

Review

WHAT WENT WRONG IN KAMPUCHEA

LE KAMPUCHEA: VIET-NAM-CAMBODGE GUERRES ET
INDEPENDANCE

by Catherine Quiminal

Paris, Editions Anthropos, 1982.

"Failure, resistance in the environment created
by that failure and occupation of the country ..."

It is in relation to these historical facts
that Catherine Quiminal examines the Khmers Rouges
rule between 1975 and 1978. Her vantage point is
therefore a critical one - it departs from the
failure of the Democratic Kampuchea experiment.
But it is a criticism that situates that failure
within the context of the Kampuchean people's

struggle for national independence. The validity of that struggle and its continued relevance for the Kampuchean people is not negated, as Quiminal shows, by the disastrous consequences of the Kampuchean Communist Party's accession to power. The party's history was determined by a struggle on two fronts: against the repressive policies first of Sihanouk and then of the US-backed Lon Nol and against the Vietnamese communist leaders' repeated efforts to subordinate the Kampuchean party's struggle to their own tactical requirements. The Khmers Rouges' rise was therefore rooted in the struggle for national self-determination, which Sihanouk and even the Vietnamese promised but could not deliver.

Sihanouk's neutrality

Quiminal recalls that despite Sihanouk's much acclaimed non-alignment and refusal to side with the Americans in the Vietnam war, Cambodia under his rule was increasingly dominated by the US. According to Sihanouk's own account, the US through huge "aid" programmes was cultivating its own political elite.

Although the limitations on Cambodia's independence and the impoverishment of the mass of its people are indisputable, Sihanouk's role was more contradictory and complex than Quiminal's account would have it. Whatever the limitations of this non-alignment, Sihanouk successfully kept Cambodia out of the US's military grasp and maintained a neutrality that, far from serving the interest of SEATO, permitted the Vietnamese to use Cambodia's border areas as a sanctuary from US bombings. Subsequent developments have made Sihanouk's accomplishment all the more cherished, and largely explain Sihanouk's enduring popularity with broad sections of Cambodian society. Retrospective it may be, but this popularity is a factor that neither Vietnam nor the Kampuchean resistance has been able to ignore. Despite the urban decadence and corruption that thrived under and with the connivance of Sihanouk, the Prince's personal standing in the affections of his compatriots has survived because he kept the country free from foreign forces that neither of his successors - Lon Nol or the Democratic Kampuchean government - were able to secure.

To recognise the positive aspects of Sihanouk's rule is not in any way to justify the Vietnamese leadership's attempts at the time to halt the struggle of the Kampuchean communists, for fear of its jeopardizing Sihanouk's ability to keep the US war-machine out of Cambodia. The Vietnamese, writes Quiminal, were prepared to "buy their presence in Cambodia at the cost of sacrificing the independence and autonomy of the Cambodian revolutionaries". First liberate Vietnam, they argued; that would provide support for the other, less developed movements. "One can see here", adds Quiminal, "the beginnings of what has become the diktat in the region. The Vietnamese now declare their right to intervene, which is the same right as that of the USSR to intervene in Czechoslovakia." (p. 48)

Internal weaknesses

The history of the relation between the Vietnamese and Kampuchean communists allows little credence to the argument that Vietnam invaded Kampuchea



Prince Sihanouk

because of border violations by the latter. Rightly, the book devotes only passing comments on this issue. Kampuchea had nothing to gain from a border conflict, while Vietnam had a pretext to gain for invading Kampuchea. Nor is the argument that Democratic Kampuchea had become a puppet of the Chinese and was harassing Vietnam at the former's behest any more credible. As Quiminal points out, only Vietnamese propaganda has not recoiled from the absurdity of portraying the Pol Pot leadership as both xenophobic in the extreme and totally subservient to the Chinese.

