

## **The Political Construction of Narrative and Collective Memory in Cambodia**

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### **Abstract**

The Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia from 17 April 1975 to 6 January 1979 in what is known locally as the “Pol Pot era.” This personification of blame was carefully cultivated by the group that overthrew the Khmer Rouge, who were themselves former Khmer Rouge members, and who continue to rule the country in 2017 as the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). The two main elements of the preferred narrative of the CPP are: the horrors of the Khmer Rouge are solely attributable to a handful of evil leaders, and members of the CPP are saviours who liberated the country. This message has been built through a 1979 People’s Revolutionary Tribunal, children’s textbooks, museums, annual Days of Anger, and the currently operating UN hybrid court, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. More than three decades of government influence over the political narrative of the Khmer Rouge regime has shaped the country’s collective memory of that time.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, narrative, Khmer Rouge, United Nations

## Introduction

The Khmer Rouge period left behind a country littered with mass graves and a population scarred by violence and trauma. Nearly everyone who lived through the Khmer Rouge period considers themselves to be a victim of it, as do half of adult Cambodians born after the Khmer Rouge period.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I focus on the narrative that has been constructed around the Khmer Rouge regime. Outside of Cambodia, this period from 17 April 1975 to 6 January 1979 is known as “the Khmer Rouge period,” or sometimes by the regime name, “Democratic Kampuchea.” However, in the Khmer language it is far more common to hear this period referred to as *samay Pol Pot* (សម័យប៉ុលពត), the Pol Pot era, after the leader of the Khmer Rouge. This personification of blame is one element of the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period that I discuss in this paper. It has been more than thirty-five years since the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, and in that time the successor government has built a very specific narrative of the Khmer Rouge with two main features: the crimes of the regime are attributed to only the highest leaders, and the new authorities are portrayed as the saviours of the nation. Having first discussed the Khmer Rouge regime and its overthrow, I examine specific mechanisms the government has used to build this narrative, including the creation of a museum at a former torture centre, a trial of two Khmer Rouge leaders, incorporation in the education system, a historical research commission, and a day of memorialisation. The use of these mechanisms has ebbed and flowed over the last thirty-five years but cumulatively they have built Cambodia’s collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period.

## The Khmer Rouge Regime

The Khmer Rouge, or, more formally, the Communist Party of Kampuchea, sought to completely transform society in accordance with Marxist and Maoist principles. When Khmer Rouge soldiers took control of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, they forcibly evacuated the capital along with other urban areas. Life became increasingly collectivised over the course of the regime. Money was abolished, schools were closed,

monks were forced to disrobe, Buddhist *wats* were used as storage sheds, western medicine was rejected, and the family was no longer considered to be the basic unit of society. There were long days of manual labour and impossibly high agricultural targets. Deaths from malnutrition and exhaustion were widespread.

The regime singled out intellectuals as a particular threat to the type of society it was trying to create. With the exception of the top leaders, many of whom had received a foreign higher education, people had to hide their previous education or employment as well as skills such as the ability to speak a foreign language.<sup>2</sup> Ethnic minorities in Cambodia were also targeted. Almost all people with a Vietnamese background were either killed or expelled.<sup>3</sup> Cham Muslims were disproportionately targeted, and in some cases forced into actions, such as eating pork, which went against their religious beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

The regime was also extremely paranoid and brutal. The smallest acts of scrounging for food could result in death, and there was a nation-wide network of prisons where torture was commonplace. Top leaders who fell out of favour would be sent to the Phnom Penh prison and torture centre known as Tuol Sleng or S-21.<sup>5</sup> Thousands of ordinary people also passed through S-21, often ignorant of the crimes of which they were accused. They would be forced to write long and detailed confessions where they would claim to have been working for the CIA, the KGB, or the Vietnamese to bring about the downfall of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>6</sup> Under torture, they would list dozens to hundreds of family members and acquaintances as “strings of traitors” before being killed.<sup>7</sup> Through a combination of execution, torture, starvation, overwork, and inadequate medical care, the Khmer Rouge regime was responsible for the deaths of 1.7 million Cambodians, a quarter of the population.<sup>8</sup>

