

By David Chandler

Cambodia's Historical Legacy

Cambodia's past, with its mixture of grandeur, obscurity and horror, weighs on its people and on those who study it with peculiar force. Two stretches of Cambodia's history in particular have tended to hold fascination and have shaped the country's present-day politics. These are the medieval era known in the West as 'Angkor' and the late 1970s when Cambodia was ruled by the murderous Khmer Rouge.

Contrasting images

Angkor

Between the ninth and the 15th centuries AD, a Hindu-Buddhist, Khmer-speaking kingdom centred in Cambodia's northwest was a powerful presence in Southeast Asia, extending its influence over much of present-day Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Hundreds of elegant stone and brick temples, over 1,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer and a wealth of mesmerisingly beautiful sculpture testify to the magnificence and complexity of the kingdom, the richness of its art and the sometimes awesome power of its rulers.

After Angkor was abandoned in the 15th century following a series of attacks from the west, Cambodia's centre of gravity shifted south-

wards to the vicinity of Phnom Penh. But Angkor lingered on in popular mythology. Several of the temples came to be associated with ancestral spirits and a few became Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Inscriptions could no longer be read, however, and the names of Angkorean kings, their demands on ordinary people and the cruelty of the Angkorean wars were forgotten. Over the next four centuries, the power of the Angkorean era was gradually watered down.

When Cambodia, like Vietnam and Laos, became part of French Indochina in the late 19th century, French scholars 'discovered' Angkor. Deciphering its inscriptions, they named its Angkorean kings, supervised the restoration of its major temples and established the sequence of Cambodian art. To their protégés, the Khmer, the French presented evidence of grandiose autonomy that contrasted sharply with the country's diminished size and dependent status. The Angkorean heritage has been used ever since by Cambodian nationalists to differentiate Cambodia from its neighbours and to enhance its own identity. An image of Angkor has appeared on every Cambodian flag — of which there have been five — since the 1940s.

Fisherman in front of the Bayon Temple, Angkor

Source: Mak Remissa



The Khmer Rouge

The second period of Cambodian history that springs to mind is uglier and more recent. In April 1975, following 90 years of French 'protection' and 22 years of independence, an indigenous communist movement known in the West as the 'Khmer Rouge' seized power in Cambodia. Inspired by Mao's China, it stamped its utopian brand of socialism onto a population devastated by five years of foreign invasions, aerial bombardment and civil war. Until January 1979, when the regime was swept from power by a Vietnamese invasion, Cambodia called itself Democratic Kampuchea. It was ruled by a shadowy Communist Party led by a deceptively soft-spoken former teacher named Saloth Sar who hid behind the pseudonym 'Pol Pot'.

The so-called Party Centre which ruled Democratic Kampuchea consisted of Pol Pot and a handful of colleagues who believed that they had 'grasped the wheel of history', as they put it. Filled with revolutionary zeal they decided to cut off Cambodia from the rest of the world. They tried to revive its past grandeur and forestall what they saw as the corrupting influences of modernity by drawing on the perceived limitless revolutionary

empowerment of its people. Their goal was to achieve socialism faster and more thoroughly than it had been achieved anywhere else.

The human costs of this experiment were enormous, and are still being paid by survivors of the regime. Within a week of the Khmer Rouge 'liberation' of Phnom Penh in April 1975, its population was driven into the countryside *en masse* to begin establishing a collectivised agricultural system. Thousands of people died on the way. Within a month, towns, private property, markets and money were abandoned; law-courts, government offices and schools were closed and religious practices were forbidden. As everyone set to work under the supervision of revolutionary soldiers, Democratic Kampuchea became a prison farm. Pol Pot and his colleagues, who believed that secrecy had played an important role in their victory, only revealed their identity to the world in October 1977 when forced to do so by their Chinese patrons.

Conditions in Democratic Kampuchea varied from time to time and from place to place, but were generally harsher than most Cambodians had ever known. The Khmer Rouge had systematically set out to obliterate Cambodia's

Buddhist culture, its family-based system of social organisation and its educated classes. Between April 1975 and January 1979 perhaps as many as 1.5 million Cambodians died from malnutrition, overwork and disease. At least 200,000 others were executed without trial as 'class enemies'.

It was only during the 1980s that the full horrors of the Khmer Rouge period became known to the outside world. The Khmer Rouge had presided over the deaths of roughly one in five of Cambodia's inhabitants, pursuing what the French writer Jean Lacouture has called a policy of 'auto-genocide', which left deep scars on its survivors. What had happened in Democratic Kampuchea also altered people's views of Cambodian history. This era provided a striking contrast to the prevailing, sentimental view of Cambodians as peace-loving, non-violent people, more sinned against than sinning, whose culture reflected the beauty of Angkorean art without the passion and destructiveness of Angkorean politics. The Khmer Rouge period, in other words, exposed an inherent ferocity in Cambodian politics that had been either neutralised by foreign 'protection' or played down in the historical record written to favour those in power.

