

The Analytical Errors of the Kampuchean Communist Party

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Editorial note. In our last issue we carried an article on the politics of Demotracric Kampuchea during the 1975-78 period. In this issue we continue the debate by presenting an alternative interpretation of the events leading up to that period that focusses upon the underlying analytical errors made by the CPK. It has been written by W.E. Willmott, Professor of Sociology in the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and was first published in the Canadian quarterly, Pacific Affairs, vol. 54, no. 2, Summer 1981. The extracts that follow have been taken from a much longer version and we have had to leave out the extensive, well-

documented footnotes for reasons of space. Reprinted by permission.

The readers may find it useful to have particulars of the two studies on which the following account relies heavily:

Khieu Samphan, Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development, tr. Laura Summers (Ithaca, New York: Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1979).

Jean Delvert, Le Paysan Cambodgien (Paris and The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1961).

On September 27, 1977, Pol Pot presented a long report to a "Meeting to Commemorate the 17th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of Kampuchea" during which he officially revealed for the first time the existence of the Kampuchean Communist Party (KCP) and reviewed the history of the revolution. While no one was surprised at the revelation, the speech is important nevertheless, for it presents the most comprehensive statement available of how the KCP had analyzed Khmer society, history, and its own success in achieving political power ...

A central aspect of a revolutionary ideology is the analysis of the society to estimate the revolutionary potential of its various classes. While many marxists would insist that the ideology flows from the analysis, it seems to me more accurate to see the two as dialectically related, for the ideology also determines the analysis to a large extent, as I show below for Kampuchean marxists. The vast majority of Kampucheans were peasants, of course, and therefore the analysis of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry takes a central place - as in most Asian countries. Thus, Pol Pot tells us (seventeen years after the fact) that the founding congress of the KCP, held in the Phnom Penh railway station 28-30 September 1960, determined the fundamental strategic line of the "national democratic revolution" from an analysis of "the true nature of Kampuchean society at the time ... A correct analysis of Kampuchean society allows a correct definition of the tasks of the revolution, and au contraire, an



Pol Pot - erroneous analysis

erroneous analysis will lead to equally erroneous tasks." The congress agreed on the fundamental characterisation of Kampuchea as a "semi-colonial country" under the yoke of American imperialism, and then went on to determine the "fundamental contradiction" within Kampuchean society.

The KCP recognised, of course, that Kampuchean society was complex in 1960, with various forms

of exploitation defining conflicting class interests. However, eighty-five per cent of the Kampucheans were peasants, "the crushed majority" whose relationship with the landlords, according to the KCP, was "the contradiction that played the preponderant role" in Kampuchean society; it was therefore to this contradiction that the KCP should attach highest priority in developing the revolutionary struggle ...

Mistaking the Main Contradiction

[The] graphic example of the poverty suffered by Khmer peasants during the old regime illustrates the reason why the founding congress defined as "antagonistic" the exploitative relationship between landlords and peasants. They believed that mobilising the peasants against the landlords was the only way to achieve power:

That is how we defined our tasks in the democratic revolution ... the liberation of the people ... To liberate the peasants who constitute 85% of the population is at the same time to liberate all the people. Among the remaining 15%, the great majority joins the masses of the 85%. This mass constitutes a powerful revolutionary force, powerful not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively because it is an antagonistic contradiction. To uncover this force, that is the key to victory. To think of our peasants as backward, unhygienic, miserable, uncultured, incapable of making revolution is to fall into a serious error of analysis. It is not to proceed from a scientific analysis of the contradictions at the heart of society.

Starting in 1960 with this analysis, the KCP embarked on a two-front attack against imperialism and rural exploitation. Some of the small band that met in the Phnom Penh railway station remained in the city to continue the political struggle against imperialism, but by 1963 almost all of them had retired to the countryside to organise the peasants. It is not my purpose here to trace in detail the course of the revolutionary struggle that led to victory for the KCP in 1975, for this has been ably done already by Stephen Heder and others. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that the sociological analysis upon which the KCP based its "revolutionary line" was erroneous and led to serious errors in the definition of revolutionary tasks. The extent of repression by the KCP and the subsequent defeat of Democratic Kampuchea by a rapid Vietnamese invasion in 1978 stem from the gross error of analysis which identified the peasant-landlord relationship as the fundamental contradiction in Khmer society in the 1960s.

