

# The Future of Cambodia

By Kassie Neou

**Cambodia, April 1975.** The Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh and began an extermination policy that resulted in the self-destruction of Cambodia, the Cambodian culture, and the Cambodian social structure. Between 1.5 million and 2 million lives were lost. This holocaust was unique. In Germany, Jews were killed by Germans. In Armenia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the atrocities were committed by Russians. In our country, though, Cambodians killed Cambodians.

Being a survivor of this holocaust, I was haunted by images of the Khmer Rouge. Thus, I welcomed the invading Vietnamese forces in 1978 as liberators.

Following the downfall of the Pol Pot regime, a new government was installed by the invading forces of Vietnam. However, most of the key government officials, as well as army and police officers, are former Khmer Rouge. Moreover, the security apparatus and the policies of the Interior Ministry are similar to those of Pol Pot. As a result, Cambodians — both in and out of the country — realize they are still in the same slow moving boat, only with different crew members.

In my August 1989 trip to Cambodia, I felt like a stranger among my own people. In the fifteen years since the Khmer Rouge first came to power, the Cambodian people themselves had been changed. They exhibited unexpected behavior patterns that seemed strange to me at first. Only after countless official and unofficial contacts with old friends, classmates, government officials, businessmen, army officers, students, teachers, pedicab drivers, and peasants did I begin to understand why my people are what they are today. First, they face a daily struggle for basic necessities and food. Second, they live in an atmosphere of fear, both from the threat of systematic Vietnamese colonization, as well as from the threat of Pol Pot's return. It can be said that the Cambodian people are caught between a tiger and a crocodile.

**Far From Free.** I found life under the current regime an improvement over that of the Pol Pot era. Yet my people are far from free. Killings continue, only in a less public fashion. Human rights violations still occur. Disappearances continue. The regime is an oppressive one. People still do not have genuine freedom. Freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press are tightly controlled. I think it would be enlightening to share with you what I learned from our delegation's interview of the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen.

We asked him about freedom of speech in Cambodia. Specifically, we asked if our delegation's trip report could be published in Cambodia. He responded: "The content of the article is the freedom of the writer. In case the reality is not properly expressed, [we]

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He spoke to The Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center on April 4, 1990.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1990 by The Heritage Foundation.

must reserve the right to deny [its publication]. As far as publication is concerned, it has to be through the channel of the government...”

We then asked him about promoting education about and protection of human rights. To this, he stated: “ We are very concerned about the issue. But we have difficulty in abiding by the human rights laws because the country is still in the state of war.”

We asked if Amnesty International could visit Cambodian prisons. His response: “We will consider the issue in the near future. So far we never allow any prison visits due to the war situation.” Then we asked if our delegation could visit Phnom Penh’s central prison, known as T-3. Again Hun Sen turned down the request.

Clearly, we were getting nowhere with Hun Sen. However, I was able to get much more candid responses through several informal discussions with a number of government officials. One noted that crime had become rampant in the countryside. He told me that forced army conscription had stripped farms of able-bodied men, leaving behind only women, infants, and the elderly. The result: poor harvests. His concern is that next year there will be starvation, because of an increasing population and a decreasing number of farmers. He added that some rice is also shipped to Vietnam, compounding the problem.

**Rampant Corruption.** The same official admitted that systematic corruption exists throughout the government. Any request or application requires a bribe, no matter how small the job. From village to hamlet to district levels, you need to bribe or you will not be helped.

Previously, under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and later under Cambodian President Lon Nol, there was also corruption. But corruption under the current regime is much more widespread. This has made living standards of the people within the vicinity of Phnom Penh and other cities very low. But if you travel further out to the hamlets or villages, such as in Takeo province, living is miserable. Corruption even extends to health care. Modern medicine is scarce and too expensive to be affordable to the public. When one needs to go to the hospital, one must first have the right connection, then have a substantial amount of cash for a bribe. Nowadays, bribery is a daily fact of life.