Although sharing a common background and past cooperation with the Vietnamese communists, the Khmer Rouge began making border incursions into Vietnam almost immediately after taking power. The situation escalated significantly in early 1977, and diplomatic ties were officially severed at the end of the year.<sup>9</sup> Fear of the Khmer Rouge’s internal purges had forced many cadres to flee to Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> It was a combination of these Cambodian defectors and the Vietnamese army that

launched an invasion to overthrow the Khmer Rouge on 25 December 1978. They advanced much faster than expected through the country and took control of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979.<sup>11</sup>

### **The People's Republic of Kampuchea**

A new government was formed and Cambodia was refashioned as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The Cambodian leaders of the new government were almost all former Khmer Rouge members or Hanoi-trained communists.<sup>12</sup> The Vietnamese government had a strong controlling hand over this new Cambodian administration, but kept this role hidden as much as possible. The Khmer Rouge itself was not entirely defeated though; they fled to refugee camps on the Thai border and continued to wage guerrilla war against the new government in Phnom Penh throughout the 1980s.

The leaders of the PRK government were faced with the problem of how to portray themselves. They had an image problem: too communist, too Vietnamese, and with a Khmer Rouge past. There is a long-standing fear in Cambodia of being swallowed by larger and more powerful neighbours, and so it was important to avoid the appearance of Vietnam as a colonial or hegemonic power. Additionally, the Cambodian population was understandably concerned with the possibility of another communist government after the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime. The new PRK government was distinctly different from its Khmer Rouge predecessor; it recreated a network of schools, reintroduced currency, allowed some religious freedoms and, although it was a slow process, a semblance of normality returned to life.<sup>13</sup> Although such actions were important in calming the fears of the Cambodian population, in the short term the easiest and most immediate tool the government had was to build a strong narrative. This narrative born of political self-interest, and in some cases influenced by models from Vietnam, was created to build the power and reputation of the new authorities.

The narrative that was chosen was one in which the Khmer Rouge movement was essentially good and righteous until the moment it took power, at which point it immediately turned away from its true

principles. A month before they overthrew the Khmer Rouge, the leader of the PRK, Heng Samrin, praised the “glorious victory of April 17, 1975” which occurred shortly before the Vietnamese victory.<sup>14</sup> A later party history in Cambodia asserted that the lead-up to the liberation of Saigon had “created the conditions for the Kampuchean people and armed forces to rise up, fight fiercely and liberate Phnom Penh.”<sup>15</sup> This extolling of April 1975 allowed the new authorities to lay claim to Cambodia’s revolutionary history and to past cooperation with Vietnam—but the Khmer Rouge period needed to be rejected. Accordingly, Heng Samrin said that there has been a diversion from the correct path “a few days after liberation,” which he attributed to “the reactionary Pol Pot-Ieng Sary gang and their families.”<sup>16</sup> Part of the blame for this shift was attributed to the increased connection between the Khmer Rouge and the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>17</sup> The PRK sought a narrative that oscillated back and forth, blaming the Chinese on the one hand and making comparisons with Hitler and fascism on the other. For example, Cambodian party leader Pen Sovan referred to the Khmer Rouge as a “draconian, dictatorial and fascist regime,” while a Vietnamese official called the Khmer Rouge leaders “Hitlerite-fascists.”<sup>18</sup>

There was also a very narrow version of culpability portrayed by means of which criminality was focussed on two or three significant individuals. There were two main reasons for this. The first was an attempt to facilitate the defection of top Khmer leaders to the new government. The second was to remove the suggestion of criminality amongst the leaders of the PRK.<sup>19</sup> It was these very top leaders who had deceived the rest of the Khmer Rouge movement and taken Cambodia down the wrong revolutionary path. And throughout all of this narrative building, it was necessary to preserve the core idea that the PRK leaders were the saviours of the nation, a message necessary both as a way of strengthening the PRK’s own power and to avoid the characterisation of the taking of power as the result of a Vietnamese invasion.<sup>20</sup>

The PRK also had an international image problem that required a slightly different narrative. The recent legacy of the Second Indochina War and the preponderance of Cold War concerns about communist expansionism were widespread in the capitalist countries. In this

context, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was seen as another fallen domino (even if the Khmer Rouge had already instituted communism in Cambodia). It thus contained no recognition of the extent to which the invasion was also a liberation. Operating under the old adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, the Khmer Rouge and the United States found themselves allied against the common Vietnamese foe. The Khmer Rouge had already enjoyed support from China, and the United States and China had recently normalised relations. As a consequence, Cambodia came to enjoy international support, or at least tolerance, from American and Chinese allies, leaving only the Soviet bloc as supporters of the new PRK government.

