



The Cambodian Genocide A Short History (1975-1979)

As a post-colonial state Cambodia faced growing internal pressures brought on by increased militarism and corruption, exploitation of its rural farmers, the reliance of a single product economy, and the external pressures of the Vietnam war being fought on and within its borders. The Khmer Rouge communists inflicted a genocide against its Cambodian population rooted in grievance, trauma, and ideology.

From French Colonial Protectorate (1863-1965)

From 1863-1953 Cambodia was under the control of France. In 1941 France made filmmaker Prince Norodom Sihanouk the puppet King of Cambodia. After being occupied by Japan (1941-45) Sihanouk negotiated an end to French rule and in 1953 Cambodia became an independent constitutional monarchy. King Sihanouk had learned the tactic of “extreme neutrality” (allying with guerilla groups from the Left and Right) to push the French out. In 1955 King Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father and was in turn elected prime minister. In 1960 Sihanouk became head of state again, this time as prince, and declared Cambodia a “nonaligned” neutral in the Cold War. At first, he accepted military assistance from the U.S., but then distanced himself from Western powers as the U.S. became more engaged in the war in Vietnam. Although beloved by many Cambodians (who identified their national pride with the monarchy), government corruption and Sihanouk's authoritarianism sparked a communist resistance movement led by Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot). In 1963 the resistance - Initially a small group operating in the capital Phnom Penh - moved into the countryside. In 1966 a National Assembly was elected with a strong right-wing coalition.

Khmer Rouge (1967)

Pol Pot had been sent to school in Paris in 1950s, where he became a Communist focused on “eliminating” the Cambodian monarchy. He was inspired by China's Mao Zedong who had created the Communist People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The Khmer Rouge communist resistance was purportedly set up in 1967 as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. Pot's resistance forces had trained and were equipped by Vietnamese and Chinese communists. The Khmer Rouge advocated single party rule; the rejection of urban and Western ideas (science, technology, anything mechanical – except useful trucks); abolition of private property; and embracing a radical agrarian ideology which would increase food production through forced collective farming. The movement demanded loyalty to Angkar (“the organization) which would replace all other loyalties (like family and villages). The ideology stressed self-reliance and nationalism, a restoration of an imagined past - the ancient Khmer Empire (parts of Thailand, Laos, and South Vietnam) - and fending off perceived extinction at the hands of historical enemies (Vietnam and Thailand). All foreigners were to be expelled.

Peasant Discontent (1967-1968): Samlaut Uprising and Civil War

Rising inequity, corruption, and exploitation fueled grievances and resentment in the countryside. Chinese and Burmese were buying peasant lands to create fruit plantations and the peasants were forced to work them under harsh conditions and were often displaced from their land. The cotton industry was unproductive, with low yields and harsh intensive labor. Many became indebted and lost their land. Meanwhile, the Cambodian Army was involved in creating co-operatives that forced villagers to reorganize and bear the brunt of paying subscriptions to finance loans. The loans fell into the hands of corrupt officials who provided poor or false insecticides – which led to weeds overwhelming crops and lowering yield.

The Cambodian economy relied heavily on taxation of rice exports. In response to growing black market sales to Viet Cong (VC) often through Chinese middlemen in Saigon, Prime Minister Lon Nol used the military to enforce a new system of rice collection (*ramassage du paddy*). Under this plan the military bought rice (or forced peasants to surrender their crops) at a lower than what they could make on the black market.

As the Left gradually coordinated its activities (many were minority leaders in the National Assembly), held demonstrations in the towns, attacked the government, and conducted grievance propaganda in the countryside, the predominantly right-winged government increased its military and economic regulations. On April 2, 1967, a peasant rebellion broke out in Batdambang Province. Prince Sihanouk once again in France, authorized Prime Minister Lon Nol to crackdown. Many historians see this as the beginning of the civil war that would last until 1975.

Lon Nol's crackdown was brutal. The military executed rebels; burned, bombed, and strafed villages; and sent severed heads, by the truckload, back to Phnom Penh. Sihanouk vacillated between supporting the reprisals and offering amnesty to the local rebels. The rebellion quickly spread to other districts and communist sympathizers found supported among left-wing groups from the towns, including schoolteachers and ex-students. By the end of 1967, unrest was reported in eleven of the country's eighteen provinces. In response, the government decided to directly appoint village headmen. This caused more outrage as these had previously been elected by villagers.

