

DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA

Theses on the Kampuchean Revolution, 1975-78

Editorial note. The following article is a translation of an article first published in the German publication *Kampuchea-Informationen* (Nr. 11, June 1981). The writer who is a demographer by training is a member of Kampuchea-Initiative Kiel, one of the several Kampuchea support groups in West Germany. We publish the article in the belief that it is a serious and thought-provoking contribution on the contentious subject of what went on in Democratic Kampuchea between 1975 and 1978. Our decision to publish it does not mean that we on the *Kampuchea Bulletin* necessarily agree with or endorse everything that it says. It is a discussion document and no more, and we invite comments and criticisms on it.



For over a year the Government of Democratic Kampuchea has been attempting to bring together all the patriotic forces of Kampuchea involved in the struggle against the Vietnamese occupiers. Its stated objective is the creation of an "independent, united, democratic, peaceful and non-aligned Kampuchea". (1)

In connection with this new strategic policy of a united front, representatives of Democratic Kampuchea have referred to a number of "mistakes" committed between 1975 and 1978: too hasty evacuation of Phnom Penh, over-collectivization in certain areas of the country, suppression of the national bourgeoisie, sectarian and isolationist foreign policy in the face of the threat from Vietnam. (2)

An official government self-criticism has not so far been forthcoming. Moreover, representatives of Democratic Kampuchea have explained incorrect developments almost exclusively in terms of sabotage by "Vietnamese agents". (3) All of which has served to reinforce the tendency to deny that the "Khmers Rouges" are at all capable of learning from their mistakes. And this in turn is bound to have repercussions on our solidarity with the present liberation struggle of the Kampuchean people.

Are the "Khmers Rouges" able to provide any kind of perspective for the struggle? We believe that the question cannot be answered without an investigation of the domestic and foreign policy of the Government of Democratic Kampuchea.

In the following theses we set out the positive achievements and the mistakes in the politics of Democratic Kampuchea, together with the reasons for those mistakes. The theses are the fruits of lengthy discussions within the "Kampuchea-Initiative" group in Kiel.

Our aim is to examine whether the "Khmers Rouges" practised counter-revolutionary politics, or whether they based their politics on the fundamental interests of the Kampuchean people, on social progress and national independence.

1

In the face of enormous difficulties and relying solely on their own resources, the Kampuchean people developed a self-sufficient agricultural sector after April 17th, 1975, and laid the basis for the independent industrialization of Kampuchea.

The leaders of Democratic Kampuchea affirmed their intention to transform their country, independently and within 10 to 15 years, from a backward into a modern agricultural one. Proceeds from the export of rice surpluses were to finance the importing of machines geared to the development of a consumer goods industry. From 1977 on, this did in fact happen to a large extent. According to official figures, the collective efforts of the people had ensured that rice production was by then sufficient for Kampuchea to feed itself. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) estimated the export of agricultural products in 1977 at 680,000 US dollars, as against 350,000 US dollars in 1976. (Imports, by comparison, rose from 2.5 million US dollars in 1976 to 19m US dollars in 1977.) (4) Again according to the FEER, 130,000 tons of rice were exported to Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Madagascar in 1978. (5)

In a speech given on September 27th, 1978, Pol Pot described the economic development policy of revolutionary Kampuchea in these terms:

As far as our industrial development is concerned, we have also worked out a line which aims to develop our industry



SOLVING THE FOOD PROBLEM

within the context of an independent economy. While relying on our agriculture, we are developing our light industry and advancing towards a progressive development of heavy industry. (6)

Opinions differ as to whether or not Democratic Kampuchea's policy of national reconstruction was successful. Critics of the regime base themselves chiefly on refugee accounts or refer to the "revelations" of the Vietnamese regime in Phnom Penh. On the other hand, there are the reports of the various delegations which visited Kampuchea in 1977 and 1978. In spite of their differing ideological positions, they paint on the whole a positive picture of the development of the productive forces, particularly in the agricultural sector. One of the most detailed accounts was written by the American journalist Richard Dudman, (7) who, along with Elizabeth Becker (*Washington Post*) and the British S.E. Asia specialist Malcolm Caldwell (who was murdered by terrorists in Phnom Penh on December 23rd, 1978), spent several weeks at the end of 1978 travelling round eleven of Kampuchea's nineteen provinces. Dudman writes:

We saw many new dams and canals, parts of a crash irrigation program that is bringing new areas under cultivation and permitting two or three rice harvests a year in some areas.

Foreign analysts have been skeptical of government claims of a modest rice surplus in each of the past two years. They have said any exports would be at the cost of hunger or starvation at home.

Refugees, who have accused the Pol Pot government of methodically killing off hundreds of thousands of former city dwellers said the food allowance for those who remained was far below minimum requirements.

I saw no evidence of starvation, however. My observation of hundreds of ordinary Cambodians suggested that they got an adequate diet, if a plain one.

