

# THE LONG TERM VIEW

## Thugs Who Have Run Governments in the Last Century

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# Don't Blame Me, It Was My Prime Minister

*By Ben Kiernan*

**P**ol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, which ruled Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979, subjected that country to what was probably the world's most radical political, social, and economic revolution ever. Cambodia was cut off from the outside world, foreign and minority languages banned, all neighboring countries militarily attacked, cities emptied, schools and hospitals closed, the labor force conscripted, the economy militarized, currency, wages and markets abolished, and most families separated, while the majority Buddhist religion and other religions and folk culture were suppressed and places of worship substantially destroyed.

For nearly four years, Democratic Kampuchea, as the regime named itself, enjoyed almost total success in prohibiting freedom of the press, movement, worship, organization, association, and discussion. The Khmer Rouge leadership and its armed forces kidnapped a whole nation, then besieged it from within. Meals had to be eaten in collective mess halls: parents ate breakfast in sittings, and if they were lucky, their sons and daughters waited their turns outside. Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was a prison camp state, and eight million prisoners served most of their time in forced labor and solitary confinement. In less than four years, 1.7 million of the inmates died of execution, starvation,

overwork, or denial of medical care.

Those victims included not only one-sixth of Cambodia's ethnic Khmer majority but also approximately 250,000 Chinese, 100,000 Muslim Chams, all 10,000 ethnic Vietnamese civilians resident in Cambodia, members of the Thai and Lao minority groups, and perhaps 50,000 Khmer Buddhist monks. Racial, ethnic, and religious groups are protected by the Genocide Convention; the fate of the Khmer majority population is covered by international law prohibiting crimes against humanity.

Although the Genocide Convention was enforced only rarely in the decades following its adoption by the UN in 1948, more recent pursuit of international criminal justice, culminating in the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 2002, aims to deter such crimes in the future. However, prosecutions may also be nourishing a new genre, the evasive defendant memoir. Since 1993-94, when the UN first implemented the Genocide Convention by creating special Ad Hoc International Criminal Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, perpetrators have spun tales of self-justification. The five-hour courtroom harangue which Slobodan Milosevic delivered at his genocide trial in The Hague last year could become his first draft of a self-serving autobiography. The

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trend may now spread as a United Nations/Cambodian tribunal prepares to open in Phnom Penh. In December 2004, the UN appealed for international funding to help establish Extraordinary Chambers in the Cambodian judicial system to try Khmer Rouge leaders before Cambodian and international judges.

Pol Pot, general secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) since 1962 and DK prime minister from 1976 to 1979, died in the jungle in 1998 as the Cambodian army finally closed in on his fugitive Khmer Rouge forces. Cambodia soon arrested the former DK army chief Chhit Choeun (alias Mok) and prison commandant Kang Khek Iev (alias Deuch). Six years later both men are still in jail awaiting trial, but others remain at large. Pol Pot's deputy Nuon Chea, the CPK No. 3 Ieng Sary, Sary's wife Ieng Thirith (Pol Pot's ex-sister-in-law), and former DK Head of State Khieu Samphan, are now expected to be indicted. Khieu Samphan stands out as the figurehead of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The son of a judge, Samphan studied in Paris in the 1950s just after Pol Pot did. Both men joined the French Communist Party. Pol Pot failed his radio-electricity course, but Samphan earned a doctorate with an intelligent economics dissertation at the University of Paris. Back home, Samphan established a newspaper, and Cambodia's then ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk assigned him a parliamentary seat. He became Economy Minister, but resigned under pressure from opponents of his nationalizing reforms. By 1966, rightists dominated the parliament, and civil war loomed. The next year Samphan took to the jungle to join Pol Pot's insurgents. They defeated Sihanouk's successor, General Lon Nol, in 1975. Samphan became Head of State of the Khmer Rouge regime and joined the Standing Committee of the ruling CPK's Central Committee. Standing Committee min-

utes document his attendance at its high-level meetings during the genocide that followed. When Vietnam overthrew DK in 1979, Samphan fled with Pol Pot to the Thai frontier. He surrendered in 1999 but still lives in retirement and impunity on the border.