It is not possible, of course, to reconstruct the debate during the founding congress in order to evaluate the supporting evidence for the social analysis Pol Pot provides in his report. It is altogether likely, however, that a major contribution was made by Khieu Samphan, who had presented his doctoral dissertation at the University of Paris only the year before. This dissertation entitled "L'économie du Cambodge et ses problèmes d'industrialisation," offers an analysis of the Kampuchean economy that obviously provided the basic lines for KCP policy in economic development



Khieu Samphan: underestimated middle peasants

generally, as has been pointed out by several scholars already. Whatever research was done among the peasants subsequently was undoubtedly guided by the analysis advanced by Khieu Samphan, and I therefore take it as the basic document for the KCP in this matter. For this reason, it is worthwhile to review his argument in some detail here.

Khieu Samphan characterised Kampuchean agriculture as "a feudal mode of production. The peasant family grows rice mainly for paying off land rents and debts, and the remainder goes toward meeting subsistence needs, not for exchange or for monetary gain." He characterises mid-nineteenth-century agriculture (at the time of the French invasion) as "resembling the feudal form" but not identical in that there were no large domains and no lords, because the monarchy was sufficiently powerful at the centre to destroy fiefdoms when they emerged. Instead, the *séthey* - or mandarins appointed by the king - represented the court's interests and powers at the local level, collecting taxes in the form of capitation. The French introduced private property in land in 1884, and by 1930 all rice fields were registered as privately owned ...

Clearly, the situation in Kampuchea was different not only from rural China but also from Vietnam, which is the contrast Khieu Samphan makes in the following passage. This paragraph also demonstrates his understanding of the nature of exploitation suffered by the Khmer middle peasants:

Middle peasants ... are numerically the largest group (60 percent) and seem to be holding on to a major share of the cultivated land (about 40 percent). In this respect, Cambodia differs from its neighbour, Viet Nam. In that country, big landlords own the overwhelming majority of lands, while poor peasants, numerically more important, have only a tiny portion of the cultivated land area. In Cambodia, middle peasants own their own agricultural implements as well as their own work animals. But more often than not, they lack operating capital. They obtain it from village usurers who are also large landowners or traders. They are then unable to escape the grasp of these people. Property ownership is no more than the appearance of ownership for a

substantial number of middle peasants. Interest rates attaining 200 to 300 percent per annum amount in practice to cheating them out of all their labour product just as if they were working the land of usurers. Belief in such "ownership" alone makes them hold on as best they can under the most difficult circumstances while waiting for "better times." Usurers, landlords, and traders have every interest in perpetuating this belief; they see no need to expropriate land for reasons of insolvency.

Since his thesis had to do with the nature of economic development rather than revolution, Khieu Samphan's analysis then moves toward an explanation of the lack of capital investment in Kampuchean agriculture...

KCP Squandered Support

As it turned out, the American war in Vietnam and its "side-show" in Kampuchea precluded reformist solutions, and Khieu Samphan's thesis became one to organise revolution instead. His analysis implied that rural misery could be fashioned into a mass peasant movement in support of a social revolution, just as the Chinese had successfully done three decades earlier. The rapid success in developing mass support in 1969-75 might suggest that this analysis was indeed correct, but the defeat of the KCP and its relegation to the maquis once again by the Vietnamese invasion at the end of 1978 casts some doubt.



DK maquis - recruited from peasantry

I shall return later to the issue of how the KCP achieved the mass support it enjoyed during the civil war, 1970-75. Its increasing resort to repression in 1977-78 suggests, however, that the KCP squandered what support it had by forcing unpopular policies on the peasants. The subsequent Vietnamese invasion moved so rapidly through Kampuchea that one cannot escape the conclusion that the KCP could muster no support whatsoever among the people by that time... It seems to me that the failure of the KCP suggests that their analysis was wrong, and a careful examination of the sociological evidence supports this view.

The evidence comes primarily from Jean Delvert's magisterial study of the Khmer peasants, undertaken at the time Khieu Samphan's dissertation was being presented in Paris. In it, one can find the facts to show not only that Khieu Samphan was wrong, but also how he made the error that led to the inappropriate analysis. Delvert surveyed the area where ninety per cent of the Khmer population lived by agriculture - that is, the heartland surrounding the Great Lake (Tonlé-sap), plus the southeastern provinces in the Mekong basin. He ignored the two provinces in the northwest (Mondolkiri and Ratanakiri) where live mainly non-Khmer highland peoples (montagnards), and the highland regions in the northwest and southwest, which are sparsely populated and atypical. His study included ethnographies of several villages as well as more general and statistical information. While much of the study is not relevant to this paper, his examination of land tenure provides detail that significantly contradicts Khieu Samphan's characterisation of rural Khmer society.