A very critical observer, Dudman records the human and political sacrifices entailed by the rise in production of foodstuffs, but concludes:

But on the simple question of economic viability, this rich agricultural country once more appeared to be flourishing and potentially prosperous - at least until the Vietnamese invaders moved in.

The conclusion that ordinary Cambodians were adequately fed rested on more than the rather clumsy propaganda efforts of the government.

However, it is not only the agricultural successes of the Pol Pot government which Dudman emphasizes. He also describes the organization of collective work in the co-operatives, without which the increase in agricultural production would have been utterly inconceivable. He is full of admiration for the ambitious national housing programme, "a sudden, massive improvement in individual family houses compared with the standards that had obtained for centuries." In the sphere of light industry, too, Dudman notes a number of very positive developments:

I saw a wide range of industrial growth - concentrated more in tiny and primitive cottage industries such as brick making, silk spinning, and local blacksmith shops, but including also a fairly sophisticated rubber factory near Kompong Cham.

The verdicts of the other delegations (Swedes, Japanese, Yugoslavs, Canadians, among others) are essentially similar. Over and over again, emphasis is put on the fact that the question of feeding the people has been solved. The report of the Yugoslavian delegation which visited large areas of Kampuchea in March 1978 states:

To summarize everything we have seen in Kampuchea: the country has solved the food problem for the population. In certain co-operatives ... the existing grain stores were not big enough to contain the extra quantity of rice, which meant that they had to be left in the fields. (8)

Against this, Kampuchean who fled to Thailand between 1975 and 1978 spoke of inadequate rice rations, even of acute food shortages and famines. How is this apparent contradiction to be explained?

The lowest administrative units in Democratic Kampuchea were the co-operatives, combinations of several villages (phum), which were supposed to feed themselves. There was little support from the state. On the other hand, the co-operatives were expected to deliver rice surpluses to the state. In a number of "crisis regions" agricultural production was not enough to cover the inhabitants' nutritional needs (this was the case in the North West region, where most of the Kampuchean who fled to Thailand came from), whereas the co-operatives in other regions such as the South West and the Centre (which were the areas most frequently visited by the foreign delegations) were much better off. For example, the Kampuchean were proud to show their foreign guests (e.g. the Japanese and Swedes) the Ang Tasom (model) co-operative in Takeo province (S.W. region). This co-operative, with a population of almost 9,000, embraced in 1978 3,000 hectares (1 hectare = 2½ acres) of rice fields, 500 hectares of fields yielding other types of grain, 3,000 cows, 4,500 pigs and 32,000 head of poultry. In 1977, 3,000 tons of rice were produced of which 1,750 tons were put into storage, 325 tons went to the state and 925 tons were consumed by the members of the co-operative. (9)

That kind of situation did not obtain in other co-operatives. It often happened that co-operatives would deliver rice to the state in spite of the fact that they were not producing enough.

Their own members would receive only meagre rations, and as a rule former town-dwellers would be allocated less than the settled peasant population. In our view, this sort of unequal distribution constituted a grave problem, which was further exacerbated by the practice of denying the members of the co-operative any private plots. The government of Democratic Kampuchea was aware of this ultra-left mistake. According to Thiounn Prasith, Democratic Kampuchea's Ambassador to the UN in New York, the Pol Pot government launched early in 1978 a campaign to give every family a garden plot for its own private use, so as to raise the level of vegetable production. (10)

The mistakes depicted above have to be seen in the context of the Pol Pot government's aim of transforming Kampuchea into a modern agricultural country within an extremely short space of time. Which also explains why the government forced the expansion of the agricultural infrastructure (building of dams, large-scale irrigation systems, reclamation of hitherto undeveloped jungle areas, etc.) and accepted a certain level of consumption crises as part of the price to be paid. In this respect we can see clear parallels with Russia in the 30's and the "Great Leap Forward" in China.

2

The Government of Democratic Kampuchea unhitched the country from the world capitalist system after 1975 and attempted to pursue its own autonomous course of development to the benefit of the people.

As early as 1959, Khien Samhan had discussed such a "Kampuchean way" in his doctoral dissertation. Khien Samphan, who was influenced by the similar views of his Egyptian colleague Samir Amin (who is now Director of the African Institute of Economic Development and Planning in Dakar, Senegal), recognized that the integration of Kampuchea into the capitalist system of the international division of labour conferred no benefits at all on his country. The "unhitching" of Kampuchea from the world capitalist system was always regarded by the leaders of the "Khmers Rouges" as a temporary measure. In fact, from 1977 on, Kampuchea opened itself up again increasingly to foreign trade on the basis of mutual benefit, and at the end of 1978 the government was planning to re-introduce money. The reasons for this were the unmistakable development of the productive forces following the end of the US war, and the concomitant strengthening of the country's economic base, which together made foreign trade on an equal basis possible.

Consequently, between 1975 and 1978 Kampuchea developed its political and economic ties with independent, socialist and non-aligned countries, such as North Korea and Yugoslavia.

