

# REVIEW OF

## Ben Kiernan's

# How Pol Pot Came to Power

VERSO PRESS, 1985, London.

Early in his book, How Pol Pot Came to Power, by way of illustrating that those who were later to lead the Khmer Rouge were Chauvinists, Kiernan writes:

Thiounn Thioeunn and Thiounn Chum were both sent to study in Hanoi from 1942 to 1945; their attitude to France and Japan during this period is not known, but they noted, according to their 1979 account, that 'Vietnamese intellectuals spoke of Angkor as their own'. After the war the two men went on to Paris... Their brother Mumm gained a doctorate in science there, and the fourth brother Prasith was also sent to study in France... All developed left-wing contacts there, but their nationalism was fierce. In fact they refused to meet Ho Chi Minh. Chum recalls: 'In Paris during the Fontainebleau Conference, in 1946, we were called to the Vietnamese delegation. 'You will pay your respects to Uncle Ho', they said. But we answered, 'He is not our Uncle Ho'. They then said, 'We are brothers. You should pay your respects'. But we did not do it. Socialism was only a cover. We said to the representatives of the Yugoslavian Youth Federation: 'It is not right that a country as fertile as Kampuchea should have such a small population'.

'Socialism is only a cover' is of course a reference to Vietnamese attitudes, but it seems just as appropriate to those of the Thiounn brothers. Their political world view was one of national and racial grandiosity, evident enough from the reference to Angkor and to the size of Kampuchea's population. Whether or not these attitudes can be adequately described as feudal, the form of Khmer nationalism they embodied was specific: it was quite distinct from that of the Khmer communists in this period, and from that of the 'bourgeois nationalist' Son Ngoc Thanh, whose goals were more concrete and his politics much less sensitive to Vietnamese patronising, as we have seen. But by a process which is the subject of

this book, it did eventually become the dominant strand of Khmer communism, under the leadership of Saloth Sar (the 'Original Khmer').  
(p.30)

These lines will merit examining in a little detail. They are revealing, firstly, of Kiernan's approach to data which, as we shall see, tends to exhibit an excessive zeal to marshal by no means clear-cut statements and events in support of the thesis that the root of the Vietnamese Kampuchea conflict was a clash between Vietnamese socialism and Khmer xenophobia. Secondly, they show something of Kiernan's theoretical - and political - framework, which abstracts the nationalism of the Kampuchea communist movement from the context that in large part determined it: the efforts of the Vietnamese communist leadership to direct the Kampuchean communist movement. The conflict between the two is presented in Kiernan's work as a struggle between two political elites pursuing divergent ideologies - one conceived in Hanoi, under the influence of the Soviet Union, the other in Paris and Phnom Penh, under the influence of the Chinese. His history is constructed as the unfolding of these two ideologies, revealing their true essence. Within this process, events, the actions of classes and groups - or the external forces such as the US and China - are presented as reinforcing or inhibiting the outcome of a holocaust that was always there in embryo, in the nationalist ideology of the young Pol Pot - did he not sign, Kiernan recalls, as the 'Original Khmer'? - and even further back, perhaps in the ideology of Thanh, a nationalist who during the Second World War advocated collaboration with Japanese imperialism.

Names, biographies and minute events crowd the pages of How Pol Pot Came to Power, but rather than illuminate they shut out the light on the structure and dynamics of Kampuchean society and on the revolution that badly went wrong. In the account of the years that brought

Pol Pot and the Democratic Kampuchean government to power, the struggle of class forces and their relative strengths are barely mentioned and never as constitutive of that history. Kiernan's work though containing much valuable information, instead of unravelling the developments and contradictions of Kampuchean society that brought the Khmer Rouge to power and conditioned its course of action once in power, produces a history in which a set of ideas, driven by the fanaticism of a group, is shown to triumph over events.

A different history is required if lessons are to be drawn from the Democratic Kampuchea rule, not only for the benefit of Kampuchea's future but for socialist struggles, in general. It is necessary to examine that rule - in particular the mass repression, the absence of party democracy, the forced labour and collectivisation (pursued in the name of socialism not for the first time) - by relation to the contradictions that it claimed to resolve and the class domination it actually served. Kiernan's work does not facilitate this because, as it will become apparent, his analysis of Kampuchean history is circumscribed by the premises of the official Vietnamese interpretation which is tailored to justify the occupation of Kampuchea.