On February 25, 1968, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge launched an attack on the Cambodian military. More than 10,000 villagers from various provinces joined the rebellion – inspired by years of armed Khmer Rouge propaganda teams. By mid-1968, a network of bases, and lines of communication were created. As the civil war raged, Khmer Rouge forces suffered heavy losses and the rebellion stalled. Pol Pot, likely because of this initial failure, claims that this was a spontaneous uprising without Khmer Rouge planning or instigation. In January 1969 fears grew among left-wing sympathizers that Sihanouk would ally Cambodia with the Americans as they escalated the war in Vietnam.

U.S. and the Vietnam War

U.S. policy in Southeast Asia was predicated on President Eisenhower's "Domino Theory" which sought to contain the spread of communism in response to the creation of Communist China (1949) and the North Korean invasion of South Korea (1950). The U.S. had been intensifying its war in Vietnam since 1965. Prince Sihanouk maintained close ties to China and allowed Vietnamese communists to use Cambodia as base areas, sanctuary, and as a supply route into South Vietnam. Many Cambodians, seeing Vietnam as a traditional enemy, disliked this policy. The policy became increasingly unpopular as the Vietnam War extends into Cambodia via the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trails.

In 1967 the U.S. and South Vietnamese troops conducted raids into Cambodia. Sihanouk signals he will not object if the U.S. wanted to bomb the Vietnamese - unless Cambodians are killed. In March 1969 President Nixon secretly ordered the U.S. Air Force to bomb eastern Cambodia where North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese insurgents were operating. Sihanouk restored diplomatic relations with the U.S. In the next 14 months, 3,800 U.S. airstrikes will drop 108,823 tons of explosives on Cambodia. The U.S. will eventually drop more than 2.7 million tons of bombs on more than 113,000 sites in Cambodia. More than two million Cambodians fled their homes, many ending up in Phnom Penh and other provincial cities. Prime Minister Lon Nol fully supported the attacks. On March

12, 1970, large anti-Vietnamese riots in Phnom Penh damaged the Vietcong and North Vietnamese embassies.

Lon Nol and Lieutenant General, Prince Sirik Matak (Sihanouk's cousin) closed the port of Sihanoukville, to stop smuggling of weapons to the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. They issued an ultimatum: all North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces were to withdraw from Cambodian soil within seventy-two hours or face military action. Lon Nol has abandoned Sihanouk's neutrality policies.

Military Coup Establishes the Khmer (Cambodian) Republic

On March 18, 1970, the Cambodian National Assembly voted to strip Sihanouk of his power and General Lon Nol became head of State on an emergency basis. Widespread popular demonstrations in favor of Sihanouk were suppressed as the Khmer (Cambodian) Republic was declared. The U.S. backed Lon Nol because he was seen as more aggressively anti-communist than Sihanouk. In response to this coup Prince Sihanouk formed a government-in-exile (GRUNK) and tried to ally with Khmer Rouge.

In a pragmatic twist the Khmer Rouge pivoted to support Sihanouk knowing that his popularity in the cities would gain them more support. Sihanouk was seen as a great recruitment tool and cover. Because of this turn of events, Sihanouk was condemned to death in absentia by the Cambodian Republic.

The Vietnam war Spills Into Cambodia

On April 17, 1970, North Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Vietnamese troops seized large sections of the countryside for the Khmer Rouge, who had few troops and willingly accepted the help of their foe, the Vietnamese. U.S. forces entered Cambodia to fight Vietnamese troops. On April 28, 1970, President Nixon authorized a strike in Cambodia, sending U.S. troops across the border from South Vietnam to destroy the HQ of Communist operations below the 17th parallel, Viet Cong base camps that were providing support to the Communists fighting in South Vietnam, and bolster the Khmer Republic.

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon went on TV to explain that the U.S. military, along with the South Vietnamese People's Army, were launching a limited incursion into Cambodia (30-kilometer strip along the border to the end of June). The goal was to destroy Viet Cong base camps and impede North Vietnamese supply lines. Politically, the timing of this announcement was a mistake. Only ten days earlier the President had announced the withdrawal of 150,000 Americans from the region.

Militarily the U.S. attacks yielded a great quantity of rice, weapons, and ammunition from the Vietnamese and disrupted the North Vietnamese command and logistics structures for months, buying time for Vietnamization and further U.S. troop withdrawals. Politically, it was a mistake. Violent protests erupted on campuses across the U.S. (culminating in four students being killed at Kent State on May 4, 1970). Nixon eventually withdrew U.S. troops from Cambodia but maintained military aid to Lon Nol and continued airstrikes in the countryside.