For many people, therefore, the word 'Cambodia' conjures up images of the medieval temples of Angkor — which seem so peaceful — or the killing fields of the 1970s, or both. At first glance, it is difficult to establish any continuity between these two epochs or to see beyond these two clichés. The intervening centuries are poorly documented and lack comparable emotional force. Nonetheless, to understand the background to present-day Cambodian politics, it is helpful to examine the more obscure years between 1400 and 1975 when times of prosperity and national self-confidence alternated with periods of subservience to outside powers. Was Cambodia a great nation treated unjustly by larger, inferior powers, or was it a weak state unable or unwilling to resist the inevitable dominance of its more advanced and more ambitious neighbours?

The roots of vulnerability

Expansionist neighbours

One key to understanding Cambodian history and the policies of its leaders lies in the country's physical geography and its relations with Thailand and Vietnam. In the Angkorean period, Cambodia owed much of its greatness to its ability to subjugate peoples immediately to the west. The Mekong Delta to the south-east, which was populated by Khmer-speaking people, had not yet come under the influence of the Vietnamese empire. Like Angkor itself, these areas were easily accessible to armies, immigrants and traders, with no natural barriers to protect them. As its neighbours became more populous and ambitious after 1400, the territory and population under the control of Cambodia's kings shrank markedly.

Cambodia was often invaded by Thai or Vietnamese armies which, in turn, would be expelled by forces assembled by the other neighbour. This destructive process reached a climax in the mid-19th century when the kingdom was on the brink of disappearing. It was at this point, with its western half falling under the patronage of Thailand and the land east of the Mekong coming under Vietnamese control, that the French offered the Cambodian King their protection.

During the French colonial era, Thai influence over Cambodia declined, but hundreds of Vietnamese civil servants worked in Cambodia and thousands of Vietnamese settlers came to live there. Many Cambodians and, in particular, nationalist members of the minuscule élite, were wary of the Vietnamese and fearful of their long-term intentions. This animosity persisted after independence and most markedly among the Khmer Rouge. Anti-Vietnamese feeling continues to smoulder today among many Cambodians both inside the country and abroad. Despite repeated Thai depredations throughout Cambodian history, however, anti-Thai feelings among the population have been rare.

Social volatility

Another key to recent Cambodian politics is the nature of power and social relations in post-Angkorean, pre-revolutionary times. Chronicle histories, law codes, travellers' accounts and normative poetry from the period suggest that the King's power was in theory absolute. The word for 'govern', or 'reign' also meant 'to consume'. There was almost no corresponding notion, which is familiar in the West, China and Vietnam, of the King acting as the 'servant' of the people. Absolute power flowed downwards onto a powerless population. In practice, however, the King presided over a fractious family, rivalrous factions at court, ambitious officials with regional power-bases and a cowed but scattered rural population that was hard to reach.

Society, also, was rigidly structured in theory, but highly volatile in practice. The word 'society' was, in fact, not introduced into the Cambodian vocabulary until the 20th century. Instead, the population was seen as a collection of subjects subservient to the King, who in theory owned all of the land. The population was traditionally divided into those who gave orders (*neak prao*) and those who received them (*neak bomrao*), between those who exploited others and those who paid homage; as the Cambodians graphically put it, between the few who 'possessed' goods and power (*neak mean*) and the much larger component of the population who were deprived (*neak kro*). Loyalty was not a two-way street.

The volatility of post-Angkorean patterns of social relations was in some ways reinforced by Cambodia's dominant belief system, Theravada Buddhism. While it preached the avoidance of violence, it also awarded merit to those in high positions. There were, however, neither legal restraints on people holding power nor peaceful methods to replace them. Concepts of primogeniture or a loyal opposition did not exist. When a King died struggles for succession were often fierce and losers were routinely killed. Because Cambodia was regularly prey to foreign invasions, often encouraged by factions at the court seeking

foreign help, supposedly absolute rulers were often fearful and forced to negotiate their positions with their rivals or foreign powers.

During the French colonial period the King's powers were curtailed, though the institution of royalty remained powerful and deferential attitudes in the population at large remained in place. While political activity was forbidden by the French, little was done to diminish the hierarchical nature of Cambodian society or to introduce such concepts as accountability or a respect for human rights. Dependency was the order of the day. French rule, like monarchic rule in earlier times, was unquestioned. At the same time, the French brought much needed peace and security to Cambodia. The rural population flourished and expanded and a small, educated elite was trained to help the French govern their protectorate. With hindsight it could be argued that the French did less harm to Cambodian society than most post-colonial administrations.