Delvert's findings demonstrate that the division of the Khmer peasantry into three classes is not warranted, despite the fact that small holdings predominated. He found that ninety-two per cent of the holdings were less than five hectares in 1956, and eighty per cent were less than two. At first glance, this might suggest that Khieu Samphan actually underestimated the proportion of poor peasants by relying on outdated figures. Two facts presented by Delvert, however, belie this categorisation, as does the ethnographic detail on specific villages. First, because Khmer inheritance is bilateral, properties were fragmented between both sons and daughters and owned individually rather than by families. Consequently, many families farmed at least two parcels of land, those belonging to the husband and to the wife, so that the size of family farms is larger than the individual holdings would suggest. While there were over 770,000 owners at the time of his study, there were only 659,000 family farms (menages d'agriculture). Fragmentation through bilateral inheritance thus increases the number of individual parcels but does not necessarily diminish the size of the family farm ...

Usury and Commerce

Delvert's ethnographic study leads him to the conclusion that most farms fell between two and five hectares, with the average being about 2.2 at the time. Furthermore, his information on village life suggests that peasant families could survive on less than two hectares - perhaps 1.5 - so the category of middle peasant (those living by family-farming) should include a far larger portion of the peasantry than Khieu Samphan supposed. The village studies also show that there was very little wage-labour in the villages ...

One need not agree that Kampuchea was "perfect" in order to recognise that Delvert's careful evidence completely contradicts the view of the KCP that landlord-tenant conflict was the fundamental contradiction of Kampuchean society. Indeed, Delvert himself has identified rural exploitation, but he insists that it lies in commerce and usury, not in rents or wage-labour. Before examining this question, it is worthwhile considering how the KCP made such a fundamental mistake in their view of rural society.

If one looks back at the cadastral figures from which Khieu Samphan derived his rural classes, one sees that they refer to three provinces only: Battambang, Prey Veng and Svayrieng - the three provinces Delvert expressly mentions as exceptional in containing large landholdings and therefore a degree of landlordism. These three provinces were capable of producing sufficiently large surpluses over subsistence that they attracted merchant capital into land-ownership, leading to a higher rate of tenancy than elsewhere in Kampuchea ...

Nationalism not Class Consciousness

To use figures from Battambang to represent all of Kampuchea, as Pol Pot did in the example quoted above, is obviously to distort the rural situation in Kampuchea. Battambang is radically different from the other Kampuchean provinces because of its recent history. Wars between Thailand and Kampuchea devastated its agriculture several times until Thailand eventually annexed the entire province in 1794, after which it fell under Thai patterns of exploitation. By the end of the nineteenth century there was only a sparse population along its rivers, the rest of the region being uncultivated grasslands. When it reverted to Kampuchea in 1907, many Thai peasants left their fields. The repopulation of its major rice plains began only in 1925, under French direction and cadastral policy. One result was larger proprietors, including several European and Chinese absentee-landlords, who owned large tracts farmed by workers or tenants. "Rural society is much more diversified here, less egalitarian than elsewhere" in the country, concludes Delvert.

As for Svayrieng and Prey Veng, these two provinces are in the southeast of Kampuchea, where there was the highest concentration of Vietnamese peasants, and where land tenure was most affected by the high rates of tenancy in neighbouring Cochinchina (South Vietnam). Neither of these provinces figured prominently in the revolution until relations between Kampuchea and Vietnam deteriorated to bellicosity in 1977. Battambang, on the other hand, was the region where the KCP first developed its rural support, following the Samlaut uprising in 1967. Without doubt, their years of political work in the Samlaut region reinforced the views of the KCP leaders that Khieu Samphan's analysis was a valid guide to formulating rural policy for the entire country. Altogether, the three provinces of Battambang, Prey Veng and Svayrieng comprised just over a million peasants in the late 1960s - only a fifth of the total peasantry in the country. Even there, the nature of exploitation was somewhat misunderstood by Khieu Samphan and then inappropriately generalised to the whole country ...

In summary, I have argued that the KCP incorrectly identified the exploitation of tenant by landlord as the major social tension in the Kampuchean countryside. Furthermore, the objective exploitation of Khmer peasant by Chinese merchant produced no righteous indignation, because it was mitigated by the ethnic division between them. Consequently, there was little social basis for rural discontent (except in pockets) when the KCP first began to organise the peasantry in the Kampuchean revolution.