To examine the validity of Kiernan's characterisation of the Khmer Rouge as chauvinist, which is central to his account of recent Kampuchean history, it is instructive to begin from the paragraph quoted above. In recounting the refusal of two Kampuchean communists to show feudal-like deference to another country's communist leader, Kiernan sees first and foremost evidence of 'fierce nationalism' on the part of the Kampucheans. But this episode is recounted without reference to its context: the Viet Minh leadership's assumption that it was the rightful leader also of the Kampuchean and Laotian communist movements. Detached from this context, the 'fierce nationalism' becomes not a response, an act of resistance to the threat of domination, but a self-generated act, manifestation of 'racial grandiosity'. Even the criticism voiced by Thiounn Chum that the Vietnamese intellectuals consider Angkor to be their own or his reference to the fact that parts of Cambodia have been incorporated into Vietnam are interpreted by this logic as manifestations of the same ideology. 'Their political worldview was one of national and racial grandiosity, evident enough from the references of Angkor and to the size of Kampuchea's population'.

In fact, taking into account the argument put across in the interview, from which these sentences are taken, it is not at all evident



Pol Pot

that Chum's reference to Angkor, to the size of Kampuchea's population, or indeed to the Vietnamese demand that he should pay his respects to Ho Chi Minh are anything more than illustrations of Kampuchea's subordination to Vietnam in recent history. Since Kiernan uses the argument that the Khmer Rouge leadership was imbued with 'racial grandiosity' to support the Vietnamese contention that the DK government was expansionist and that the Vietnamese occupation was therefore essentially an act of self-defence, it is not without interest to probe further Kiernan's evidence on this point. A more detailed elaboration of the argument advanced in the book is put forward in an earlier essay, 'Pol Pot and the Kampuchean Communist Movement' (Kiernan and Boua, 1982). Here, as one of the proofs of Pol Pot's racism, Kiernan quotes Serge Thion:

...the officials of the (Pol Pot) regime affirm that their country is 99% populated by Khmers, thus ruling out with a stroke of a pen the very existence of the Cham population, hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Sino-Khmers, small groups of Burmese and Lao, mountain dwellers and other more or less Khmerized minorities (Kuh, Pear, etc.). Here we have a lucky country which is not troubled by the problem of 'national' minorities.

(p.230)

Kiernan obviously knows the text to which Thion refers - it is one of the few published speeches of Pol Pot - but Thion's paraphrase of the text serves his purpose better than the original. For the original reads: 'The People of Democratic Kampuchea include Khmers (99%) and numerous national minorities living together in the same great family, closely united and defending and building the country'.



Ho Chi Minh

(Pol Pot, 1977) The figure of 99% is inaccurate but the national minorities are explicitly mentioned - hardly the 'ruling out with the stroke of the pen', alleged by Thion. DK practice in relation to national minorities is of course more important in determining whether they could be said to be racist, than official declarations. But on this ground, too, Kiernan's case is weak. As he himself points out, the Khmer Rouge's support came initially mainly from the hill-tribe people, a group traditionally looked-down on by the lowlanders. The only specific allegation of DK persecution of a national minority, that Kiernan makes, concerns the Chams. 'There are confirmed reports from refugees in Thailand and Vietnam', he states, 'that entire villages of Chams were wiped out, by armed forces of the Pol Pot regime after 1975' (op.cit. p.231). But according to Vickery, who is altogether more cautious in the treatment of refugee accounts, there is no evidence that the Chams were the object of an extermination policy. Although some local massacres of Chams took place, Vickery concludes: 'the statements of Cham refugees in KID (Khao I Dang) suggest that there was never a central policy to destroy them' (Vickery 1984, p.182).

Kiernan's allegation of Khmer Rouge racism against the Vietnamese appears at first sight to be better founded. To demonstrate this, he uses the Black Paper, which is the Khmer Rouge's account of the background to the conflict between Vietnam and Kampuchea. This text published in September 1978, by which time the two countries were virtually at war with each other, has certainly chauvinist overtones. Although on the first page its

authors state that 'the words Vietnam and Vietnamese refer variously to the CP of Vietnam (formerly the Vietnamese Workers Party), to Hanoi government and the provisional revolutionary government of South Vietnam, 'Vietminh' and 'Vietcong', this does not negate the interpretation suggested by the text that Vietnam, as a nation, has historically tried to swallow Kampuchea. Nowhere is the point made that the mass of Vietnamese people do not necessarily share in this objective. Indeed, it even goes on to say that there is historical antipathy between the peoples of the two countries and refers to anecdotes and terms well known by Kampucheans that indicate mistrust and contempt towards the Vietnamese. It is implied that there are good grounds for these prejudices.