This support for the Khmer Rouge was most evident at the United Nations in discussions about who had the right to occupy Cambodia's UN seat. These debates were also evidence of how the international narrative of Cambodia was shaped. The Chinese government released a statement on 7 January 1979 that decried the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge as a "massive war of aggression" and part of an "expansionist strategic plan."<sup>21</sup> For those countries that supported the Khmer Rouge and opposed recognition of the PRK, the themes were to criticise the Vietnamese actions. The Western countries, meantime, tried to focus their comments on technicalities and abstractions rather than outright support for the Khmer Rouge. The credentials of the Khmer Rouge were debated first in January 1979 by the UN Security Council and then in September that same year by the General Assembly. At this second debate, the Australian delegation sought to distance itself from association with the Khmer Rouge and its "abominable past record." Instead, the representative said that Australia's support for the Khmer Rouge's right to represent Cambodia was based on "the principle of respect for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of a State Member of the United Nations."<sup>22</sup>

For the new PRK government and its allies, a counter narrative was needed. Unlike the domestic narrative that talked about distinguishing the Khmer Rouge's bad communism from the good communism of the new government, internationally the issue of communism was too contentious. Instead, they sought to refocus the debate on the crimes

of the Khmer Rouge regime. The Soviet representative criticised the regime's "unprecedented arbitrary terror and barbarous repression," and the Vietnamese representative described how the Khmer Rouge "pursued inhumane policies and turned that happy people into slaves and the entire country into an immense concentration camp."<sup>23</sup> As with the domestic narrative, there are traces of comparisons to fascism rather than communism in these references to concentration camps.

The main focus of the PRK allies in this forum was on the Cambodian nature of the new government in order to remove Vietnamese associations. The new rulers, the PRK, were described as the "national patriotic forces of Kampuchea."<sup>24</sup> The Vietnamese representative praised the Kampuchea people for their "four long years of continued and resolute struggle—indeed heroic and even sublime struggle—against that detested and abhorred regime."<sup>25</sup> The Hungarian delegate argued during the September debates that the PRK "exercises effective power and control in Kampuchea" and meets "all criteria for State sovereignty established by international law."<sup>26</sup> Despite these arguments, China, the United States, and their allies voted to accept the credentials of the Khmer Rouge to represent Cambodia with a vote before the General Assembly of seventy-one to thirty-five, with thirty-four abstentions.<sup>27</sup> Thiounn Prasith, the representative of the overthrown Khmer Rouge, held his position at the United Nations for more than a decade.

The narrative at play was one that emphasised the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, and focussed on the overthrowing forces and the PRK as solely Cambodian entities. Whilst the domestic narrative had also sought to emphasise these crimes, it used a narrower frame by only focussing on the top leaders. The domestic narratives around the correct type of communism were occasionally referenced on the international stage but were not prominent, as they would have been perceived to be unhelpful. An important distinction between the domestic and international narratives was the medium through which they were delivered. Since it was not recognised at the UN, the PRK could not speak for itself at that forum. At most, its messages could be conveyed by the Vietnamese or Soviet delegations or their allies. It was also evident that these earlier attempts had had little success. Although many of the mechanisms I

discuss below had both an international and a domestic component to their messaging, some were exclusively domestic. I will focus primarily on the domestic narrative, since it is the one that built the collective memory I discuss in this paper and which had greater impact. This is because the international message rarely reached its intended audience; nor did it receive much attention when it did.

## S-21

Immediately following the Khmer Rouge's expulsion from Phnom Penh in January 1979, two Vietnamese photojournalists followed the stench of death to this facility where more than fourteen thousand people had been detained, tortured and executed.<sup>28</sup> The name of this now-notorious facility was S-21. During the early years of the PRK, this site was transformed into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes by Mai Lam, a Vietnamese museum curator, although his role was kept obscure to limit the impression that it was a foreign construction.<sup>29</sup> In keeping with the fascist narrative, Mai Lam stated that as well as being influenced by his Vietnamese experience, he had visited museums in Germany, Russia, France, and Czechoslovakia and had been assisted by East German specialists.<sup>30</sup>

In early 1980, Ung Pech, one of the handful of survivors of S-21, was appointed as the museum's director.<sup>31</sup> Initially, foreign dignitaries were the only people allowed to visit, but in July 1980, it was opened to Cambodians. By the end of the year, Cambodians were coming in the hundreds of thousands, many seeking information about the fate of their relatives.<sup>32</sup> S-21 had kept extensive documentation of what had transpired there, and after its public opening some of its main attractions were the rooms of photograph boards of detainees, taken shortly after their arrival at the former prison. The people in these photographs have ID numbers pinned to their shirts, or sometimes directly to the flesh, with the same uniform haircut prescribed by the regime. On their faces are diverse expressions that range from defiant rage to defeat. The horror of the institution is enforced by the number of portraits of children.