But if Vietnam's reasons for invading Kampuchea cannot be put at Pol Pot's door, the conditions which made that occupation possible can. The Vietnamese leadership was able to realise its ambition of dominating Kampuchea because of the country's internal divisions and weakness. Quiminal's assessment of the DK period represents the most valuable section of the book. She discusses some of the key government decisions - evacuation of Phnom Penh, rapid collectivisation, excessive reliance on coercion, etc. - but instead of pursuing the method of demonology - a (witch)craze perfected by Pilger and Kiernan, she looks at the underlying political reasons for them, in the combination of objective and subjective factors.

The objective factors are well known. There were 3.5 million Kampucheans, half the population, concentrated in Phnom Penh when the Khmers Rouges entered the city in April 1975. Food was scarce and, equally important for the new leaders, the US had had ample opportunity to leave behind a network of agents. In one move the Khmers Rouges sought to resolve a number of contradictions: between the urban bourgeoisie and the peasantry, between the supporters of the US-Lon Nol government and their own guerrilla army, between an economy based on the city and one based on the countryside. But even had this political choice been correct, insufficient preparations to receive the people who were thus pushed out of the city undermined any political benefits that it may have yielded. But the error was not merely in the application of the

political line; the line itself, Quiminal argues, was wrong. The suppression of the contradiction between the city and the countryside by the incorporation of the old casses into cooperatives, with the accompanying abolition of market relations, assumed that the stage of communism was at hand. "Was the national question settled to the point where all the united front work could be broken up and there be an accelerated collectivisation, within a social revolution of unprecedented radicalness?" (p. 82)

A Kampuchean alternative

This incorrect identification of the stage that the Kampuchean revolution had reached derived, Quiminal indicates, from an incorrect analysis of both the external and internal forces. The dominant faction within the Kampuchean CP leadership underestimated the threat of a Vietnamese invasion and analysed incorrectly the social forces within Kampuchean society. The party classed 95% of the population as peasants yet the peasants' aspiration for land and improvement in the standard of living was neglected: "what is more important", declared a party statement, "is that they can witness with their own eyes that their country has at last become independent". (p. 84)

The forcible suppression - from above - of class differences obscured the classes that existed in Kampuchea. What differences persisted were put down to ideological legacies. It was on the basis of attitudes towards the party that the leadership sought to evaluate the social forces within the society. The population was divided between the "base people", those who had been in the guerrilla-held areas before 1975, and the "new people", those who had lived under Lon Nol - US control. The application to a new situation of a distinction that was derived from the past "blocked the unity of the largest possible number of people against the Vietnamese, the new enemy of the time. It indicated the absence of a policy of mobilisation in the new stage." (p. 85)

Those who were opposed to the party leadership's analysis of the tasks of the revolution were treated as traitors. It followed a logic that Stalin inaugurated in 1936, when having declared that class divisions had disappeared and the state



Pol Pot: incorrect identification of the stage that the Kampuchean revolution had reached.

was that of the "whole people", any opposition that remained had to be the work of external enemies and their agents. Quiminal does not examine the divisions within the Kampuchea CP and seems to embrace the leadership's own explanation that opposition within the party came from those who wanted to subordinate Kampuchea to Vietnamese ambitions.

The implication of this view, that between Pol Pot's policies and Vietnam's occupation there was and there can be no alternative, is one that apologists for Hanoi also like to maintain. Yet the execution by the DK government of such prominent leaders as Hou Yuon and Hu Nim, whose known sympathies for the Cultural Revolution are likely above all to have been for its anti-bureaucratic and mass-participation aspects, suggests that there were indeed alternative political tendencies within the Kampuchean CP that saw the road to national independence and socialism for Kampuchea through the eyes neither of Pol Pot nor of Heng Samrin. Such weaknesses notwithstanding, Quiminal's book makes an important and valuable start towards putting the analysis of the Vietnam-Kampuchea conflict on to a sound, scientific basis.



The collectivisation took place at a break-neck speed