Yet when all this is said, to determine the character of this 'racism' it is necessary to look beyond speeches and texts, to the history and practices that they are part of. Khmer nationalism is that of an oppressed nationality. Since the decline of the Khmer empire, Kampuchea was subjugated by the French who treated the people as inferior also to the Vietnamese, who staffed the lower echelons of the colonial administration in Kampuchea. The anti-Vietnamese statements of the Black Paper, do not derive from an ideology justifying the oppression of another nationality but from injured national pride and from burning resentment at Vietnamese intervention in the internal affair of the Kampuchean communist movement. The expulsion of 200,000 residents from Kampuchea by the DK government is cited by Kiernan as further evidence of its racism. But in relation to this, too, he is careful to omit the political conditions in which the presence of Vietnamese settlers was perceived as a threat by the Pol Pot leadership. This measure by the DK government - as indeed the pressures put on Chinese residents in Vietnam by the Hanoi government - has to be examined in the context of the political conflict between the communist movements of the two countries involved.

#### The central question

Much the same goes for the DK leadership's strident assertion of independence and self-reliance. Kiernan repeatedly refers to declarations in this vein as proof of chauvinism, and to contrast them with the 'internationalism' of the pro-Hanoi tendency within the Khmer communist movement, as evidenced by their readiness to acknowledge the support of Vietnam. Serge Thion is again quoted to bear witness to the contrast and, in particular, to the chauvinism of the Pol Pot leadership:

Ethnic Khmers sympathetic to the Vietnamese Communists were invariably described as

Vietnamese 'agents'. According to Serge Thion, this was 'as if it is impossible for a Khmer militant to believe that the general line of the Vietnamese revolution is good, or even that it is the best in contemporary Indochina'.  
(Kiernan and Boua, p.232)

How absurd and paranoid, the reader is invited to judge, to assess agreement with the Vietnamese line as anything but an honestly arrived at opinion. Kiernan, through Thion, implies that it would have been more reasonable to have considered the advocacy of the pro-Hanoi position within the KCP simply on its scientific merits. But to see it in this light, is to abstract that position from the political struggles in which it emerged.

This touches on some of the central questions on which conflicting interpretations of the Vietnamese-Kampuchea conflict hinge. Did the Vietnamese leadership try to impose its line on the Kampuchean communist movement and did that play a part in the development of the ideology and policies of the DK leadership or did these stem, as Kiernan argues, from a strand of Khmer nationalism which became radicalised in contact with a faction of Kampuchea's small educated elite?

In his essay, 'Pol Pot and the Kampuchean Communist Movement', Kiernan suggests that there is no basis for believing that Hanoi tried to dominate the Khmer movement. To make the point he quotes a passage from Heder first:

Sihanouk's anti-Americanism became the most precious to the Vietnamese... The contradiction between the Vietnam Worker's Party's needs in terms of liberating the south and the C.P.K.'s needs in terms of revolutionising Kampuchea became most acute. The V.W.P. probably believed that the C.P.K. could resolve this contradiction by some variation on united front tactics. The C.P.K. probably believed that such tactics just could not work. Each party saw the other as thinking only of its own interests.  
(p.254)

Kiernan then comments: 'This is scarcely evidence of any long-standing desire of the Vietnamese 'to put the Kampuchean revolution under their thumb' and eventually coerce it into an 'Indochina Federation' (as argued by the Black Book). The particular quote used by Kiernan is indeed 'scarcely' evidence of Vietnamese ambitions but these few lines certainly cannot be held to sum up the relation between the two communist movements. On this point, Kiernan's position is less categorical in How Pol Pot Came to Power.

## Relations between the Kampuchean and Vietnamese Communist parties

Kiernan confirms that even after the Indo-chinese Communist Party was dissolved in February 1951, the Vietnamese party continued to see itself in the role of directing the communist movements of Laos and Kampuchea.