The UN and Cambodia have agreed to try DK leaders in Cambodian courts with local prosecutors and judges flanked by UN counterparts, who will be in a minority but will wield veto power. Samphan's response is a book, whose Khmer title means *Cambodia's Recent History and My Successive Standpoints*. It recalls Ieng Sary's 1981 profession of innocence, which went, as Anthony Barnett put it in the *New Statesman*, "Don't Blame Me, It Was My Brother-in-law." Samphan claims, similarly, that until recently he knew little of the genocide and participated in none of the decisions that led to it. His denial follows a Khmer Rouge career that he began with an eight-year stint in the company of their insurgent leadership, before presiding as Head of State over the genocide, and then spending the subsequent two decades in the company of the defeated DK leaders.

The glossy Khmer-language edition is lavish for a Cambodian paperback, with color photographs of Samphan sporting pastels and open-necked shirts. The French publisher's blurb lauds his evasions as "modesty." An English translation from the French is also on Phnom Penh streets, in time for international judges to pick up a copy. The preface by Samphan's attorney, Jacques Vergès, lawyer for Klaus Barbie and Saddam Hussein, makes a shining start by likening Samphan to André Malraux or Anthony Eden.

As in any self-serving explanation, Samphan quotes himself at length. Following one two-page self-quotation, he re-quotes a paragraph, then reproduces the lot in Appendix 2. Yet eight pages are missing from the Khmer edition, while the French contains typographical errors and reduces the Khmer

phrase for the Marxist term "dialectical materialism" to simply "la dialectique." That mis-translation could be Samphan's own: such cases of losing the "materialism" were common in the often anti-materialist, Maoist, and racist CPK.

Cambodia has agreed at UN insistence to seek no pardon for anyone the tribunal convicts. Samphan's autobiography, replete with adulation of King Sihanouk, who was recrowned in 1993 but late in 2003 abdicated in favor of his son, seems to be angling for a royal pardon. Samphan writes as if he is in 1965, in the pages of the royalist magazine *Kambuja*. He lauds the throne, ignores facts, rewards allies, and demolishes straw men. (Samphan criticizes me for quoting Cambodian refugee testimony, but I've had worse from the Khmer Rouge.) Like most Cambodians, Sihanouk has since seen everything, but unlike them, Samphan has learned little. Having taken to the jungle, he emerged 32 years later without much to add. Vainly discreet, he seems unaware how much documentation of the internal workings of his regime is now in the public domain.

In his awe of authority, Samphan evinces little regret even for his association with prospective co-defendants like the Khmer Rouge army commander, Mok. He says he first met Mok in 1967, after accepting the advice of the CPK leaders to join them in the jungle. In a peasant hut that evening, Samphan found Mok dressed "like all the peasants," in black shorts and an unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt. "The diffuse glow of the lamp nevertheless revealed to us the deep and piercing eyes which stood out on his bearded face. . . . He asked affably about our trip and recommended that we never leave the house." By contrast Mok himself "moved about freely . . . sometimes bare-chested, revealing his hairy chest and arms. . . . In fact, in the face of his activity, I became well aware of my limits. And more deeply, I felt pride to see this man I

considered a peasant become one of the important leaders of a national resistance movement." Samphan went along with the Party's restrictions, while his more independent companion Hou Yuon rejected them.

Yet Samphan expects Cambodians to pity him for those years in the hills without good food or medicine, when he missed his mother, and for the constant mobility required by the wars the CPK pursued with his support (reiterated here), when in turn the CPK attacked and refused to negotiate with Sihanouk's regime, then Lon Nol's, and then Vietnam. Jungle life, Samphan writes, imposed "habits of isolation and lack of freedom of movement which were my lot." Samphan thinks people will believe that only patriotism kept him going, and that he accepted the job of Head of State after the 1975 CPK victory only out of duty to his country.

It is astonishing that he pleads near-total ignorance of the genocide which occurred when he was Head of State (1976-1979). He claims that rarely-specified "Khmer Rouge leaders" (not him) bore sole responsibility for those deeds and failed to keep him informed. For all DK's crimes, which he is shocked (shocked!) to discover now, Samphan expects sympathy from the surviving victims.