The independent path of national construction is certainly the main reason for the massive campaign of vilification mounted by the West, the Soviet Union and Vietnam against the Kampuchean

revolution. Richard Gott of the "Guardian" has drawn an interesting parallel with the regime of Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia in nineteenth-century Paraguay:

Francia, who refused to allow his country to be opened up to the alleged benefits of British-imposed free trade, was not-ably vilified in the British press. But, behind his borders, he managed to turn his country into the most powerful state in Latin America. (11)

3

Society in Democratic Kampuchea was characterized by an extreme contradiction between the rural and the urban population which jeopardized the national unity of the country. Given that, Kampuchea was not able to resist fully Vietnamese expansion.

Kampuchean society has been defined for centuries by a crass contrast between town and country, which in a certain sense assumed the form of a class contradiction. The state bureaucracy sat in the towns and extorted taxes from the peasants. With the establishment of French colonialism and the integration of Kampuchea into the world capitalist system, a bureaucratic comprador bourgeoisie developed which profited from colonialism, whereas in the countryside, with the exception of the rubber plantations in the Kampuchean-Vietnamese border area, the traditional mode of production remained in existence. Rural Kampuchea and the towns (primarily Phnom Penh), which were oriented towards the world market and were largely unproductive, represented two entirely different worlds.

The crass town/country contrast became even more pronounced after the failure of Sihanouk's "Buddhist socialism" towards the mid-60's. Two events should be mentioned in this context: the appointment of Lon Nol as Prime Minister in 1966 and the peasants' uprising in Samlaut in 1967.

The process by which the imperialist-backed urban bourgeoisie seized power culminated in Lon Nol's 1970 coup d'état, directed against Prince Norodom Sihanouk. This reactionary putsch, however, also prompted the Kampuchean peasantry to mobilize politically on a large scale. The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), which had been leading the armed struggle since 1968, organized the peasant masses in the struggle for national liberation against US imperialism.

Thus it was that by 1975 the whole of the countryside had been liberated, while the larger towns remained bastions of the Lon Nol regime. After the conclusive defeat of the pro-American regime on April 17th, 1975, the "Khmers Rouges" were confronted with the seemingly impossible task of integrating into the revolutionary order of Democratic Kampuchea hundreds of thousands of town-dwellers, many of them avowed enemies of the new regime. The "Khmers Rouges" (who claimed throughout to be the representatives of the

peasants' interests and indeed, from 1968 right through to 1975, worked almost exclusively in the rural areas - where, moreover, they recruited most of their members from the rebellious peasant youth) failed to accomplish this task.

In many co-operatives the former urban dwellers ("new people") possessed considerably fewer rights than the old-established rural population ("old people"). It even went to the extent where rice rations were reduced for those who belonged to the "new people".

In our view, this was not an official policy of the government of Democratic Kampuchea, but was in line with the attitude of many local cadres and large sections of the peasantry, who regarded the town-dwellers who had survived the US bombing war almost as "prisoners of war" and set out to re-educate them through hard physical labour. The official statements of the CPK - Pol Pot's speeches, for instance - proceed, by contrast, from a Marxist class analysis:

These former poor and lower middle peasants constitute 75% of the total population ... The former middle peasants and former petit-bourgeois make up a further 20%. That adds up to 95%, which represents a powerful force, not only from a political and ideological point of view, but also in respect of organization and ability in all fields, most particularly in the field of agricultural production. It is a force which will draw the remaining 5%, the majority of whom are patriots, along with it. ... Of these 5%, at least 3 or 4% are for the revolution. Which means that 98 or 99% of the population is for the revolution ... (12)

According to Pol Pot, then, only 1 or 2% of Kampucheans were "reactionary elements", who had to be "educated and won over", "neutralized", or, if need be, "isolated", so as to be made "incapable of causing any damage."

It is worth emphasizing that Pol Pot divides the Kampuchean population in accordance with their social origins and not - as has often happened in practice - in accordance with their behaviour during the anti-American war of liberation. And yet his class analysis is one-sided, because it adopts as its criterion for the political basis of the Kampuchean revolution simply and solely which class this, that or the other person belongs to.

This limited and one-sided class analysis made it difficult for the leadership of the CPK to handle correctly the contradictions among the people. Resistance to their policies which went beyond the level of 1 or 2% was all too readily regarded as "sabotage committed by foreign agents."

However, it would be wrong to see the oppressive policies of Democratic Kampuchea vis-à-vis the former urban upper and middle strata simply as an ideological problem. We must not overlook the Vietnamese policy of destabilizing Kampuchea, Hanoi's striving after hegemony over the whole of Indochina (after 1975). The threat posed to Kampuchea's national independence by the reactionary regime in Hanoi was a very real one. It



Pol Pot: one-sided class analysis

prompted the "Khmers Rouges" to take extremely harsh and repressive measures against the bourgeois and feudal elements, for it was they who were seen as potential allies of Vietnamese hegemonism. (13)

That these fears were not groundless is demonstrated by the political base of the Heng Samrin regime today, just as much as by that of the former Lon Nol regime. However, it is only proper that the "Khmers Rouges" should ask themselves to what extent they themselves, by virtue of their ultra-left politics, drove many bourgeois (and not only bourgeois) elements into the arms of the Vietnamese aggressors.