Judy Ledgerwood has identified three key messages that the Tuol



Sleng museum presented to its domestic audience. The first is the importance of remembering the crimes of the Khmer Rouge regime. The second is that this remembrance should be used to ensure that the Khmer Rouge are not able to return to power: Cambodia should never again face a similar period of violence. The third is that there must be an ongoing understanding and feeling of the pain of that period, with those feelings used to inspire the fight against the Khmer Rouge and the rebuilding of Cambodia.<sup>33</sup>

### **The People's Revolutionary Tribunals**

Although the development of the S-21 museum began in the first months of the PRK government, the government had already started to build its narrative in other ways. One significant method was the arrangement of People's Revolutionary Tribunals. The first and the largest of these was set in August 1979 in order to try Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, the Khmer Rouge's foreign minister.<sup>34</sup> Internationally, this tribunal is often entirely ignored or simply labelled as a show trial because it focussed far more on the performative aspects of justice than on correct procedure. A large volume of evidence about suffering during the Khmer Rouge regime was presented, even though very little related to proving the guilt of the defendants. Instead, the defendants were there as personifications of the regime as a whole and viewed as responsible for everything that had occurred during the regime. Although some of the top RPK leaders might have been able to provide evidence of the roles of the two defendants, their testimony would have also served to remind the population that its current leaders were recently Khmer Rouge officials. This outcome was not part of the political strategy of the trial. To remind the population of this unwelcome fact might have tarnished the desired perception that these leaders were saviours.

A verdict other than guilty was never a possibility; one of the defence lawyers called his clients "criminally insane monsters."<sup>35</sup> As well as presenting a message about the Khmer Rouge period, the tribunal was meant to demonstrate internationally that the Khmer Rouge were unfit to be representatives of Cambodia. The tribunal's ultimate judgement,

which found Pol Pot and Ieng Sary guilty and sentenced them to death *in absentia*, was circulated as a UN document at the request of the Vietnamese delegation. However, it received little attention.<sup>36</sup> Domestically, this outcome of the tribunal was to help to create the rhetoric that would be used to account for the Khmer Rouge.

## Education

As it sought to re-establish the Cambodian school system, the PRK also incorporated this narrative into its educational materials to enhance its power and longevity. The following examples are from a Grade 3 learning-to-read book from 1984.<sup>37</sup> It contains a series of short stories or excerpts, with each page containing a short text, a graphic image, and some sample vocabulary. Many of the stories are those that might be typical of any school text aimed at eight-year-old children: they consist of reading passages about family, agriculture and folk legends. But some are quite different. One story, entitled “Torture at Tuol Sleng,” is accompanied by a line drawing of a severely emaciated person shackled to a wire bed frame. To one side of this person, there is a typewriter to record the confession, some instruments of torture, and a pool of blood. The following reading passage accompanies this graphic image: “The clique that betrayed their country savagely killed our intellectuals by beating with metal bars, hanging by the neck, gutting, cutting their throat, pumping out their blood, and electrocution.”<sup>38</sup> Another story in the same book is entitled “Murder of Niang Chhaynee’s Family by the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary-Khieu Samphan Clique.” Chhaynee recounts how her father was regarded as an enemy. As a consequence, her family was forced to do additional manual labour and her younger sibling was taken away by a Khmer Rouge cadre. Chhaynee followed them when they left and subsequently described the “extremely savage” killing to her mother. Afterwards, her mother was caught by the Khmer Rouge and beaten to death.<sup>39</sup>

These texts also include political calls to action: they request “high revolutionary vigilance,” the need to protect and build the motherland, and the need for solidarity with their Vietnamese brothers and sisters.<sup>40</sup>

The history books for older children talk about “consolidating and creating a special relationship between Kampuchea, Vietnam, and Laos as brothers and sisters” and the ways in which “the expansionist pro-Chinese group has conspired with imperialist America and reactionary forces holding power amongst Asian countries in order to pursue a strategy to isolate the PRK in the international arena.”<sup>41</sup> The texts also outline the correct line of communist solidarity and an explanation why the PRK is not recognized internationally. In this way, Cambodian children who were too young to remember the Khmer Rouge period would come to understand what had happened and be taught to support the government and its promise of peace and stability.