A captured Viet Minh document dated 1 Nov. 1951, asserted that 'the Vietnamese Party reserves the right to supervise the activities of its brother parties in Cambodia and Laos', and that 'later, however, if conditions permit, the three revolutionary parties of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos will be able to form a single party: the Party of Vietnam-Khmer-Laotians Federation.  
(p.83)

It was relatively easy for the Vietnamese to retain leverage within Kampuchea. The Viet Minh had a significant military presence in the north-east, a large number of cadres continued to be trained in Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese, who could presume to have some feelings of loyalty to Vietnam 'continued to predominate in the highest administrative level' (p.85) of the KPRP. According to the Black Paper, it was because the Khmer communist movement had been over-dependent on the Vietnamese, that once the latter abandoned it - as the Khmer Rouge saw the 1954 Geneva agreement - it was incapable of taking on the task of leading the struggle. On the precise role of the Vietnamese leadership in the Geneva agreement, Kiernan argues that it was the Chinese, through Chou-En Lai, that conceded to the US the disbanding of the communist forces in Kampuchea. Kiernan's interpretation is supported by most other accounts and the Black Paper's version, which implies Vietnamese complicity, is contradictory for if, as its authors argue, the KPRP was at that time largely an extension for the Vietnamese Party then it is unlikely to have served Hanoi's interest to see it disbanded. Yet shorn of the allegation of it having been a Vietnamese conspiracy, the lesson drawn from the outcome of the Geneva agreement by the Khmer Rouge leadership was essentially correct. The Khmer communist movement's dependency, at the time, on the Vietnamese made its elimination, as a military force, possible. Although Kiernan is almost certainly right to say that this concession had been forced on the Hanoi leadership, it nevertheless remains that it was Hanoi rather than the Khmer communist movement which ultimately had to agree to it and that while Hanoi gained at least a breathing space in return, the Kampucheans gained nothing.

In the aftermath of the Geneva agreement, Hanoi continued to give directions to the

struggle for socialism, while at the same time giving the Prince credit for maintaining the country's independence... (p.191)

A 1962 statement by the pro-Hanoi tendency, cited by Kiernan which placed hopes for further reforms on radical elements within Sihanouk's own party, shows a remarkable continuity in important respects with the ICP line. It regards Kampuchea within an Indochina-wide strategy, in which Hanoi is assigned the leading role. Kiernan notes: 'The document ends with a recommendation for continuing restraint, and confidence in the revolutionary developments in Laos and Vietnam, where victories would lead 'immediately after' to victory in Kampuchea' (p.196).

Thus by Kiernan's own account, the line advocated by Hanoi and the Khmer communists acting with its approval, was for the formation of a united front with Sihanouk, not as part of a long-term strategy aimed at a revolution carried out by Kampucheans themselves, but as part of a hidden agenda according to which once Vietnam was liberated the Kampuchean revolution would follow as its extension. Contrary to Kiernan's claim, this does not represent a classical Marxist or proletarian internationalist perspective. If it has a claim to orthodoxy it is that of the theory of 'revolution from above' and the practice of the Soviet army setting up the communist states of eastern Europe, after World War II.

But not only did Hanoi's line <sup>not</sup> represent a revolutionary strategy for Kampuchea, it is doubtful whether, after 1963, it could even serve the more modest objective of preventing the liquidation of Khmer communism as a political force.

The Vietnamese leadership counselled the KPRP to 'support Sihanouk while criticising him and maintain a political but not a military struggle' (Porter, op.cit., p.66). The reasons for preserving the status quo in Kampuchea from the Vietnamese point of view is readily understandable, as we indicated above, but Kiernan seeks to demonstrate that this strategy would have been appropriate for the Khmer communist movement had the Pol Pot group not provoked repression from the right. The Vietnamese analysis was that the Kampuchean ruling class was divided between a reactionary and a progressive faction. The communists, it argued, should work with the Sihanouk faction to encourage a neutralist foreign policy and internal economic reforms. Kiernan evidently considers this policy to have been correct. Open political struggle, he suggests, had been possible at least until 1966. He quotes

Charles Meyer, who indicated that it was in the middle of that year that 'government repression began against the forces of the left'. But Pol Pot and some fellow communists had already left for the countryside to prepare for armed struggle in 1963 and intensified their preparations in 1965, in anticipation of a rightist coup against Sihanouk: 'if Lon Nol takes over Kampuchea we would combine politics with arms' (p.211). Kiernan describes the consequences of these preparatory moves for armed struggle in the following terms:

Having prematurely escalated the communist struggle in 1963, the CPK leaders now did so again. They realised that armed activity on their part would increase the likelihood of a move by rightists already alienated by the late 1963 reforms, and believed that the resultant political destabilization 'could only be positive for the revolution'. (p.211)

The repression against the forces of the left and the polarisation of Kampuchean society from 1963 onwards are, therefore, presented by Kiernan as being triggered primarily by the strategy pursued by the Pol Pot group. Their analysis of the Sihanoukist state was, he argues, self-fulfilling and can be held responsible for undermining the Vietnamese counselled policy, that the KCP should limit itself to legal struggle within the Sihanoukist system.