Though based at CPK headquarters, for instance, Samphan claims he was "profoundly upset" by his Party's forced evacuation of Phnom Penh on its fall in April 1975. While others like Hou Yuon opposed it, Samphan calls the evacuation something "I was not expecting at all." Meanwhile the CPK had forcibly collectivized the countryside. "Great was my surprise," he claims, on learning this soon after the 1975 victory. Until then he could have been the sole Cambodian in the countryside unaware of its collectivization.

Documentary evidence belies Samphan's claimed ignorance of high-level policy at every turn. He admits to full membership of the CPK Central Committee from 1976, but

not of its powerful Standing Committee (SC). He says he attended only "enlarged" SC meetings. However the extant minutes for 1975-76 record Samphan in attendance at 12 of 14 SC meetings (gatherings not "enlarged" by lesser invitees). Samphan indeed attended the CPK's closed, high-level deliberations.

After the point when he now concedes learning of the urban deportations and rural collectivization, party documents reveal not only Samphan's important role in the regime, but his awareness of looming purges. On October 9, 1975, he attended the SC meeting at which it appointed itself as Cambodia's secret government. The minutes rank Samphan fourth in the cabinet hierarchy, after Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, and Ieng Sary. At this closed meeting, Pol Pot targeted a general, Chan Chakrey: "We must pay attention to what he says, to see [if] he is a traitor who will deprive himself of any future." Then, moving also against Chakrey's deputy, Pol Pot added: "we must be totally silent . . . we must watch their activities." As Samphan surely anticipated, Pol Pot soon ordered both men assassinated. This action launched massive purges that killed thousands of other CPK members and innocents. As Pol Pot had instructed, his tame Head of State was "totally silent" about Chakrey and his deputy at that time. He remains so now.

Samphan was not so quiet about the fate of Hu Nim, a leftist parliamentarian, who unlike Samphan, protested DK policies and was arrested in April 1977. Nim's torturer reported: "we whipped him four or five times to break his stand, before taking him to be stuffed with water." Samphan may not have read that report, but knowing Nim was in danger, he stated on radio the next day: "We must wipe out the enemy . . . neatly and thoroughly . . . and suppress all stripes of enemy at all times." On July 6, CPK security forces massacred Hu Nim and 126 others. Posing now as a

victim, Samphan claims Nim as "my friend" and recoils at the "suffering in his soul and in his body, what a nightmare." This performance cannot convince us of Samphan's claimed "naïveté"—or that at the time he "was unaware even of the existence" of "massacres and crimes."

Samphan tries to blame Cambodia's tragedy, including the genocide carried out by his own Party, on its Vietnamese opponents, a racist false memory still fomented in Cambodian politics. Denouncing Hanoi's perfidy, he explains away DK's slaughter of Vietnamese civilians in cross-border raids and silently ignores its genocide of Cambodia's Vietnamese minority. In one glimpse of humanity, Samphan describes hospitals "overflowing" and men "covered with blood, groaning through the wards," a sight that "tears blocked my eyes from seeing. I was literally undone." However, these patients were not Cambodia's genocide victims, but DK troops back from fighting on the border.

Samphan understands the use of racism to shore up power and obscure misdeeds. As late as 1992, he threatened more ethnic violence by invoking 1970 massacres that had choked the Mekong with bodies of ethnic Vietnamese. Blackmailing the UN to accept Khmer Rouge demands, Samphan warned that a recurrence of the 1970 killings "might become a reality." Khmer Rouge slaughter of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and UN peacekeepers re-commenced months later. Visionary or instigator, Samphan knew more then than he is letting on now.

Samphan is honest about one thing: he lacked the courage to criticize DK from its inner circle. "I could not bring myself to raise my voice to express my opposition to the violences . . . perpetrated in my name," he recalls. This rings true. In his 1963 economic reform campaign, Samphan won a cabinet vote of confidence but suddenly resigned. He now

claims he was fired. Mesmerized by power, Samphan just lacked nerve. Hou Yuon and Hu Nim fought harder and were sacked, yet kept pushing for reforms. When they later spoke out against Pol Pot, he murdered them. By contrast, Samphan's career betrays a wooden, tone-deaf irresolution that surfaces in his book as moral cowardice. The memoir of a man perched atop a genocidal regime has its own surreal logic. It reveals almost nothing of the carnage of his people, antiseptically conceding that atrocities occurred while withholding their details and authorship. ◆