4

Thousands fell victim to the internal political purges in Democratic Kampuchea. The frequently voiced allegation that the Democratic Kampuchean government perpetrated "genocide on its own people" is not justified, however.

All discussions on Kampuchea eventually come up against the extremely serious issue of "Pol Pot's massacres". How many people were killed between 1975 and 1978?

In an earlier study, "Population Development in Kampuchea", (14) we dealt with this question in detail. Our investigations showed that between 1975 and 1978 about 500,000 died over and above the natural mortality rate. The overwhelming majority died of starvation and disease in the immediate post-war period (modern medical treatment was not available until 1976!) Between 30,000 and 50,000 Kampucheans were murdered during the Pol Pot period.

More important than the precise scale of the killings is the question of who was responsible for them. Were the massacres:

a) an official policy of the central government in Phnom Penh?

b) a "grass-roots" reaction in the rural areas?

Point a) is given credence by the systematic murders of senior Lon Nol officers and government officials in the period after April 17th, 1975. Point b), however, is strengthened by two decrees issued by the central government - one in May, 1975, (15) the other in October, 1975 (16) - both ordering a stop to all killings and acts of revenge.

Policies towards the lower and middle-ranking officials of Lon Nol differed from one area of Kampuchea to another. In several regions, the number of killings was very limited. Michael Vickery is an American expert on Kampuchea, who interviewed and questioned large numbers of refugees. He concludes:

In the (for the Pol Pot faction) ideologically correct South West region, teachers, engineers, doctors and certain other categories of civilian personnel were never marked out as such for extermination and in the ideologically less well organized Eastern region, which was hostile to Pol Pot, similar conditions prevailed. Besides these very large regions, in the smaller Kratie special zone number 505 nobody apart from officers was ever in any danger on account of their former position ... And even in the North West, where the cadres interpreted politics as a licence to kill, there was one whole zone (out of seven altogether) in which the number of people murdered was minimal. (17)

Between 1975 and 1977, there were no systematic massacres, ordered by the government of Democratic Kampuchea; but there were bloody excesses committed at the regional and local level. (The purging of "Vietnamese agents" in the Eastern region from May 1978 onwards is a different issue, which we shall discuss more closely in the next section.)

The North West region bordering on Thailand (Battambang province) was undoubtedly the scene of the bloodiest excesses perpetrated against enemies of the revolutionary regime. Apart from the brutality of the local CPK cadres, an important role was played by the acts of vengeance carried out by the peasants. Many of the atrocities described by refugees are in no way "typically Kampuchean", but are rather characteristic of peasant wars with which even our own German history has made us familiar. The Egyptian economist Samir Amin has drawn some interesting parallels with more recent peasant uprisings in Africa:

The history of these peasant societies is an uninterrupted succession of revolts against domination by capital, against the administration machinery, against forced labour and taxes - massive uprisings whenever the countryside notices that the influence of urban capital has been weakened. In Zaire the peasants killed the government officials during a period of weakening imperialism, occupied the towns, attacked all the symbols of their oppression, shot ruthlessly anybody who wore a tie,

burned down the air-conditioned villas, and did not even spare the missionaries with their spirituality, nor the medical personnel with their health-care; nor the teachers with all their learning. Similar examples are to be found everywhere, from Kenya to Cameroun and Madagascar. (18)

The comparison with similar occurrences in certain parts of Kampuchea after the victory over US imperialism is striking. Democratic Kampuchea is anything but "unique". Rather, we can expect developments similar to those that took place in Kampuchea to occur in a number of third world countries in the coming years and decades.

5

The internal disputes in the CPK centred on questions relating to national reconstruction. The ideological (and national) conflict with Vietnam played a less significant role.

The conflict within the CPK between 1975 and 1978 is an area which has received less critical attention than almost any other in Kampuchean history. The representatives of Democratic Kampuchea describe the disputes in the CPK as struggles between "cadres devoted to the Kampuchean revolution" and "Vietnamese agents". The latter, in this version, were more or less responsible for all the difficulties that cropped up. By mid-1978, however, it had become possible to

"eliminate" them, with the result that only the "good ones" (i.e. pro-Pol Pot people) were left. (19)

The Vietnamese and their apologists such as Ben Kiernan (20) have a similar view, but in reverse. In other words, the two opposing schools of thought both proceed from a purely ideological conflict, and, moreover, assert that there existed a strong pro-Vietnamese faction within the Kampuchean patriotic and revolutionary movement (after 1975!). It is a plausible interpretation, all the more so in view of the current situation in Kampuchea. We believe it to be wrong, however, on two counts:

1. The Khmer cadres who had been schooled in Hanoi and returned to Kampuchea after 1970 had already been removed by 1972. They were rightly regarded by the Kampuchean revolutionaries as representatives of Vietnamese interests.
2. There is a strong, historically grounded tradition of anti-Vietnamese feeling to be found in all sections of the Khmer population.

