Lek Hor Tan

The Khmer Rouge: beyond 1984?

Lek Hor Tan is a Cambodian-born British citizen. He was actively involved with the National United Front between 1970-75; this was a coalition of Sihanoukist, Socialist and Khmer Rouge forces fighting against the American-backed Lon Nol regime. Unlike hundreds of Cambodian exiles who returned to Cambodia after the victory of the United Front, and who were later murdered by the Khmer Rouge, he remained in the West. He has an intimate knowledge of the people involved in the Cambodian revolution and their thinking behind it. He has been with Index since 1977. For other articles on the Khmer Rouge see Lek Hor Tan, ‘Total Revolution in Cambodia’ (Index 1/1979), and Soth Polin, ‘Pol Pot’s diabolical sweetness’ (Index 5/1980).

When the Khmer Rouge came to power in Cambodia in 1975, they embarked on a revolutionary experiment which went further than any other revolution had dared, approaching and perhaps surpassing the nightmarish world depicted in 1984. As one Khmer Rouge political commissar put it, the basket with the fruit was overturned, and only the articles that satisfied the revolution were chosen and put back in.

The remark was made with reference to the Vietnamese revolution in the South which started at about the time when the Khmer Rouge saw that their Vietnamese allies and comrades-in-arms (until 1977 at least) were not going fast enough. The Vietnamese revolutionaries did not tip over the basket, the Khmer Rouge cadre remarked, they only picked out the rotten fruit. The Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, believed in the ‘great leap forward’, jumping the stages of revolutionary process, because the ‘objective conditions were right and ready’.

Thus in a very short time, literally as soon as their forces ‘captured the capital city Phnom Penh (the last stronghold of the Khmer Republicans), its entire population, including the sick and the dying in hospitals, were forced out at gunpoint to the countryside. The same pattern took place in other provincial cities and towns. The whole country was turned upside down, according to carefully worked out plans.

As observers noted at the time, nothing happened haphazard, nothing was improvised and nothing was overlooked.

The political and ideological justification behind this policy was the Khmer Rouge determination to transform Cambodian society into a ‘truly revolutionary one’, and in the shortest time possible. The Khmer Rouge had a vision of a ‘completely egalitarian society’ in which exploiting and exploited classes were to be eradicated, and where private property and ownership and all private means of production would be totally destroyed. City dwellers, the Khmer Rouge argued, were unproductive people, parasites of society, belonging to the ruling and exploiting class, and only serving the elite. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge...
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believed they were 'traitors and puppets of American imperialists', in a 'semi-feudal and semi-colonial society'.

Then there was a security consideration as well; the Khmer Rouge were fully conscious of their relatively small forces which had to be able to have absolute control and domination over three quarters of the population, who were potentially hostile to their policies. By emptying the cities of their population, any organised resistance and acts of sabotage would be easily neutralised and crushed.

In addition, the evacuation policy would facilitate the task of discarding the 'rotten fruit'. This included military and police officers and personnel serving under the previous regimes, their civil servants, bourgeois elements, such as people in the professional class, merchants, shopkeepers and foreigners (mostly Chinese and Vietnamese).

According to some estimates, during the first phase of purification, tens of thousands of 'traitors' and 'class enemies' were arrested and executed. Those who managed to escape the net were later hunted down and liquidated.

According to Khmer Rouge documents, their revolutionary vision of man asserts that when a man has been spoiled by a corrupt regime, he cannot be reformed. He must be physically eliminated from the brotherhood of man. The vision of a new socialist society and a new socialist man could also be seen in their political slogans at the time. For instance, 'The former regime must be destroyed, the enemy must be crushed to bits'; 'What is infected must be cut out', 'what is rotten must be removed', 'it isn't enough to cut down a bad plant, it must be uprooted'. And so on.

One refugee interviewed in Thailand in 1976 talked about a woman she knew who was weeping over her husband's death and was told off by a Khmer Rouge cadre: 'Why are you crying about the execution of an enemy? That shows you don't love the Revolution'. Other refugees reported about many other senseless killings, but the Khmer Rouge had answers for those as well. 'It is better to kill an innocent person than to leave an enemy alive' or 'To keep it, no profit; to destroy it, no loss', or 'It's better to make an error early on, than to make it too late'.

Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge leader and Prime Minister of 'Democratic Kampuchea', in a radio broadcast in September 1977 said that one or two per cent of the population (7 million) had been classified as class enemies and must be neutralised and eradicated. The purges and purification of 'class enemies', 'traitors' and 'counter-revolutionaries' continued unabated till the end of 1978, when the Vietnamese invaded the country. (They later installed in power the Khmer Rouge elements which had their backing.)