The obvious objection to such a thesis is the un-

contestable fact that the KCP was able during its years in the maquis to develop a small guerrilla pocket in Battambang Province into a mass peasant movement which eventually swept the party to power with the capture of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975. This remarkable and rapid success seems to indicate that the KCP had correctly analyzed their potential support and understood how to mobilise peasants by highlighting their real problems of exploitation and offering popular revolutionary solutions. This argument can be refuted, however, by pointing to the three major factors that led to peasant support for the KCP: the popularity of Sihanouk, the Vietnamese invasion in 1970, and the American bombing of Kampuchea. None of these has much to do with class antagonisms in the countryside.

One reason why peasant masses rallied to the communist side in the civil war was the fact that Prince Norodom Sihanouk was at its head. At the beginning of 1970, according to Pol Pot, the KCP led only four thousand soldiers and fifty thousand guerrillas, while others estimate their forces as considerably less. Their popularity and area of control expanded markedly after the coup d'état led by Lon Nol in March 1970 forced Sihanouk from the position of being their enemy to becoming their titular leader as head of state of the Royal Government of National Unity of Kampuchea (GRUNK). Peasant demonstrations organised by the KCP in Kompong Cham following the coup called for the return of Sihanouk even before he had entered a united front with the KCP, clearly because it was seen by the KCP as a popular slogan among peasants. When in 1971 Sihanouk announced from Beijing that he would retire from political activity as soon as GRUNK was victorious, Ieng Sary made a special trip from Kampuchea to ask him to retract the statement



**PUTERA NORODOM
SIHANOUK**



IENG SARY

so that the Khmer peasants would not abandon the struggle. This is another clear indication that support for the KCP-led front depended on the popularity of Sihanouk at that time.

A second reason for mass peasant support of the united front led by the KCP was the Vietnamese invasion that followed Lon Nol's coup. Faced with difficulties from the first moment of his government, Lon Nol called upon Saigon for military support, and South Vietnamese armies swept through southeastern Kampuchea as far as Kompong Speu and Kompong Chhnang during June and July

1970, "pillaging, burning, raping" as they went. Not only the invasion itself, but also the evidence it provided that Lon Nol's government was a client of the Vietnamese, moved peasants to support the KCP-dominated GRUNK.

The third reason was the American bombing of Kampuchea, which we now know was heavier than any in previous history. Using bombs designed to destroy buildings and installations, American B-52s rained destruction on the rice fields, pagodas, and homes of Khmer peasants during three years, particularly during April-August 1973, when "the ground shook continuously" from the bombing, as Hu Nim told one reporter. In such horrible circumstances, Khmer peasants faced only two choices: either to become American-fed refugees in the city or to support the revolutionary forces. It is not surprising that hundreds of thousands, outraged by this American holocaust, threw in their lot with the KCP, which they knew only as Angkar - "the organisation." Indeed, the fact that the KCP hid its true identity for so many years is further, if indirect, evidence that the peasantry did not support the programme of the KCP as such, but were willing to rally to the nationalist cause of GRUNK.

Having achieved victory in armed struggle, the KCP believed it had a popular mandate to transform Khmer society radically and immediately. If my thesis is correct, however, the mandate was a nationalist, not a socialist one, and the forced march toward communism that followed their vic-

tory was unpopular from the start. While the government of Democratic Kampuchea succeeded in carrying through an agricultural revolution during 1975-77, transforming floodland to irrigated fields capable of supporting two or three crops a year, solving the food shortages created by the American bombing and subsequent disruption of rural life, and replacing family farming by large-scale collective farming, this revolution was at the cost of increasing dissatisfaction and repression. Because their social analysis convinced them that they could expect widespread support for revolutionary change, the KCP were not prepared for the growing opposition and could define it as nothing else than counter-revolutionary. Consequently, no criticism was tolerated, and even the mildest opposition was punished severely. Not having felt particularly exploited before, peasants were not impressed by the liquidation of the "exploiting classes," but rather mourned the loss of urban commodities and rural freedom. Inexperienced cadres could think of no better solution to failing support than to punish or kill those who lacked enthusiasm for their programme. Their leaders are most to blame: not only did they lack any sense of Khmer history, they criminally failed to understand their own society. "Democratic Kampuchea," therefore, stands as a forlorn monument to the horrible consequences of any socialist revolution that ignores its own history and culture.

(University of Canterbury, New Zealand, February, 1981)