U.S. bombing of Cambodia, recommended by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, had major intended and unintended consequences. The communist Vietnamese were driven deeper into Cambodia. Many civilians were killed and by 1971, 60% of refugees surveyed cited U.S. bombing as the reason for their displacement. This shell-shocked and traumatized rural population were easily recruited by

the Khmer Rouge to avenge their lost loved ones. The bombing significantly destabilized and shattered the Cambodian economy.

Cambodia on the Brink

By the end of 1972 most North Vietnamese troops had withdrawn from Cambodia and were replaced by Khmer Rouge fighters armed mainly with Chinese weapons. In August 1973 the U.S. Congress ordered air strikes to stop, but weapons still flowed to Lon Nol. Lon Nol was collapsing under the pressure and was seeking advice from soothsayers and mystics. As his troops retreated and ran out of ammunition, Lon Nol sprinkled consecrated sand to protect Phnom Penh from the encroaching Khmer Rouge. On April 1, 1975, Lon Nol resigned and fled into exile. His name was the first on a list of people the Khmer Rouge had vowed to execute. On April 12, 1975 Phnom Penh was surrounded by the Khmer Rouge and the U.S. evacuated diplomats and a few Cambodian allies via U.S. Marine helicopters.

Genocide Begins

On April 17, 1975, Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh, declared Year Zero, and immediately began implementing their genocidal plan. Pol Pot was named head of state of the newly established “Democratic Kampuchea”. The goal was to create a self-sustaining, farm-based society free from outside influence. Pol Pot admired the tribes in Cambodia’s rural northeast who were self-sufficient and lived on the goods they produced through subsistence farming. He envisioned this as the future of Cambodia.

Surrendering officials were murdered. Buddhist monks were targeted as parasites, their temples seized, and religious images and structures were destroyed. The middle class (educated; anyone associated with the previous government or the West; speaking a foreign language; wearing glasses; laughing; showing love) and ethnic minorities (ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai) were targeted. Up to 70% the Cham Muslim population (perhaps 500,000) and 8,000 Christians were murdered. People were forced to fill in a *pravatarup*, the Khmer Rouge-required “biography”. Individuality was forbidden. Everyone was forced to wear shapeless black clothing and no emotions allowed to be expressed. All people knew was that “Angka” (the “Organization”) was in charge.

The “Killing Fields”

Pol Pot ordered all towns and cities to be emptied. No one was spared. People are ordered (via loudspeakers) to return to their native villages and were forced into agricultural collective farms. Everyone was addressed as ‘Met’. Fathers were ‘Poh’ and mothers were ‘Meh’. The traditional family was attacked. Village meals were taken communally, children were separated from parents and sent to forced labor. Affection and humor were forbidden. People were encouraged to inform on each other.

New class distinctions replaced the old. Communities were divided into first class (Chief, Khmer Rouge with power to teach, police, execute, decisions on food...) “base people” (who had joined the movement early and lived and ate separately) and “new people” (who had come from cities in 1975) and were despised and persecuted. The Party taught that children were morally superior to most of their elders who were “polluted” with capitalism and religion. Children of Party leaders were placed in positions of authority and child soldiers were created.

Mismanagement and the killing of doctors led to mass starvation. Hunger likely killed between 500,000 and 1.5 million between 1975-1979. 1.7 million people (21% of the population) died in the

“killing fields” of communist Khmer Rouge Cambodia or in places like Tuol Sleng prison (S-21), a former high school. It became a Khmer Rouge torture and killing center. It was controlled by Khmer Rouge Special Branch *Santebal*. Thousands (mainly Khmer Rouge party members or officials and their families) were interrogated, tortured, and executed for treason - accused of having betrayed the Party. *Santebal* kept meticulous records of the tortures and mutilations. Their photographs are now part of the genocide exhibit.

In 1979 Vietnam invaded Cambodia and toppled the Khmer Rouge regime. The vast majority of survivors are traumatized, functionally illiterate, and the region is in shambles. Cambodia became the People’s Republic of Kampuchea for a decade, until Vietnam withdrew in 1989.