After the first phase of purification the evacuated city dwellers were classified as 'new people', as distinct from the 'old people', ie those who had been under the control and domination of the Khmer Rouge in the 'liberated areas' during the civil war of 1970-75. The 'new people' were sent to live and work in farming co-operatives of up to 10,000 people or in mobile work brigades, a system which converted the whole country into a gigantic forced labour camp. They had to work through a 10-day cycle, with one day off for political education, in addition to endless sessions of political meetings in the evenings. The 'new people' were only allowed basic necessities, such as their sleeping mats and black pyjamas, given to them once a year. They lived in family huts that they had built themselves. Single men and women lived in separate quarters and were not allowed any social contact. Children were looked after and educated by various revolutionary committees of the co-operatives and were returned to their parents only at night. The Khmer Rouge publicly proclaimed that the future belonged to the children because of their 'purity'; they could be easily taught to become 'pure and tough revolutionaries'. Many of them were also taught to spy on their parents and denounce them.

Normal family life was not allowed as this would encourage 'privacy', 'individualism' and the traditional way of life. The attempt to destroy family life included the banning of private cooking facilities. Every member of the co-operative had to get his food in the communal kitchen. Every adult member of the co-operative was assigned to a specific task, like being a member of a production brigade, etc.

The power responsible for carrying out this 'total revolution' was first enigmatically known as Angka Loeu or 'Organisation on High'. At first, few people knew what Angka Loeu was or the names of its members. It appeared to be a faceless, shadowy body, but soon the 'new people' discovered that it exercised omnipotence over all Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers. Like the Cambodian kings during the Angkor period (802-1432 AD), who were divinities incarnate, Angka Loeu was a new divinity to which the Khmer Rouge devoted themselves body and soul.

Later, the 'new people' began to learn about the true identity of Angka Loeu. By 1976, Angka Loeu was known as the Cambodian Communist Party, a revolutionary party committed to Marxist-Leninist ideology, a vanguard party determined to lead the revolution in order to achieve the ideal Communist state. The
names of some of the leaders were also revealed, but in general, Angka Loeu remained secretive and mysterious and this was its strength.

Like the Big Brother in Orwell's 1984, Angka Loeu was everywhere. Every hamlet had its revolutionary committee, backed up by the People's Revolutionary Army and militia, exercising absolute authority over all aspects of individual and collective life. Angka Loeu knew everything, the Khmer Rouge liked to boast, and the 'new people' were constantly reminded that this was so. It was a crime to hide any secret from Angka Loeu, and the punishment was summary execution. As the Khmer Rouge themselves 'put it, 'Angka Loeu has eyes like a pineapple, it can see everything'. It would be pointless to hide from it.

As part of its application of a system of absolute control and total domination, the 'new people', when they first arrived in the co-operatives, were asked to write their own biographies. Those who were foolish enough to tell the truth, especially those from a 'class enemies' background, were taken away and executed.

Those who managed to hide their true identities had to go through endless sessions of confession and self-criticism during political meetings. They were expected to learn and become 'true revolutionaries', like most 'old people' who had already been 'reformed' and 're-educated'.

Those who were later discovered to have lied to Angka Loeu or disobeyed its orders, were taken away and executed like other 'traitors' and 'class enemies'. The most common form of execution was a bayonet stab at the stomach or a bash on the back of the neck with a club, 'in order to save ammunition'.

The Khmer Rouge also invented their own newspeak. People who were taken away to be executed were simply told by the revolutionary committee that 'we are sending you to Angka Loeu' or 'Angka Loeu wants to see you'.

During the phase of purification and re-education of the 'new people' the Khmer Rouge were also dealing with the material things left in the cities as most of them represented the old society, especially foreign imported consumer goods. So private cars, television sets and refrigerators were systematically destroyed. So were Buddhist temples, Christian churches and Muslim mosques as they represented the 'superstition' and 'opium of the people'. Most of these religious buildings were razed to the ground; some that they kept were used as storehouses.

Then it was the turn of books and documents. The National Library in Phnom Penh was emptied of its priceless collection of books, archives and records. As the Khmer Rouge argued, all these documents were written by French colonialists and reactionary Cambodians, therefore they must be destroyed. The National Library was later transformed into a pigsty.

Like the citizens of Oceania in 1984, the 'new people' had to be totally cut off from the past or any contacts with the outside world. The past was to be obliterated so that the purity of the future could be absolute — the ideal of complete oblivion. This included the changing of people's names, so that the new man could forget everything, the country's past history, dead ancestors, the names of places, traditional and national customs. Like Orwell's Big Brother, Angka Loeu wanted to nationalise the personal and collective memory of its people so that they would become perfectly malleable and controllable.

Once the 'new people' had been deprived of their identities, like the 'old people', they would have become helpless and incapable of questioning anything, except obeying Angka Loeu's orders. They would not revolt, think or create. They might even be happy and learn to love Angka Loeu.