Kiernan's argument on this point is crucial to the main thesis of his book, that the contradiction between the Vietnamese and Kampuchean movements stemmed from the 'racial grandiosity' and 'chauvinism' of the Khmer



Samphan and Sihanouk

Rouge. As we shall see, however, the available evidence points to the conclusion, that Hanoi's efforts to dominate the KCP, accentuated internal divisions and nationalist resentments which created conditions favourable for sectarian and ultra-leftist policies.

### Subordination of the Khmer Party

In the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva agreement, the Vietnamese recommended that Khmer communists should support and express their objectives through the Democratic Party, a radical party with considerable popular following. A mixture of government harassment and internal dissension caused the dissolution of this party in 1957. Thereafter, communists and leftists of various tendencies tended to turn to the Pracheachon Party as a platform for propaganda and for electioneering. The government arrested a number of Pracheachon leaders before the 1962 elections and then disbanded the Party itself, which indicates the extent of repression and the difficulty that this was posing for those pursuing the strategy advocated by Hanoi of combining political struggle with support for Sihanouk. Even the pro-Hanoi communist leader, Tou Samouth, concluded:

In the upcoming elections there is no need for us to present candidates, since the results of these elections are known in advance and cannot evidence the power of our movement, given the fact that the people are undergoing the oppression of Sihanouk's police and army and will be unable to clearly demonstrate their support. (p.196)

According to another party member cited by Kiernan:

In 1963 to 1965 the enemy's activities were very strong. Sihanouk arrested cadres who had formerly been involved in the struggle. Many were gaoled. (p.213)

In these circumstances, for the Pol Pot group to have begun organising for armed struggle in the countryside does not seem to have been premature as Kiernan contends. In addition, he caricatures the Pol Pot group's line in this period, by suggesting that it 'abandoned the political scene' (p.206) to concentrate on armed struggle. In reality, the policy was, as Kiernan indicates elsewhere in the book, to 'take clandestine struggle as the basis', of which armed struggle was the main component, but even in 1965 with the possibility of a right-wing coup, political struggle

continued to be on the Pol Pot group's agenda. 'If Lon Nol takes over Kampuchea', the party line at the time stated, 'we should combine politics with arms' (p.211). The line laid down by the party leadership in 1966 'of struggling for strength in the towns, and preparing for armed struggle in the countryside' (p.224), also makes clear that the real conflict between the pro-Hanoi and the Pol Pot tendencies cannot be characterised simply as an opposition between the advocates of legal, political struggle on the one hand, and of armed struggle on the other. The Pol Pot group did not deny the need for political struggle but saw it as secondary to the preparations for armed struggle. Thus some communists almost certainly linked to the KCP continued to operate within Sihanouk's Sangkum, the only remaining legal party after the dissolution of Pracheachon. The most prominent of these was Khieu Samphan, who was minister of trade and a member of Sihanouk's cabinet when he abruptly resigned in 1963. Samphan's decision to quit was made at a time when, as Kiernan describes, 'the National Assembly were attacking the policies pursued by Khieu Samphan and Hou Youn; commercial circles were proving recalcitrant, while Sihanouk's reforming enthusiasm had lagged' (p.204). All this suggests that the possibilities for advancing radical reforms through the Sihanoukist state were proving futile. 'In such a state', Summers remarks, 'holding



Khmer Rouge guerrillas: the move to the countryside began in 1963



Secretary of State Rusk defending US policy in Southeast Asia.

office or administrative reform were equally misleading concepts' (Summers 1979, p.19). Kiernan, however, anxious to claim continuing validity for a strategy that confined itself to working within that state, draws the improbable conclusion that, 'Samphan's voluntary exit, after such a short period as Minister, suggests either a lack of nerve or an inability to deal with a difficult situation by means of a judicious compromise' (p.204). And he adds in brackets, perhaps in case the reader finds this less than convincing 'It is possible, though, that he [Samphan] was instructed to abandon attempts at reform by Pol Pot, who had taken to the jungle about six weeks before'. But if Samphan had acted under Pol Pot's orders and these orders were to withdraw, it is difficult to see why Samphan should not, at that time, have joined the maquis in the countryside and why, later, in the 1966 elections he should have stood (also on Pol Pot's orders?) as candidate.

Kiernan sees the subsequent 'left' turn in Sihanouk's foreign and domestic policies as proof of the correctness of Hanoi's line of working within the Sihanoukist state. He writes: 'on 28th August, barely two months after Samphan's resignation, Sihanouk broke off diplomatic relations with South Vietnam, signaling a shift to the left and an escalation of his regime's hostility to the U.S.' (p.205).