### **The Historical Research Commission**

In 1982, as part of its overall political re-education strategy, the PRK set up a historical research commission. This research commission conducted a survey on the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, using interview data and evidence from mass graves. The commission eventually estimated a death toll of 3,314,768 for the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>42</sup> Although this figure accorded with the government’s rhetorical references to 3 million deaths during that period, most academic estimates view this number as too high.<sup>43</sup>

Afterwards, this report was used as the basis for a series of public meetings, with people being asked to write narrative accounts of the harms they suffered.<sup>44</sup> Some were written by individuals, others, by work or village groups, appending their thumb prints at the end. Although these testimonies contained much specific detail, there was also a uniformity of language. For example, a report from the agriculture office in Kandal Province stated that their petition sought “to illuminate all the crimes which the expansionist China-Peking group and their followers committed and which the genocidal Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique implemented on the Cambodian population from 1975 until 1978.” It further noted that thanks to the “correct and righteous leadership and the enlightenment of the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party and with the assistance and support from Vietnam, USSR, other friendly

socialist countries, and from among other people in the world who love peace, our people have been liberated, totally and permanently.”<sup>45</sup> The language contained in many of these statements indicates that they were written for an international audience. In particular there are calls to end the recognition of the Khmer Rouge as Cambodia’s representatives at the UN. Nonetheless, for some inexplicable reason, these petitions were never sent to the UN and remained unknown until their rediscovery in the 1990s. Domestically, however, the impact of the historical research commission was significant: it demonstrated that the government was in charge of the country, that it was able to organize large-scale operations such as war crimes investigations, and that it deserved international recognition.

### The Day of Anger

In 1983, in response to the report of the historical research commission, the Cambodian National Assembly designated 20 May an annual national “Day of Anger” (ទិវាចងក្រហឹង).<sup>46</sup> Chea Sim, the Chairman of the National Assembly, stated it was important “to remind our people and the next generations about the disastrous period full of blood and tears faced by our Kampuchean people at the doing of the Beijing Chinese expansionist-hegemonists, in collusion with the U.S. imperialists, and their most subservient Pol Pot-Ieng Sary-Khieu Samphan clique.”<sup>47</sup> During the 1980s, the Day of Anger was an event held at many worksites, schools, and memorial locations. Today it is centred mostly on Choeung Ek, the memorial and tourist site outside of Phnom Penh, known as “the killing fields.”

At the 2014 ceremony, following the pattern of previous years, representatives of victims groups gave speeches about the harm their communities suffered during the Khmer Rouge and expressed gratitude towards the government for ending the regime. The second half of the ceremony consisted of an elaborate play complete with smoke machines that depicted the evacuation of Phnom Penh, the harsh living conditions, the executions, and the eventual liberation of the country. These were particularly graphic performances with women wailing as

their babies are snatched away, and people begging for their lives while being struck on the back of the neck with rifle butts. There was also a man who mimed being strung up and gutted. Brightly dressed acrobats enacted the liberation of the country, and this was followed by songs and chants in praise of the government. This event is a significant method for the government to perpetuate a narrative of suffering created by a small number of evil leaders, and salvation by those now leading the government. It also helps to recreate a sense of anger and outrage.

### Changes over Time

Most of the mechanisms I have identified were instituted in the first few years of PRK rule. In 1989, the PRK reconstituted itself as the State of Cambodia, introduced a new national flag and anthem, instituted Buddhism as the state religion and initiated reforms to liberalise the economy.<sup>48</sup> Sweeping change came in the form of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (February 1992-September 1993). The end of the Cold War helped to diminish the potency of the Cambodia issue, and a peace agreement was negotiated between the government operating in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge, and two non-communist resistance groups. In May 1993, the UN organised an election, although the Khmer Rouge had announced their refusal to participate. Nonetheless, this period witnessed a new spirit of cooperation, or at least a need to be seen to be cooperating. After the 1993 elections, Cambodia was governed by two prime ministers: First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh of the royalist FUNCINPEC party, the winners of the election, and Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, who had been Prime Minister since 1985. During this period, the Day of Anger celebrations were suspended, and the Khmer Rouge period disappeared from educational materials.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the fact that Cambodia was formally being run by co-prime ministers, the main power continued to rest in the hands of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The CPP had been able to disentangle itself from reliance on the FUNCINPEC party through control of the governmental bureaucratic structures. After refusing to take part in the 1993 election, the Khmer Rouge found itself isolated internationally, but