Delay in Recognizing the Cambodian Genocide

For traumatized survivors and refugees, a healing point begins when your trauma is recognized. Unfortunately, there was a delay due to Cold War priorities. The U.S. and China became uncomfortable allies against Vietnam. The U.S. sought to stop Vietnamese communist expansion and China wanted preeminent leadership of the communist world (USSR backing Vietnam). In 1979 Khmer Rouge resumed guerilla warfare against the Vietnamese and they were supported by the U.S. and China. Incredibly, the Khmer Rouge was even allowed to retain their seats in the United Nations until 1982 because of U.S. and Chinese support. Another important factor in recognizing and acknowledging what had happened was the U.S. reluctance to have its role in the genocide examined.

U.S. attitudes slowly shifted. In 1978 President Carter declared the Khmer Rouge “the worst violator of human rights in the world today”, but did not outwardly condemn the genocide. In 1984 *The Killing Fields* film introduced people all over the world to Cambodia and its ordeal and significantly shifted public attitudes and engagement. When Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in 1989 Prince Sihanouk was restored. As things stabilized, the U.S. improved its relations with Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge crumbled. In 1994 President Clinton signed the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act to bring the main perpetrators to trial. The U.S. provided money to research and document the crimes. In 2001 the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was created by Cambodian government. After much negotiation, the United Nations and Cambodia agree to create the Tribunal in 2003. The Tribunal ended its work in 2022 having convicted only three Khmer Rouge perpetrators.

Epilogue

Lon Nol escaped the Khmer Rouge, first to Indonesia and then to the U.S. (Hawaii and Fullerton, California). He lived with his second wife Sovanna Lon and several of his nine children until his death on November 17, 1985.

Prince Sirik Matak (who ruled for Lon Nol during first year of Khmer Republic) was offered asylum in the U.S. He declined, even though he was on a published list of "Seven Traitors" marked for execution. He sought refuge at the Hotel Le Phnom, where the International Red Cross was attempting to create a safe zone. He was turned away. Sirik Matak and the officials that remained along with him were executed by the Khmer Rouge on 21 April 1975.

Pol Pot lived in the rural northeast of the country until 1997 and died while under house arrest in his jungle home.

Genocide Warning and Mass Atrocity Risk Factors

James Waller in his *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* identifies four key risk factors for countries on the twisted path towards genocide. Taken collectively, each reveal Cambodia's vulnerability. Although genocide is not inevitable, the following factors prepare the way for a potential spark to ignite what has developed.

Governance

What type of regime is in charge? Although democracy, by itself, is no guarantee of stability, full democracies are more stable. Partial democracy or autocracy makes a country more at risk – especially if constitution is challenged to extend leadership. Weakness of state structures, or confidence in the state mixed with identity-based polar factionalism makes a state more vulnerable. Warning signs occur when elites and institutions are fragmented along identity lines, when elites hold an exclusionary ideology, and there are high levels of corruption. Mass protests of the regime acts as a “canary in the mine” of troubles ahead.

The autocratic tendencies of Prince Sihanouk and the corruption in his and late Lon Nol's regimes undermined confidence. Lon Nol's coup combined with a military crackdown weakened the structures of the state.

Economic Conditions

States with low levels of economic development, economic discrimination, and the lack of macroeconomic stability (economy built on one or two products making it vulnerable to changes in demand) can make a state at risk. Economic deterioration, corruption, the growth of informal economies and black markets further undermine economic stability as well as the rule of law (lack of diversified economic connections to external partners following regulations and rules of trade).

Exploitation of Cambodian peasants and the reliance on rice for revenue made Cambodia vulnerable to corruption and to an inability to be resilient when facing internal and external pressures.

Social Fragmentation

Identity-based social divisions rooted in polarization and unequal access to goods and services are another risk factor.

Class divisions and wealth inequality divided Cambodian society between cities (relatively wealthy) and the countryside (toiling on farms in rural communities). This made Cambodia susceptible to revolution.

Conflict History

This category examines the existence of cultural trauma, records of serious violations of international human rights and laws, a legacy of vengeance or group grievance, and any history of colonialism.

Cambodia's emergence from post-colonial French rule meant that there was resentment amongst some who sought a national identity (often mythologized) before colonial rule. Politically, Prince Sihanouk navigated a post-colonial world by attempting to remain neutral. This became more difficult due to the previous three categories. As Cambodia sought to find its political footing it moved from autocracy to military dictatorship while being exploited by outsiders who perceived them in colonial terms.

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