

## **Between the Lines of the Pol Pot Regime**

by Cory Campbell

It was Year Zero, marked by “the glorious victory of April seventeenth and extraordinary revolution of Kampuchea.”<sup>1</sup> Society was to be cleansed of its past, starting over with a rejuvenated clean slate. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge had successfully captured the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh on this date in 1975, overthrowing the government and installing their own in what they now called Democratic Kampuchea. The revolution proved to be anything but “glorious” as the Pol Pot regime killed an estimated 1.7 million people during the span of its four year reign, wiping out almost a quarter of the population.<sup>2</sup> Within a year of the revolution, the Kampuchean Revolutionary Army issued the first draft of their constitution, laying out the foundations of law and structure for the new government. In this constitution, the writers intentionally included statements regarding human rights that enabled the government to legally justify its atrocities.

Pol Pot knew what he was doing all along, playing quite the contrary to his later claims of ignorance regarding the killings and suffering.<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea declared freedom of religion in the state, with the exception of any form of worship “detrimental” to the party. Without clearly defining what classifies a religion as being “detrimental”, Pol Pot was able to use this constitutional clause to justify the purge of religions such as Buddhism and Islam.<sup>4</sup> A constitution advocating a “policy of independence, peace,

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<sup>1</sup> François Ponchaud, Cambodia: Year Zero (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Luftglass, “Crossroads of Cambodia: The United Nation’s Responsibility to Withdraw Involvement from the Establishment of a Cambodian Tribunal to Prosecute the Khmer Rouge,” Virginia Law Review, 90/3 (May 2004): 895.

<sup>3</sup> Pol Pot, interview by Nate Thayer, Anlong Veng, Cambodia, June 19, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Becker, When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 191, 251.

neutrality, and non-alignment...opposed to all forms of outside interference in its internal affairs” sounds like a very appealing foreign policy. However, this statement provided grounds for the Khmer Rouge to make excuses for the killing of all people showing a foreign or “imperialistic” influence. As a result, Pol Pot organized a list of demographics that were to be wiped out.<sup>5</sup> While declaring that “all workers are the masters of their factories” in pursuit of a “constantly improving material, spiritual, and cultural life”, the constitution also states that “there is absolutely no unemployment in Democratic Kampuchea.” This statement was a false manifesto of human rights based on the actions that unraveled within Khmer Rouge interpretations. Pol Pot forced labor upon every citizen after authorizing a complete evacuation of Phnom Penh.<sup>6</sup> This was the beginning of unbearable living conditions for the Cambodian people due to mandatory slave-like labor and stern treatment. The 1975 Khmer Rouge revolution rang in an era of change in Cambodia—one of horror, brutality, and dehumanization.

To an outsider, Democratic Kampuchea on the surface appeared to be a tolerant place, longing for the Utopian society that was proclaimed in the constitution. But if examined closely, the constitution foreshadowed the abolition of many freedoms. Article 20 reads: “Every citizen of Kampuchea has the right to worship according to any religion and the right not to worship according to any religion. Reactionary religions which are detrimental to Democratic Kampuchea and Kampuchean people are absolutely forbidden.” There is a stark contrast between both sentences. While the first one ensures the freedom to worship any religion, the second sentence negates this by saying that if a religion is “reactionary” it is not allowed. The constitution leaves the word “reactionary” open-ended and vague since its definition is not

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Kiernan, The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79 (New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1996), 49-50.

clarified. Evidently, Pol Pot's actions show that he viewed any religion practiced in Cambodia to be "reactionary" and "detrimental to Democratic Kampuchea".