But if there were struggles within the CPK, as there undoubtedly were, where were the lines drawn? Since no authentic sources are available, the following remarks are based chiefly on the investigations carried out by the American academic Stephen R. Heder. (21) Heder speaks fluent Khmer, and between July 1979 and April 1980 he interviewed more than 600 Kampuchean refugees.

It is necessary at the outset to say something about the organizational structure of the CPK. From 1968 to 1975 the CPK was organized on a regional basis. Each region had its own administrative apparatus, its own troops, etc. The



30th Anniversary of Vietnam's independence, 1975
Sihanouk, Pham Van Dong, Khieu Samphan

regions were relatively independent of the party's central committee, which had only one region under its immediate administration, the strategically important but economically backward North West. The Central Committee had no direct influence on the other regions. After 1975, the task facing the leaders in Phnom Penh was to centralize both the administrative structure of the country and the party apparatus. That could not be done unless the regional party committees supported the policies of the central committee.

Such support was not equally forthcoming in all regions. The South West region (the provinces of Kampot, Takeo, Kompong Speu, Koh Kong; Pursat and Kompong Chhang also belonged originally to this large region, but were separated off after 1975 and re-named "West region") led by Chhit Choeurn (alias Ta Mok), provided the main support for the Central Committee under Pol Pot and Nuon Chea. Support for the Central Committee's policies was relatively strong in the Northern region (Siem Reap, Preah Vihear and Oddar Mean Chey provinces), the Central region (Kompong Thom and Kompong Cham west of the Mekong river), the "Special" region (Kandal province together with the capital Phnom Penh) and the North East region, which is populated by national minorities (Kratie, Stung Treng, Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces).

The situation was less clear-cut in the North West region (Battambang province) and in the Eastern region (Prey Veng, Svay Rieng and Kompong Cham east of the Mekong). The North West region had a very high proportion of former city-dwellers from Phnom Penh and Battambang. Both governmental and party structures were weak in this province, for large parts of it had been controlled right up to the end of the war by Lon Nol's troops (it was in fact the only rural area over which his regime had had any sway). Although the North West region is traditionally an area which produces a surplus of rice, the factors just mentioned led to its being unable to deliver a surplus to the state after 1975. In Heder's view, the central government showed little appreciation of these particular difficulties and suspected sabotage by "incompetent cadres", which had to be countered by purges.

A similar fate befell the Eastern region, which suffered from the heavy devastation wrought by the first Vietnamese invasion at the end of 1977 and was therefore unable to achieve a rice surplus of any significance. The region's party committee also demanded of Phnom Penh that the rationing system be altered and criticised the accumulation of capital at the expense of the people's living standards. The inner-party purges that occurred in the Eastern region up to the middle of 1978 were relatively extensive. They were carried out by troops from the South West, and several thousand people (not only party members) fell victim to them. A number of cadres such as Heng Samrin escaped to Vietnam, where they offered their services to the Vietnamese. Heder considers these people to be disillusioned patriots, who went to Vietnam against their will initially, simply in order to escape the purges.

The particular economic problems which affected the North West and the East were not the only reasons for the purges. Relations with Vietnam also played a role. At issue was not whether or not Kampuchea should remain independent or submit to Vietnamese hegemony. The crucial question was: how should Vietnam be confronted?

The Eastern region's party committee demanded of the government in Phnom Penh that it strengthen its diplomatic efforts; the government, on the other hand, interpreted this demand as "capitulationism". The situation in the North West was similar. The North West borders on Thailand, and it was from Thailand that Khmer Serei groups were operating in an effort to hamper reconstruction in the border area. The region's party committee, under the leadership of the deputy state president Rhos Nim, demanded more resolute measures against Thailand and a reinforcement of the Kampuchean army in the border area.

The leadership in Phnom Penh refused to entertain these demands: in their view, Vietnam had been the main enemy of the Kampuchean people since early 1977, and therefore troops had to be withdrawn from the Thai border in order to strengthen the lines of defence against Vietnam in the East. This was why, from the beginning of 1977 onwards, the leadership of the CPK and of Democratic Kampuchea had intensified their efforts to secure an accommodation with Thailand, so that all forces could be mobilized against the Vietnamese threat. The leadership of the North West region, however, obviously saw Thailand and Vietnam as equally dangerous in respect of Kampuchea's national independence. (22)

In the view of the leadership around Pol Pot, the responsible cadres in the North West and the East were - and this view was not wholly unjustified - objectively "sabotaging" the resistance to Vietnamese expansionism, even if they had originally been as patriotic as anybody else. (23) Both economic problems and relations with Vietnam contributed to the various purges. But that still doesn't explain why the purges took place on such an enormous scale.