And further on, referring to Sihanouk's domestic reforms - involving the nationalisation of foreign trade and banking - he notes: 'Rather than being encouraged by Sihanouk's domestic reforms and his neutralism, the Pol Pot group were worried that these moves were going too far. Domestic as well as nationalist demands were now in danger of being headed off by being moderately satisfied... Pol Pot knew that for the revolution to succeed, Kampuchean society had to be destabilised (p.211). Kiernan provides no explanation for Sihanouk's left-wing turn. He writes as if it took place in a vacuum, propelled by the regime's internal momentum. Heder, however, has indicated that Sihanouk's change of policy was largely in response to pressure from the CPK.

...Sihanouk's anti-imperialist moves can be seen as attempts to compensate for his waning popularity in domestic political terms, especially among the peasantry and especially among the urban leftists, communists and non-communists alike. By breaking with American aid and implementing statist economic policy, Sihanouk may have hoped to appeal to the peasantry's suspicion of foreigners and distrust of the commercial rice export network and to neutralize left-wing pressure on his domestic policies from among urban intellectuals. (Heder, 1979, p.6)

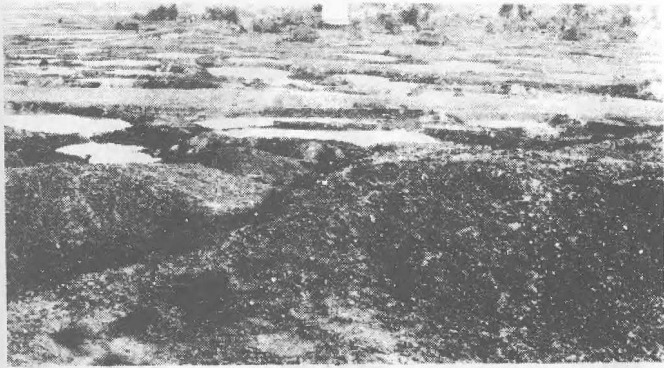
#### From the mouth of a VCP leader

The problem for the CPK was not that Sihanouk was adopting aspects of their programme - which could only enhance its standing - but that the left-wing changes were only one side of Sihanouk's strategy to regain the political initiative. The other side was suppression of the communists. Vietnamese assessment, of Sihanouk's 'left-wing' turn, at the time, shows a clear awareness of this. According to Hoang Tung, a member of the Vietnamese Party's central committee:

Sihanouk emerged from that repression of the Khmer Communists strong enough to be able to have an independent foreign policy... Pressure on Sihanouk regarding the border question began in 1960. Sihanouk recognised that internally, in Cambodia, he was strong enough, and therefore was able to break relations with South Vietnam in 1963. His strength came from his successful repression of the Communist Party.

(Porter op.cit. p.93, our emphasis)

Here from the mouth of a Vietnamese leader, is clear refutation of Kiernan's elaborate attempt to show the line advocated by Hanoi



US aggression: bomb craters.

for the Kampuchean revolution to be feasible and to coincide with the interest of the Kampuchean communist movement. Hanoi's interest in seeing stability in Kampuchea, with Sihanouk in power, could not be reconciled in this period with the survival of the Kampuchean communist movement. Seen, therefore, in its political context, the move by the Pol Pot group, in 1963, to prepare for armed struggle cannot be considered premature and the divergence with Vietnam emerges not as the product of Khmer chauvinism but of the Vietnamese party's readiness to sacrifice the Khmer Communist Movement in its own interest. From this clash of interests, the KCP drew the obvious conclusion. 'As early as 1966', the Black Paper states, 'the Communist Party of Kampuchea judged that it could only have state-to-state and other public relations with Vietnam because there was a fundamental contradiction between the Kampuchean revolution and the Vietnamese revolution' (Kiernan op.cit. p.223).

