the other was from the eastern part. In addition, I approached some of my high school teachers for the interviews. In two cases, I interviewed relatives of my friends from high school. In total, I interviewed fourteen people (7 male and 7 female): 2 teachers; 1 state official; 2 policemen; 1 nurse; 1 soldier; 2 students; 4 farmers; and 1 merchant. Back in the 1980s, most of them were in their 20s or early 30s, except my grandmother who was already 42 years old in 1979. There were a few young teenagers who were students in those days. In addition to these formal interviews, I also had informal conversations with people, including Cambodian refugees in the US, whenever chances allowed. Family anecdotes were sometimes useful for my data as well.

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