In our view, the Kampuchean leaders reacted inadequately to the Vietnamese threat - indeed, they probably underestimated it. Hence they were incapable of establishing in the interior a broad national united front that would have included the former urban middle class. Such a united front would of course have necessitated the modification of their previous policy of national construction. It was not until very late in the day, moreover, that the government of Democratic Kampuchea attempted to build a broad international front against Vietnam.

When the Vietnamese launched their first major offensive against Kampuchea at the end of 1977, the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea obviously panicked. They interpreted any and every criticism, whether of social policy or of the party, as "Vietnamese infiltration". Even several senior cadres, who in the main followed the Central Committee line, were found "incompetent" and liquidated in the autumn of 1978: Chou Chet (party secretary for the West Region), Kang Chap (party secretary for the Northern region, who as late as May 1978, on the occasion of Nicolae Ceaucescu's state visit, was still playing a central role), (24) and Vorn Vet (Democratic Kampuchea's Minister of Economics, who accompanied Pol Pot and Ieng Sary to the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in late 1977). (25) There has never been a discussion within the party of the failures committed by the purged cadres: after all, they were "traitors".

It should not be concluded from the foregoing that we deny the existence of Vietnamese agents in

Kampuchea between 1975 and 1978. Interviews conducted by George Hildebrand with Kampuchean refugees in the USA indicate that there was indeed Vietnamese infiltration and sabotage in that period. (26) What we do reject, however, is the argument that there was an organized network of agents in the party and state apparatuses, directed by Vietnam. If such a network had existed, the "treasonous" party committees in the North West and the East would have been able to co-ordinate their activities to bring about the fall of the government in Phnom Penh. That did not happen. The various purges were carried out over a period of almost two years. Moreover, our argument is corroborated by the fact that it was precisely the economics ministry where several changes of top personnel took place, whereas the Foreign Ministry remained unchanged throughout the period 1975-78.

6

In its foreign relations, Democratic Kampuchea pursued a consistent policy of non-alignment.

At the conferences of the non-aligned movement (such as the summit conference held in Colombo in 1976), Democratic Kampuchea emphasized the non-aligned character of the "bloc-free" countries and repudiated categorically the theory that their "natural allies" were to be found in the "socialist camp". The government of Democratic Kampuchea developed its external political and diplomatic relations primarily with independent socialist countries, with China, North Korea, Yugoslavia and Rumania. It also maintained friendly relations with its western neighbours, Thailand and Laos, which both belong, as does Kampuchea, to the Indian cultural sphere. (27)

In a speech delivered during his state visit to China (one day after his speech commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of the founding of the CPK, which he gave before leaving Phnom Penh), Pol Pot set out the essentials of Kampuchean foreign policy:

The Communist Party of Kampuchea and the Government of Democratic Kampuchea, who suffered cruelly from the barbarous acts of the imperialists, expansionists and reactionaries in the course of their history and who fought in concert with the oppressed and exploited peoples in the world, stand resolutely and always on the side of the oppressed peoples in the world, and especially on the side of the peoples of the non-aligned and third world countries, for the revolutionary cause of national and people's liberation and for the defence of independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right to decide their own destinies.

We stand firmly on the side of the Chinese people for resolving the Taiwan problem in accordance with the just position of the People's Republic of China.

We stand firmly on the side of the Korean people for the reunification of their fatherland in accordance with the correct policy advocated by President Kim Il Sung.

We stand firmly on the side of the people of East Timor for resolving the problem of East Timor in accordance with the just position of the Revolutionary Front for Independent East Timor (FRETILIN).

We stand firmly on the side of the Palestinian people for achieving their national rights, the right to decide their own destiny and the right to found their own independent state on Palestinian soil. We also stand firmly on the side of the Arab peoples for the liberation of their territories occupied by the Israeli Zionists.

We stand firmly on the side of the Zimbabwean, Namibian and Azanian peoples against Vorster's barbarous colonialist regime of apartheid and against Ian Smith's racism.

We are resolutely united with all poor countries in their struggle to eliminate the economic order based on exploitation and plunder by the rich great powers and for a truly just and equitable new international economic order. (28)

As far as building an international front against Vietnam was concerned, the Pol Pot government did not begin to act until very late on (in 1978), and even then very tentatively. Over-estimating its own forces, it believed that it could be a match for Vietnam without substantial foreign help.

UN General Secretary Waldheim was invited to Phnom Penh in late 1978. His visit was planned for February 1979, but never took place on account of the intervening Vietnamese invasion.