continued to launch violent attacks, primarily from bases close to the Thai border. Through a combination of military defeats and defections to the government, however, they were eventually defeated. In 1998, Pol Pot finally died; and the last Khmer Rouge commander, Ta Mok, was arrested in 1999.

In 1999, the Day of Anger commemorations were reinstated as they had become politically beneficial for the Cambodian government to reinforce its long-held opposition to the Khmer Rouge and to reemphasize the CPP's role as liberators of the country.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, systematic study of the era of the Khmer Rouge remained off-limits within the school system during the 1990s and early 2000s because the issues it would potentially raise remained highly contentious. In consequence, a generation of Cambodians have grown up with some basic questions about the Khmer Rouge period unanswered; some even express disbelief about the details of what the generation before them say they have suffered.

Up until 2004, high school textbooks contained only two sentences that mentioned the Khmer Rouge regime. Even at the university level, very little scholarship is conducted that deals with this period of recent history, because of its controversial nature. As a result, most academics rely on the ruling party for their positions.<sup>51</sup> From 2004 to 2007, the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, a local NGO, worked to put together a textbook on the Khmer Rouge. Many professors were invited to participate in this project, but all except one refused.<sup>52</sup> The era that raises the most controversy is that time before the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge. This is because the current ruling party acknowledges some of this heritage, but repudiates other aspects. As a result, a government commission raised certain objections, particularly to the idea of the current CPP leadership being portrayed as Khmer Rouge defectors, since this tends to undermine the "liberationist" narrative that they promote.<sup>53</sup> At a meeting of a working commission, consisting of academics and government members assigned to consider this text, the president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia advised that the book offer fewer names "for security reasons."<sup>54</sup>

Nonetheless, in 2007, the textbook, with some minor amendments,

was independently published and is now used as a teaching reference. Since its publication, the textbook has gained an increasingly central place in the official history curriculum, with DC-Cam distributing more than half a million copies of the work.<sup>55</sup> In 2016, it was decided that education about the Khmer Rouge period would now commence in grade seven rather than grade nine.<sup>56</sup>

The key to understanding the narrative of genocide in Cambodia is the sustained continuity of political leadership over the last thirty years. A number of high-ranking members of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) were among those Khmer Rouge defectors who overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979. For example, Hun Sen was a Khmer Rouge battalion commander who defected, fleeing to Vietnam in 1977. He was one of the founding members of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and its Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1979. In 1985, Hun Sen became Prime Minister, a position he continues to hold more than thirty years later.

Although the narrative of the Khmer Rouge period is still prized by the ruling party, it is gradually losing its political potency. The Cambodian government is now recognised internationally, and the Khmer Rouge have been defeated. More than two-thirds of Cambodians were born after the Khmer Rouge regime; as a result, the issue is of less-immediate relevance. Nonetheless, the CPP continues to present itself as the only barrier between the present peaceful Cambodia and a return to the violence of the Khmer Rouge era. The prime minister has repeatedly warned that the opposition party is dangerous to the peace of the nation. In reference to the opposition, he has asserted that the military "will not hesitate to take action against any group that could bring the country towards civil war."<sup>57</sup> In the lead-up to the 2013 election he made the link more explicit, claiming, in response to an opposition party policy to lower interest on loans, "they will do the same as Pol Pot ... this will be dangerous and a disaster."<sup>58</sup>

### **The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia**

Finally, I want to consider how this narrative is being perpetuated

decades later at a new forum. The Khmer Rouge tribunal, formally known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), is a joint venture of the United Nations and the Cambodian government currently operating in Phnom Penh. It is a hybrid tribunal that combines national and international law, staff, and judges. Thus far two cases have concluded, sentencing three people to life in prison for crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>59</sup> The ECCC international staff is also pursuing two additional cases against four suspects, but these are unlikely to go to trial. Both the government and the national judges at the ECCC have consistently opposed these cases. Prime Minister Hun Sen told UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that these cases “will not be allowed.”<sup>60</sup> The main reason appears to be that these cases expand the government’s definition of those individuals responsible for the Khmer Rouge regime and thereby run the risk of implicating people with links to the current government. As part of his investigation, an international judge also sought to interview six high-ranking government members: the president of the National Assembly, the president of the Senate, the finance minister, the foreign affairs minister, and two senators.<sup>61</sup> Each of these individuals either ignored the summons or simply refused to appear.