Kiernan detects in this assessment Chinese encouragement. 'It is difficult to believe', he writes, 'that Pol Pot's visit to Beijing had not aided him in this discernment' (p.223). There were tensions between Hanoi and Beijing, at the time, but the differences between the KCP and the Vietnamese was far more advanced and had been the subject of debate in 1964, when Pol Pot stayed in Hanoi for some months. It therefore seems unlikely that the Kampuchean communists needed the Chinese to arrive at their assessment of the Vietnamese leadership. More likely is that the Chinese expressed their readiness to support the armed struggle on which the Kampuchean Party was determined on. Kiernan's suggestion that the Chinese were behind the growing hostility between the KCP and Hanoi is, however, not without a purpose. It enables him to present the Vietnamese leadership's resolve to step up its intervention in the internal affairs of the KCP, as defensive measure, a response to Chinese efforts to manipulate the KCP. After alleging that the Chinese had a role in Pol Pot having 'discerned', as the latter claimed, 'the true nature of the Vietnamese', Kiernan adds:

The Vietnamese seem to have sensed something of the kind; they now created a special unit, called 'P-36' and directly answerable to VWP Politburo member Le Duc Tho, to train an increased number of Khmer cadres. (p.224)

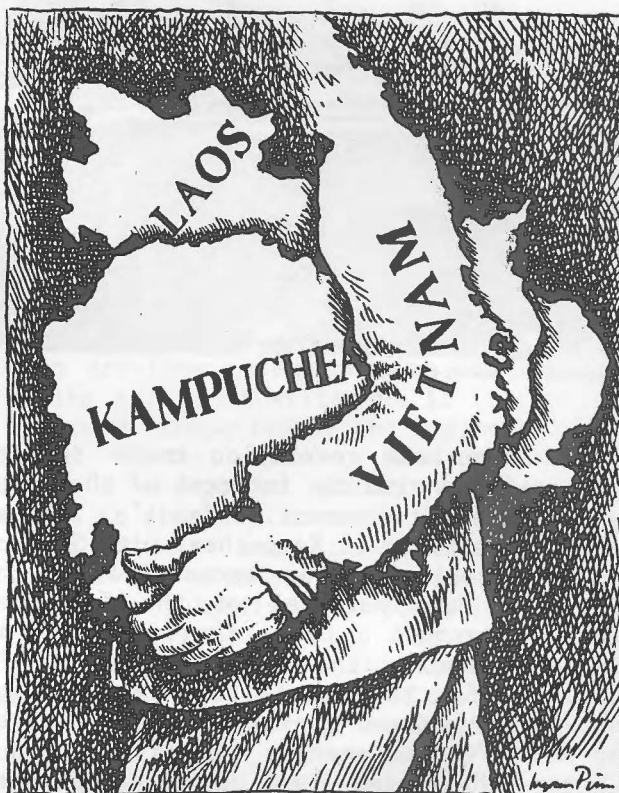
The phrase 'seems to have sensed something', suggests an innocent under threat, taking a preventive measure vaguely perceived to be necessary. Even this is, of course, a considerable admission by relation to the claim in the essay 'Pol Pot and the Kampuchean Communist Movement', that there was little evidence of any desire on the part of the Vietnamese 'to put the Kampuchean revolution under their thumb' (p.254). More importantly, it gives some indication of the reasons why opposition within the KCP to the policies of the leadership was so quickly interpreted by the latter as a national betrayal. The border conflict with Vietnam - whatever the two sides share of responsibility for it was - certainly served the Pol Pot faction's efforts to assert its dominance over the party and the army. It is this, rather than 'expansionism' or even any serious hope of gaining significant concessions on the disputed border issue that is likely to explain the vigour with which the Pol Pot leadership pursued the border clashes with Vietnam.



The VCP leadership is trying its hand in carving out a share in S?E Asia.

## Alliance with Sihanouk

There remains one major episode which Kiernan interprets as demonstrating the correctness of Hanoi's line in Kampuchea. In 1969, as a right wing coup backed by the US became increasingly likely, the KCP sought to drive a wedge between the right and Sihanouk. In this period, the party history recalls: 'It (the Party) criticised statements of intellectuals who had joined the maquis and attacked Samdech Norodom Sihanouk. It considered that these statements ran counter to the party line on the National United Front, for they should rather have attacked the US imperialists and the traitor Lon Nol' (p.286). Kiernan concludes from this: 'The CPK Centre was of course finally conceding that Sihanouk was not, after all, "a secret agent of the United States"'. This is again a caricature of the KCP position and an attempt to portray the situation in 1969 is ipso facto applicable to the entire period from 1954. Moreover, according to Kiernan's own account, the Party had already distinguished between Sihanouk and the pro-US faction in 1964. Earlier in the book, commenting on the statement of that year by the Central Committee of the KCP, Kiernan noted: 'In other words, the Centre had now accepted the distinction between Sihanouk and more pro-American elements in his regime such as Lon Nol' (p.211). A pamphlet from 1966 that Kiernan cites to show Pol Pot's hostility to Sihanouk, also indicates that the KCP leadership was aware, prior to 1969, of the existence of divisions within the ruling class and of the fact that Sihanouk's role was not fixed for all times. The pamphlet states, for example: 'We must not count too