During 1978 Democratic Kampuchea developed its ties with the ASEAN countries and with China. Yet it seems that there were differences with China over several international issues, among them the role of the Soviet Union. When the Kampuchean defence minister, Son Sen, visited Beijing in July 1978, he rejected the Chinese concept of an "anti-hegemonist united front" (against the Soviet Union and - in the S.E. Asian context - Vietnam) and insisted on the Kampuchean concept of the struggle against "imperialism" (i.e. the USA) and "expansionism" (i.e. Vietnam, and beside it the USSR). (29)

It is possible that sections of the Kampuchean leadership (Khieu Samphan?) (30) were more inclined to support the Chinese concept. But the line that emerged in 1977 as Kampuchean policy seems to have lain somewhere between China's and Albania's.



Conclusion

From 1975 to 1978, the government of Democratic Kampuchea achieved both positive and negative results. We are not concerned here to weigh them up precisely against each other. What is important to register is that the "Khmers Rouges", for all the weaknesses of their policies in specific areas, were pursuing - or at least attempting to pursue - an overall policy that was in the interest of the working people of Kampuchea.

Which is why even today large sections of the rural population support the guerillas of Democratic Kampuchea in the anti-Vietnamese struggle, in spite of the serious mistakes made between 1975 and 1978. These mistakes, of course, also alienated many patriotic and revolutionary Kampucheans.

It may well be, as Thiounn Munm, Democratic Kampuchea's Ministry of Technology, claims, that, but for the Vietnamese invasion, Kampuchea would have become "a model for other countries of the Third World." (31)

But from 1975 to 1978 Kampuchea was not an isolated island. In the process of national reconstruction, more weight should have been given to the possibilities of a Vietnamese invasion. On the other hand, the internal political disputes would have been fought out less violently, had it not been for the Vietnamese threat. It would be a fatal mistake, therefore, to see the reasons for the 1975-8 purges as residing solely in the ideology of the "Khmers Rouges" and to ignore completely the Vietnam factor.

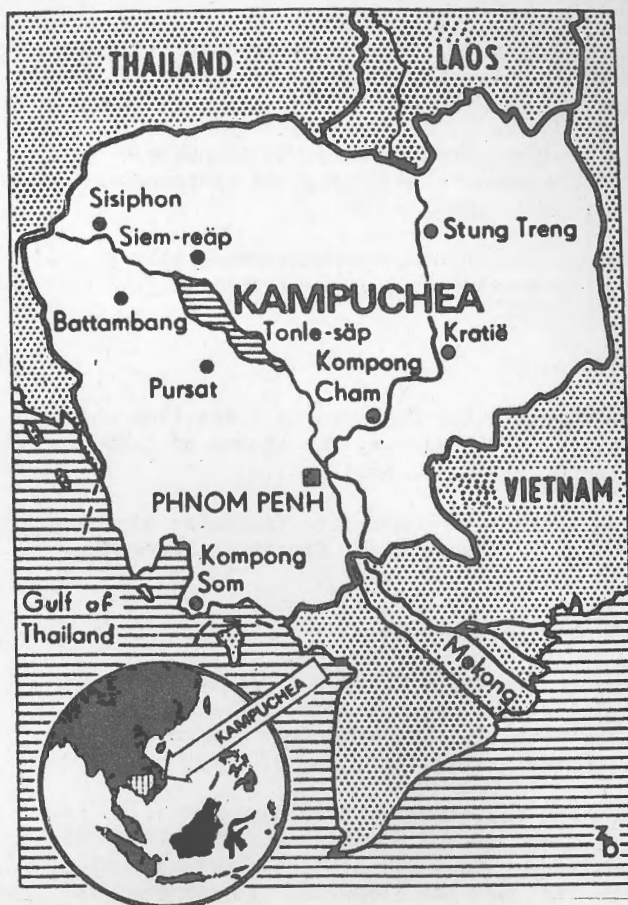
Unlike Stephen Heder, we do not believe, either, that the forces of Democratic Kampuchea are incapable of learning from their mistakes. Representatives of Democratic Kampuchea have recently criticized their own previous underestimation of Vietnam. Khieu Samphan, for instance, said in an interview with AFP and Reuters on March 3rd, 1981:

Above all, Vietnamese aggression is the most decisive proof that the policies we pursued from 1975 to 1978 are no longer of any use.

The government of Democratic Kampuchea is really trying to correct the mistakes it has made. This is shown by the improved attitude of the Khmers Rouges towards those sections of the population previously hostile to them. (32) It is also shown by a change of policy in the liberated zones, where since the spring of 1980 agricultural land has been made available for private use, and in general greater democratic liberties have been granted to the population.

Positive changes such as those described provide grounds for hoping that a broadly-based popular movement of resistance against the occupying power will develop.