The religion most sought after to abolish was Buddhism, which is quite ironic because Pol Pot himself spent three years in a Buddhist monastery during his schooling in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is the very reason that inspired Pol Pot to view the Buddhist monks as a "detrimental" class. His first-hand experience led him to see that their "danger" did not come through militancy, but intellect. In fact, Pol Pot himself said that "monks...were to be disbanded, put aside as a 'special class', the most important to fight."<sup>8</sup> Shortly following the overthrow of the Lon Nol regime, one of the eight points on Pol Pot's urgent agenda was to "defrock all Buddhist monks and put them to work growing rice."<sup>9</sup> The top clergy of the Buddhist community were murdered immediately by the Khmer Rouge, and the monks put to "growing rice" were those who obliged in forfeiting their robes.<sup>10</sup> Very few of the monks in Cambodia followed the forced orders of the Khmer Rouge, however, and 90 to 95 percent of the Buddhist monks disappeared as a result.<sup>11</sup> The Pol Pot regime and Buddhism is an example of an absolute change in policy from the rebellion period to the time of power. Initially, the Khmer Rouge coexisted with the monks with mutual respect and protection. Monks held ceremonial positions and practiced religion freely without intervention. "With victory, the Khmer Rouge immediately attacked the Buddhist clergy, pagodas...and schools....The nearly 3,000 pagodas in the country were destroyed...(and) used as stables or granaries, prisons, and execution sites."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Short, Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Kiernan, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>10</sup> Becker, 254.

<sup>11</sup> Kiernan, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Becker, 254.

It is clear that Pol Pot knew he could use the Buddhists to his advantage while in pursuit of power, only to dispose of them when no longer needed.

Another religious group essentially cleansed during the reign of the Pol Pot regime was the Muslim Chams, who made up a small minority of Cambodia. “Just like normal Khmers”, the Cham people were forced to conform and disobey their religion by eating pork and disregarding various Islamic doctrines, otherwise they were killed.<sup>13</sup> Like other groups targeted by the Khmer Rouge, the thought process of the Chams was altered by imminent threat. The Muslim Chams, descendants of the Indochinese kingdom of Champa, have a different case than the Buddhists, however. Whereas the Buddhists were massacred because of their religious practices, the Chams were put down just as much for their ethnicity as their religion. They were easily singled out and were among “the earliest victims of a general policy aimed at the cultural, social and economic leveling of all Cambodians, regardless of race or creed.”<sup>14</sup> In Article 21 of the Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea, it is stated that the party is “opposed to all forms of outside interference in its internal affairs...whether military, political, cultural, social, diplomatic, or humanitarian.” The Muslim Chams are a prime example of Khmer Rouge interpretation regarding this statement. Furthermore, ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and Thai were some of the groups subject to a systematic elimination through execution and grueling forced labor simply due to their foreign presence.<sup>15</sup> This is the element of Pol Pot’s actions that show that he committed genocide, or at least attempted to.

In his quest to purify the country by starting clean slate and eradicating any outside influence through isolation, Pol Pot was on a mission to get rid of anyone considered an intellectual. These people of above-average knowledge and specialized in their fields of work

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<sup>13</sup> Kiernan, 267.

<sup>14</sup> Short, 230.

were viewed to be dangerous counterrevolutionaries by the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot ordered the spread of propaganda regarding these people, classifying them as “agents of imperialism” and “total enemies of the people”.<sup>16</sup> As those suspected of being intellectuals were murdered by the masses immediately following the revolution, it became apparent to the Cambodian people who was being targeted for expulsion. There are some documentations in existence of Cambodian refugees who managed to escape to Thailand. One of these refugees noted that anybody “wearing eyeglasses (was) killed because the Khmer Rouge thought only intellectuals wore eyeglasses.”<sup>17</sup> It is hard to tell whether these witnesses of the atrocities committed under Pol Pot are telling exaggerated fables or the truth, but it is probable that this was not far from reality when one considers the mass executions according to demographical profiling.

As Pol Pot eliminated these “petty bourgeois intellectuals” whom he blamed for many of the problems that Democratic Kampuchea faced, he created more problems by eliminating the only people who were sufficient enough to fill certain professions (teachers, engineers, doctors).<sup>18</sup> These actions imply that Pol Pot valued advancement through hard labor over the development of skilled occupations. Pol Pot’s labor-based system relied on the attitude and pro-party spirit in order to achieve sufficient production, as opposed to specified personal skills. Consequently, there was an enormous void left open as famine and disease grew strong in Cambodia, resulting in massive casualties.<sup>19</sup> There was no one left to medically assist those who were dying from sickness.

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Laban Hinton, “A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide,” *American Ethnologist*, 25/3 (Aug. 1998): 370.