The education system is equally tainted. Students who wish to pursue higher education in the fields of medicine, agriculture, or commerce must have gold to bribe. As a result, talented poor students stand little chance in those fields. Students who do not pass junior high mostly end up in the army.

In order to avoid conscription into the army, one must obtain a junior or high school diploma and then pass the exam to enter a career school. To pursue education abroad, one must have enough money or gold to pay off the proper officials. However, this opportunity is limited to the children of the revolutionary cadres or the wealthy.

Several sources related to me cases of “disappearances.” These can be the result of forced army conscription, arbitrary arrests, or kidnappings. In addition, armed robbery is also rampant. What makes solving these cases even harder is that the Justice Ministry does not seem to have access to the thousands of detainees held by the Police Department of the Interior Ministry.

**Mixed Record.** As far as religion is concerned, the Hanoi-installed Hun Sen regime has a mixed record. On the one hand, numerous Muslim mosques and Buddhist temples have been restored. On the other hand, Cambodian Christians still face discrimination. Until today, not a single church has been restored. Buddhism has become the state religion. There is Buddhist preaching and praying on national radio broadcasts. Anyone of age can become a Buddhist monk, but only after being approved by the village chief, hamlet chief, district chief, province chief, and the United Front of Religion. One must also have a substantial amount of money for bribing along the way. This is no way for a people to live.

For the past two decades Cambodians have been deprived of their human rights — forced to live like animals. They are under constant threat of government brutality, and live filled with hunger, fear, and hopelessness. The first thing they need is peace.

**Pol Pot Holdovers.** But can the killings be immediately stopped? How can the current regime be trusted when it is filled with former Khmer Rouge officers? Let me list to you the current leaders of Cambodia who were formerly with the murderous Pol Pot regime: the communist party leader, Heng Samrin; the Prime Minister, Hun Sen; the Deputy Prime Minister, Hor Namhong; the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces, Pol Saroeun; the Minister of Trade; the Interior Minister; the leader of the National Assembly; the Trade Union Chairman; as well as hundreds of others in the Interior Ministry, the police, the army, and the district and provincial leadership.

To the Cambodian people, Hun Sen and Pol Pot represent two factions of the Khmer Rouge. Both have abused human rights; and it would be wrong to call the current leadership “good guys” just because they broke away from the Khmer Rouge. They were with Pol Pot when the genocide took place and they are just as guilty as Pol Pot.

After 20 years of killing, the only way to find a solution to the Cambodian tragedy is to exchange bullets for ballots. Our precious responsibility is to enable the Cambodian people to choose their own form of democratic government without intimidation from any political faction. In Peter Jennings’ report of April 26, Mr. Stanley Cloud of *Newsweek* called the U.S.-supported formula a “one in a thousand” chance. I call that an improvement over no chance. Let’s go for it. Any other formula is a recipe for disaster. Some people are trying to offer the Cambodian people a plan similar to the one offered Lithuania forty years ago, when the Soviets were presented as saviors from the Nazis.

**Giving Cambodians A Chance.** While the world cheers the coming of democracy in Eastern Europe, Cambodians who have paid with flesh and blood for 20 years deserve an opportunity for peace, freedom, independence and democracy. Don’t make us wait 40 years for our freedom, like Lithuania. Let us have freedom now.

If the U.S. is really concerned about the plight of the Cambodian people and sincere in wanting to stop the killings, it must support the proposed U.N. comprehensive settlement for peace in Cambodia. It is the only plan that provides for a cease-fire, the disarmament of all parties, and a halt to arms supplies. It also provides for an interim U.N. administration of Cambodia, verification of the withdrawal of the foreign occupiers, and free and fair elections. These elections would give Cambodians the chance, at long last, to choose their own leaders and their own government — a right that has been denied far too long.

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The author is grateful to Asian Studies Center Research Associate Thomas J. Timmons for his help in preparing the final version of this lecture.