Personalised rule

Because Cambodia's kings — like those in Laos but unlike those in Vietnam — accepted French protection, resistance to the French in Cambodia was rare. Cambodian nationalism, which was slow to develop, was not particularly anti-French. When Cambodia gained independence in 1953, its young King, Norodom Sihanouk, who had been crowned by the French in 1941, embarked on a political career that took advantage of the ingrained habits of deference among the people (whom he called his 'children') and reflected his own considerable skills at subduing his political opponents.

Sihanouk claimed to have won independence almost single-handedly, ignoring the role played by the Vietnamese-led communist resistance. In 1955, in the face of the growing threat to his grip on power posed by Cambodia's nascent democratic parties, he abdicated, started a national political movement, and swept to power as an 'ordinary citizen'. Under various titles, he ruled the country almost single-handedly. Like previous Cambodian rulers Sihanouk interpreted opposition to his

The makings of revolution

Cambodia's fledgling post-World War II political movements comprised both right- and left-wing tendencies, and covered the gamut of pro- and anti-monarchist sentiments. Despite the fact that King Sihanouk allowed elections to be held, he remained intolerant of dissent. This radicalised many young Khmers and, as the strength of the leading Democratic Party waned in the early 1950s, a more virulent left-wing opposition began to emerge.

The Cambodian communist party, formed in 1951, linked its opposition to Sihanouk with the anti-French nationalist movement. The Communists saw independence as but one stage in their revolution to completely transform Cambodian society. They had both a clandestine and a legitimate face and initially remained heavily dependent on the Vietnamese communists for support. When Sihanouk cracked down on the left-wing in 1963, three Phnom Penh teachers — Pol Pot, Son Sen and Ieng Sary — the core of the future Khmer Rouge leadership, fled to the jungle.

Even as the expanding Vietnam War undermined Sihanouk's power and the Cambodian economy, the Khmer communists were forced to delay the official launch of their armed struggle. The North Vietnamese refused to provide adequate support to their Khmer counterparts until the Americans had been driven out of Indochina. Moreover, the Vietnamese communists were eager to maintain good relations with Sihanouk who had secretly allied himself with Vietnam in 1966 in a desperate bid to avoid being drawn into the war.

Following Sihanouk's overthrow in 1970, the pro-American regime which replaced him steadily crumbled and Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer communists on 17 April 1975. This came two weeks before the communist victory in Saigon and ushered in a new phase of the Cambodian revolution without any connection to the one in Vietnam.

rule as treason. Fawning associates compared him favourably to the monarchs of Angkor. In the Sihanouk era, no countervailing institutions, such as an independent judiciary or an analytical press, were allowed to develop. His official ideology, a ramshackle confection called 'Buddhist socialism', effectively institutionalised the status quo.

In foreign affairs, Sihanouk wisely opted for a neutralist position. His greatest contribution was to keep Cambodia out of the Vietnam War which engulfed the country after his overthrow in 1970 in a pro-American coup. This contribution, however, needs to be balanced against his failure to allow political debate or suppress corruption, and his tendency to monopolise political life. Sihanouk allowed himself to be compared to Angkorean kings and repeatedly stressed Cambodia's past grandeur. In so doing he also encouraged some Cambodians, including the Khmer Rouge, to assume that they could — by virtue of their glorious Angkorean past — overwhelm the vast forces arrayed against them.

Prisoners of the past

Descent into chaos

Delusions of grandeur also plagued the American-backed regime that took office in 1970 under General Lon Nol. Encouraged by a United States increasingly involved in Indochina, the new regime quickly launched a holy war against the Vietnamese 'unbelievers' (communists) then sheltering in eastern Cambodia. But Lon Nol's holy war was unwinnable from the start. Despite continuing US military assistance and massive bombing of the Cambodian countryside, the Vietnamese armies, much better-equipped and trained, soon neutralised his forces. The indigenous Khmer Rouge, until then a marginal group, flourished and expanded until they were strong enough to seize power in April 1975.

The same fondness for absolute power that had characterised every Cambodian regime in the past reached grandiose proportions under the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot and his colleagues believed that they could lead the swiftest and

most thorough socialist revolution in history. Like many previous rulers, they paid little attention to the human costs involved and equated debate with treason. Like Lon Nol, they also embarked on a holy war against Vietnam, counting as he had done on open-ended foreign patronage — from the United States in Lon Nol's case, from China in the case of Democratic Kampuchea. Like Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge leaders were also inspired by Angkor. 'If our people can build Angkor,' Pol Pot declared on one occasion, 'they can do anything'.