## Conclusion

Many of the narrative issues explored here were the upshot of short-term PRK considerations, undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime to build the legitimacy of the new government. The focus on the culpability of only a small handful of Khmer Rouge leaders for the crimes of the entire regime helped to protect those members of the current government who were also former Khmer Rouge members. In Cambodia, it is still common to hear the regime referred to only by reference to Pol Pot, and the figure of three million deaths is repeated regularly. On a broader level, many of the same political concerns have persisted, as the leadership of Cambodia has remained unchanged for three decades. Accordingly, the current government continues to avert risks to itself by focussing on the idea that only a handful of Khmer



Rouge leaders were responsible for what happened, and it promotes its own power by emphasising its role in the salvation of the nation from the horrors inflicted by the Khmer Rouge. The narrative it built in the early years of its rule is now being perpetuated, at the level of a UN-backed tribunal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Phuong Pham et al., “So We Will Never Forget: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Social Reconstruction and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia” (Berkeley: Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley, 2009), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 460-61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 461-62.

<sup>5</sup> David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Craig Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide* (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 80.

<sup>7</sup> Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 456-60.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, 357.

<sup>10</sup> Harish C. Mehta and Julie B. Mehta, *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen from Pagoda Boy to Prime Minister of Cambodia*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013), 98-99.

<sup>11</sup> Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 345-47.

<sup>12</sup> Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> K. Viviane Frings, “Rewriting Cambodian History to ‘Adapt’ It to a New Political Context: The Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party’s Historiography (1979-1991),” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1997): 844.

<sup>16</sup> Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Hinton, “Truth, Representation, and the Politics of Memory after Genocide,” in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power, and Morality in Cambodia*

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<sup>21</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Letter Dated 7 January 1979 from the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council," S/13007, January 7, 1979.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "Credentials of Representatives to the Thirty-Fourth Session of the General Assembly," A/34/500, September 20, 1979, 42.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Official Record of 2108th Meeting," S/PV.210, January 11, 1979, 18, 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "Credentials of Representatives to the Thirty-Fourth Session," 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide? Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Judy Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative," *Museum Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1997): 89.

<sup>31</sup> Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative," 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> Howard De Nike, John Quigley, and Kenneth Robinson, eds., *Genocide in Cambodia: Documents from the Trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 45-47.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 504.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 9.

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<sup>45</sup> “Petition of Representative of Agriculture Office of Kandal Province,” [“ប្រតិភូស្រុកកំណែប្រែប្រួលនៃមន្ទីរកសិកម្មខេត្តកណ្តាល”], DC-Cam ID R00612, September 21, 1983.

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<sup>47</sup> Phnom Penh Domestic Service, *Chea Sim Closing Speech*.

<sup>48</sup> Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*, 303-04.

<sup>49</sup> Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide*, 74, 146.

<sup>50</sup> Rachel Hughes, “Memory and Sovereignty in Post-1979 Cambodia: Choeung Ek and Local Genocide Memorials,” in *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives*, ed. Susan E. Cook (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 269-70. This reinstatement came at a time when the Cambodian government was negotiating with the United Nations over a Khmer Rouge tribunal and being accused of recalcitrance towards the issue of Khmer Rouge accountability.

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<sup>52</sup> Dy Khamboly, interview by author, February 25, 2014, Phnom Penh.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting on the Review of the Draft of ‘A History of Democratic Kampuchea,’” [“កំណត់ហេតុប្រជុំ ផ្តល់យោបល់លើការពិនិត្យយឯកសារពិតប្រាកដ: ‘ប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រមុនសម័យសាធារណរដ្ឋប្រជាមានិតកម្ពុជា’”], December 14, 2006, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Minute%20of%20the%20Review.htm>.

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