<sup>16</sup> EA Meng-Try, “Kampuchea: A Country Adrift,” *Population and Development Review*, 7/2 (June 1981): 211.

<sup>17</sup> Becker, 162.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 167, 221

<sup>19</sup> Michael Leifer, “Kampuchea 1979: From Dry Season to Dry Season,” *Asian Suvery*, 20/1 (Jan. 1980): 36.

Article 12 of the constitution states that “every citizen...enjoys full rights to a constantly improving material, spiritual, and cultural life.” To support this claim, the constitution “guarantee(s) a living” for everyone while making “all workers the masters of their factories”. Such statements make a thunderous appeal to people who struggle to maintain a living and support a family. By using the word “masters”, Cambodian people were given the impression that they would hold power in their labor. On the contrary, Khmer Rouge leaders also included in this article that “there is absolutely no unemployment in Democratic Kampuchea”, enabling them to force labor upon the people. At the Tuol Sleng compound (one of the work locations) “The Ten Security Regulations” were posted on one of the buildings. One regulation at this cite reads: “Do nothing, sit still, and wait for my orders. If there is no order, keep quiet. When I ask you to do something, you must do it right away without protesting.”<sup>20</sup> Workers had absolutely no power under the Khmer Rouge and seldom became “masters of their factories”.

When Pol Pot implemented the evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975, ordering his officials to tell the people that “the Americans are going to bomb the city”, the evacuees were marched directly into fields and factories, never to return home.<sup>21</sup> According to Suon Phal, who lived through this event and eventually escaped to Thailand, “(m)any people died on that march: the hospital patients who had been driven out, the women who gave birth on the road, the war casualties...along the way we saw many dead bodies scattered about everywhere.”<sup>22</sup> Once the people reached the work sites where they were essentially slaves, the tasks given to them were arduous and nearly impossible to complete due to lack of skilled labor. Alongside extremely harsh conditions and malnutrition, Pol Pot wanted the people to build “dams, canals, and

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<sup>20</sup> Boreth Ly, “Devastated Vision(s): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia,” *Art Journal*, 62/1 (Spring 2003): 72.

<sup>21</sup> Ponchaud, 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

dikes...with few tools and no technical experts guiding them.”<sup>23</sup> Any sign of weakness or the slightest form of disobedience to the guards meant automatic death, or even worse, time in one of the secret prisons such as the infamous S-21, where people were tortured and starved.<sup>24</sup>

Pol Pot’s regime will hopefully function in the future as a warning to all societies or countries seeking improvements. His reign as leader of the Khmer Rouge shows that a violation of human rights in exchange for strict uniformity reaps many negative consequences. When the Khmer Rouge erased the calendar back to “Year Zero” in 1975, human beings were subjugated to forced labor, ignorance, and the abandonment of their religion and culture. All this took place despite government written documents that implied otherwise, specifically the constitution. However, it is important to remember that the Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea was not completely hypocritical in accordance to the cruelty and abuse of human rights. As select statements were broadly formed, thereby enabling open-ended interpretations, Pol Pot was able to constitutionally justify his atrocities. In this sense, Pol Pot’s reign shows that threats to the lives and conditions of people can be recognized, even if they are apparent in written documents. As stated by Khmer Rouge survivor Thida Mam: “You have to pay attention to what your government does, even when you’re young. You have to know what is going on. A number of Cambodians didn’t know what was going on, and that is what got us hurt.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Becker, 219.

<sup>24</sup> “Inside Pol Pot’s Secret Prison,” History Undercover, VHS, produced by Greg Dehart (A&E Television Networks, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Elizondo Griest, “The Cambodian Holocaust: A Survivor Speaks Out,” <http://www.dithpran.org/survivor.htm> (accessed Dec. 12, 2007).

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***EDITOR'S NOTE: Cory Campbell is a 21 year old history major in his first semester at Cal State Long Beach. He spent three years prior to this at Cypress College. Cory wrote this paper for a Methodology of History course (HIST 301, Fall 2007). He is glad for the opportunity to learn about Cambodian history and hopes to help spread awareness about the events that took place under the Khmer Rouge.***

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