Resenting the patronage of the Vietnamese communists and their policy of subordinating the Cambodian revolution to their own, the Khmer Rouge stepped up attacks on its former ally in 1977. In December 1978, Vietnamese forces launched a devastating attack on Cambodia. Within a month, the Khmer Rouge had been driven into exile in Thailand and a pro-Vietnamese regime took its place, protected by over 200,000 Vietnamese troops.

Recovery impeded

The government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) that took power in January 1979 differed from its predecessors. Headed by former Khmer Rouge officials, who had defected to Vietnam some years earlier, it understandably declined to stress Cambodian grandeur at the expense of Vietnamese intentions and took a more realistic view of power relations between the two countries. Under close Vietnamese supervision, Cambodia struggled to its feet in the 1980s though it remained isolated from global capitalism. Opportunities for corruption (or economic development for that matter) were few. Because of the welcome contrast the regime presented to the Khmer Rouge, few observers paid much attention to its systematic suppression of dissent and its monopoly of information.

Cambodia suffered inordinately in the closing stages of the Cold War because of the backing it enjoyed from Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The United States and its allies isolated Cambodia by cutting all economic and political ties. Using the armed forces mustered by the three resistance factions (Khmer Rouge, KPLNF and FUNC-

Isolation and destabilisation

Throughout the 1980s, the Cambodian government was deprived of all humanitarian and development assistance by the United Nations. Moreover, Pol Pot's delegation was allowed to hold the country's seat at the UN, the only government in exile to do so. Because of the Khmer Rouge's horrendous record, however, the delegation officially represented the so-called Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). This comprised the two non-communist factions — the royalist FUNCINPEC founded by King Sihanouk and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPLNF) — and the Khmer Rouge, the most powerful of the three.

The tripartite 'resistance' shared a hatred for Vietnam and a dependence on foreign support. This was provided through their sanctuaries in the huge refugee camps along the Thai border, home to some 350,000 Cambodians and the source of the factions' fighters. With relations between the superpowers warming in the early 1980s, China was actively encouraged by the US to arm the Khmer Rouge. The CIA itself, with the support of the Thai army, Singapore and various European countries, ensured food relief and military assistance reached all three armed factions. When the US Congress clamped down on the CIA's activities in 1986, they continued to provide assistance covertly and the British were also prevailed upon to provide the factions with military training.

With the tripartite resistance benefiting from the credibility of an international relief operation, the dividing line between humanitarian activity and war in Cambodia became very confused. Despite this massive assistance, the resistance factions never succeeded in gaining more than a small foothold on Cambodian territory. However, the US campaign to destabilise Cambodia and, by extension, Vietnam — the ultimate target of its aggression — was largely successful. With this broader objective in mind, the terrible price being paid by Cambodia's people, together with the fact that the West was actively supporting the perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge genocide, could be conveniently overlooked.

INPEC) on the Cambodia-Thai border, the United States and its allies conducted a proxy war against Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The war dragged on through the 1980s, raising hopes among exiled Cambodians that the Vietnamese-sponsored government in Phnom Penh would at some stage collapse or be overthrown.

These hopes proved illusory, and the main victims of the anti-Vietnamese strategy were Cambodia's own people. In effect they were punished for having been invaded by Vietnam (the US's enemy) and, at another level, for having been saved from Pol Pot (Vietnam's enemy). The end of the Cold War sharply diminished the interest of foreign powers in the conflict and led to the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989 as support from their Soviet patrons was reduced. Negotiations to solve the Cambodian problem nonetheless languished because of the severe intransigence among the Khmer factions and the difficulties of achieving a settlement acceptable to the major powers.

Young member of the non-communist resistance, Oddar Meanchey province, 1990



Source: Roland Eng

Inklings of peace

The Paris peace accords of 1991 represented an honourable, if belated, effort by Cambodia's patrons to distance themselves from their unruly clients and lay the groundwork for a lasting peace. Hun Sen, the young Prime Minister of the 'State of Cambodia' regime (SoC — successor to the PRK), seemed to offer a pleasing contrast to his predecessors in the meetings and conferences that preceded the 1991 settlement. Unlike Sihanouk, Lon Nol and Pol Pot, Hun Sen seemed to be open to new ideas and eager to bring Cambodia into the wider world. United Nations-sponsored elections resulted in the formation of a government of 'national reconciliation' in 1993 between Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen. It seemed as if Cambodian politics — while still far from open — were emerging from the shadows and practices of the past.