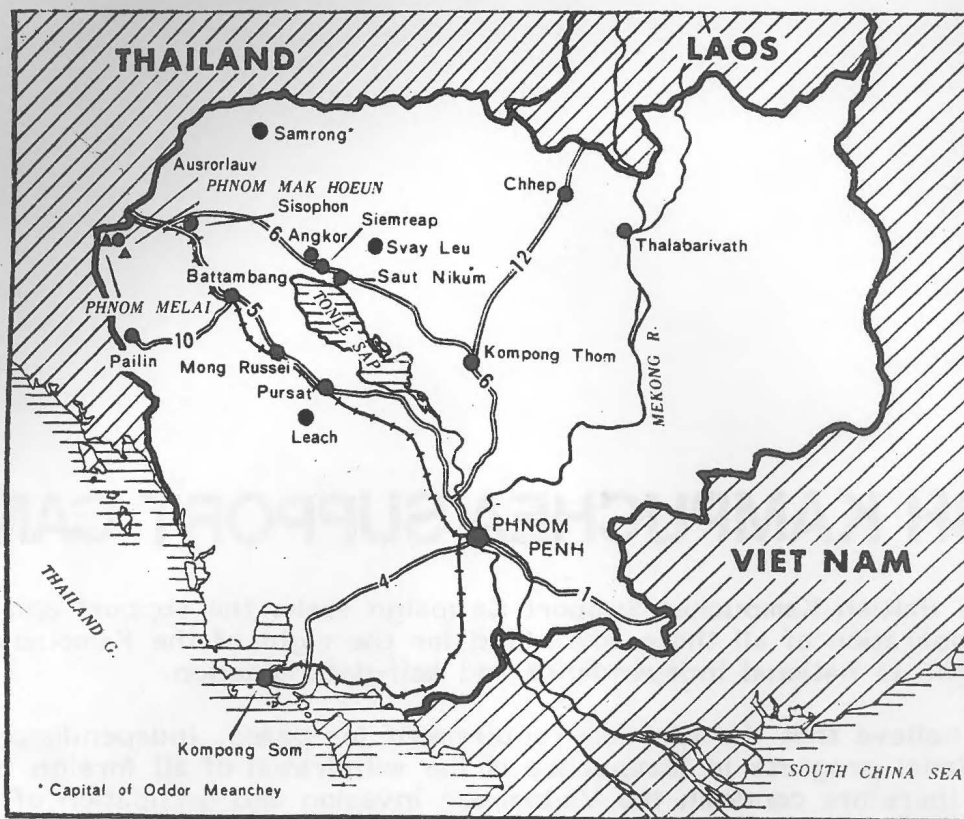
much on Sihanouk... He realises that crime does not pay in the face of political consciousness and determination of the masses of the people... In the current circumstances, Sihanouk and his supporters are not a part of the national unity organism' (p.226).

An awareness of the contradictions within the ruling class or of the need to judge Sihanouk's role according to the conjuncture does not mean, of course, that the KCP correctly identified its allies or the periods in which it should have sought alliance with Sihanouk. But to assess the KCP's orientation in relation to these crucial issues requires an analysis of the class nature of the Sihanoukist state and of the contradictions which characterised its rule, a task for which Kiernan's book provides few clues.

The above discussion of Kiernan's work on the Khmer communist movement has tried to show that the political line advocated by Hanoi for the Kampuchean revolution does not provide an adequate basis for a critical appraisal of the Khmer Rouge. The 'internationalist' line of the VCP was one that sought to subordinate the Kampuchean revolution to the requirements of the struggle in Vietnam and which saw the main agent of a socialist transformation, not within Kampuchean society but in the victorious forces of Vietnam.



Vietnamese troops in Phnom Penh



A materialist analysis of the ideology and policies of the KCP, of the social forces which they linked up with and the forms of class relations and power structures they established remains to be done. It is not by pretending that the Democratic Kampuchean rule had nothing to do with Marxism or socialism but was the product of nationalism and racism, that the mechanism of repression and the class basis of the DK rule will be established and the necessary lessons drawn. It was not the first time in history that Marxism - or, rather, a certain interpretation/distortion of it - has served to constitute a system of oppression over the masses. But that demon will not be exorcised on the altar of a more 'internationalist' version of socialism, which subordinates the struggles and, ultimately independence, of another nation.

P.K.

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