Volker Grabowsky
Kiel, May 1981



Notes

1. From the draft programme of the "Patriotic and Democratic Front of Great National Union of Kampuchea", 21.8.1979.
2. c.f. Khieu Samphan: "We made some big mistakes", in *Newsweek*, 21.7.1980.
3. c.f. interview with Ieng Thirith in *Rote Fahne*, 29.11.1979.
4. *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), 2.6.1978, p. 42.
5. FEER, Year Book 1979.
- 6.
7. Article in *St. Louis Dispatch*, Jan. 15, 1979. reprinted in the "Congressional Record", Jan. 18, 1979, and in *New War in Southeast Asia*, published by the Kampuchea Support Committee, New York.
8. FEER Year Book, p. 160.
9. See the report by Tadashi Ito: "Cambodia: Run by the Jungle Green Comrades", in *Aktueller Informationsdienst Asien*, No. 23/78 (Hamburg).
10. Interview with Thiounn Prasith in *L'Humanité Rouge*, 26.7. - 22.8.1979.
11. Richard Gott, "Have we got it all wrong about Pol Pot?" in *The Guardian*, 12.11.1979.
- 12.
13. Stephen R. Heder, "Kampuchea - Occupation and Resistance", Bangkok, January 1980, p. 8.

14. This is a translation of the title of the original German article, "Die Bevölkerungsentwicklung Kampuchreas", published in Kommunismus und Klassenkampf, No. 1, 1981.

15. Ben Kiernan, "Conflict in the Kampuchean Communist Movement", in Journal of Contemporary Asia, Nos. 1/2, 1980, p. 51.

16. Michael Vickery: "Kampuchean Demography - Cooking the Books", p. 6 (unpublished ms., November, 1980).

17. *ibid*, p. 10.

18. Samir Amin, "The Problems of Transition and of the Building of Socialism: The Lesson of Cambodia", Dakar, April, 1976, p. 7ff.

19. Terms used by a Democratic Kampuchea diplomat in a personal conversation, Stockholm, December, 1980.

20. Ben Kiernan, *op. cit.*

21. Stephen R. Heder, "From Pol Pot to Pen Sovan to the Villages", Bangkok, June 1980; Interview with S.R. Heder in Ampo (Japan-Asia Quarterly Review) Vol. 12, No. 3, 1980.

22. From the beginning of 1977, repeated incidents occurred in the North West, near the border with Thailand. They disturbed the attempts of both the Thai and the Kampuchean governments to improve their state-to-state relations. After visiting Phnom Penh in late January, 1978, Thailand's Foreign Minister Uppadit held a press conference in Bangkok (February 3rd), at which he voiced no criticism at all of Democratic Kampuchea. Six days later, 300 Thai villagers from the Ubol province were abducted across the Kampuchean border. This was the first of a whole series of incidents which occurred in the following months along the border.

23. Heder even considers Heng Samrin (who until May 1978 was a commander in the Eastern region) to have been a patriot before his flight to Vietnam. ("From Pol Pot to Pen Sovan to the Villages", p. 15). Whether this is correct or not is a moot point. It is true, however, that within the pro-Vietnamese regime of the "People's Republic of Kampuchea", there are considerable differences between cadres like Heng Samrin who deserted the CPK and those such as Pen Sovan, the real strong man in Phnom Penh today, who had been trained in Vietnam since 1954 and did not return to Kampuchea until 1979. Representatives of Democratic Kampuchea also recognize these differences.

24. c.f. "Visite officielle d'amitié du camarade Nicolae Ceausescu" (28-30.5.1978), published by the "Comité des Patriotes du Kampuchea Démocratique en France"

25. Karl D. Jackson, "Cambodia 1977: Gone to Pol Pot", in Asian Survey, No. 1, 1978, p. 82.

26. c.f. George Hildebrand's speech at the International Kampuchea Solidarity Conference in Stockholm. He said: "Refugees with whom I spoke recently in California spoke of things which they had experienced and which they could not explain to themselves - for example, they would be told to plant wet rice where in fact dry rice should have been planted, and vice versa, with the result that

people in their area died of hunger. Or in another case people were assigned to one work project, almost completed it, and were then taken to another work camp, only to be brought back later to the first one to find it collapsed. In other words, there is a strong suspicion of sabotage."

27. Even after the break between Phnom Penh and Hanoi in December 1977, Laos and Democratic Kampuchea maintained friendly relations, at least until mid-1978.

28. Peking Review, October 7th, 1977, pp. 26-27.

29. FEER, 11.8.1978, p. 13.

30. Chan Sambo, a Kampuchean refugee who lives in Kiel spoke to us of differences in the positions of Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan in relation to foreign policy. They were "opponents", he said. He claimed that Khieu Samphan wanted to follow the Chinese line more closely, but that Pol Pot, who distrusted the effect of any foreign support upon Kampuchea's independence, finally prevailed.

31. Personal conversation with Thiounn Mumm in Stockholm, December, 1980.

32. The interviews with Kampuchean refugees conducted by the Australian Milton Osborne produced the following picture: refugees expressed their fear of the Vietnamese 46 times, compared with 18 times in respect of the Khmers Rouges (FEER, May 1st, 1981). Even 18 months ago, the figures would have been reversed.