Although the Paris agreements were sweetened with promises of extensive foreign assistance, the powers drafting the accords also looked forward to a time when Cambodians would rejoin a wider world and deal with their own affairs. However cynical or well-intentioned these efforts may have been, what happened over the next few years, as David Ashley's article makes clear (see page 20), was disillusioning to everyone. The hope that the authoritarian style of Cambodian politics might be altered faded rapidly as the animosity between old enemies returned to earlier levels. With Prince Ranariddh's overthrow in July 1997, Hun Sen has again come to resemble a more traditional and intolerant leader. Indifferent to constitutional constraints and concerned with stifling dissent, this brings him into line with every recent Cambodian ruler.

Cambodian politics have remained in many ways a prisoner of a past in which effective or ineffective despots have seen themselves as born to rule. The Cambodian people, who deserve a better fate, are still being treated as commodities to be commanded, outmanoeuvred and 'consumed'. ■

The struggle for a settlement

From the beginning, the Paris agreements were worked out by foreign powers who exercised tight control over the factions and the form the final settlement would take. This was because, on the one hand, the factions refused to cooperate among themselves, and on the other the superpowers sought a solution which would officialise their withdrawal from the conflict on terms they found acceptable. For the Americans this required a solution which would not give any kind of victory to Vietnam even if this meant inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in a final settlement.

A 'comprehensive' solution

At a December 1987 meeting in France between Prince Sihanouk and Hun Sen, which marked the beginning of the peace process, the possibility of a power-sharing arrangement between the two non-communist factions — FUNCINPEC and the KPLNF — and the SoC regime was discussed. This would have ended the war, but was rejected by the US and China on the grounds that it excluded the Khmer Rouge and legitimised the Vietnamese-backed regime already in power. The inclusion of all four factions henceforth became the pre-requisite for a comprehensive settlement of the conflict acceptable to the superpowers; it would ironically often be argued that the Khmer Rouge were too 'militarily powerful' to be left out.

Future negotiations would therefore focus on an overall timeframe for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia; demobilisation of the factions' armies; measures to prevent further gross abuses of human rights such as had occurred under the Khmer Rouge; and the organisation of elections, which were key to bringing about an 'internationally-recognised' government. Negotiations would nonetheless constantly founder on the SoC's insistence that a Vietnamese withdrawal be linked to guarantees of a non-return to power of the Khmer Rouge. Though this was simply interpreted as political manoeuvring on the part of SoC to stall the peace process, it raised a delicate issue — rarely broached by the international community — concerning the fact that the peace process would legitimise the Khmer Rouge.

The factions made few concessions at their first face-to-face talks in Jakarta, Indonesia in July 1988 and February 1989, though the role of an international control mechanism for supervising implementation of a future agreement was discussed. In August 1989, 18 countries and the four factions attended the 'Paris Conference on

Cambodia' where the US, China and ASEAN pressed for a 'quadrupartite' government to be formed as a solution to the conflict. This would not only require Hun Sen to dissolve his government, but give 25% of power to the Khmer Rouge, a condition he found unacceptable.

International guarantees

Internationally-supervised elections were seen as the way forward, requiring that viable administrative arrangements be made for the transition period leading up to them. Drawing upon an Australian proposal to enhance the role of the UN in the process, a framework for a future settlement was proposed by the permanent five members of the Security Council in August 1990. The UN welcomed this initiative, though stressed it would need a well-defined and practicable mandate, backed by adequate resources, if it were to implement an eventual peace agreement.

In September, the Cambodian parties accepted the framework and in April 1991 announced their first ceasefire in 12 years. In mid-June 1991, the factions made this ceasefire 'permanent' and announced a halt to receiving outside military assistance. Most of the outstanding difficulties were ironed out at an August meeting in Pattaya, Thailand, which opened the way to the signing of the final agreement on October 23 at the second Paris Conference on Cambodia. This act marked the beginning of the transitional period in Cambodia, which would lead to the formation of a new Cambodian government following elections, to be overseen by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

Compromises all round

There were reasons for optimism at this time. With the end of the Cold War, all four factions had been deprived of external military backing, were weary of war and in need of international legitimacy. At the same time, however, the Paris agreements were the product of numerous compromises focusing on the interests of each of the Cambodian factions as well as the superpowers, which did not bode well for its implementation.

The bottom-line for each of the Khmer factions, as the next article underlines, was that the peace would not be considered a 'just' peace unless they each won a share of the power. Hence, each stood to potentially gain from signing the agreements, though not necessarily from respecting its provisions. But the positions of the Khmer Rouge and Hun Sen's government, in particular, were irreconcilable. ■