

Who is to blame for the Cambodian Tragedy?

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The conviction, on July 26, 2010 of Kang Guek Eav -“Duch”- the former S-21 prison chief of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, at a UN- sponsored tribunal, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC), followed by the indictment, on September 16 of four the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge drew international media attention to Cambodia, at least for one short moment. These decisions were significant in that they took place thirty one years after the Khmer Rouge terror regime was ousted from power. During its reign from April 17 1975 to January 7 1979, the Khmer Rouge had killed 1.7 million of its own people.

International coverage of the Duch verdict eclipses two issues. First, the international community especially in the West is ambivalent about the tribunal. Many consider it deeply flawed by corruption and interference by the Cambodian government of Hun Sen. Because of these allegations; the tribunal was riddled with perennial problems of funding, including a short fall of \$10 million this year.

Others, again especially in the West, insist that the tribunal must continue, as if this were the only road to justice and reconciliation in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. Nothing is farther from the truth. Given the thirty one year delay, Cambodia has since returned to stability and won the confidence of both donor and business communities. Cambodia's growth rate over ten years stands at 7 - 13%. Today, a majority of Cambodia's expanding population pyramid knows very little about and has no personal experience of the Khmer Rouge era. Recent surveys indicate in fact that Cambodians are paying more attention to their career advancements than to the tribunal. Because the mass killings were politically rather than racially motivated, reconciliation was easier to achieve, especially after three decades.

Obviously, the question of why did Cambodians kill Cambodians must be faced by Cambodia so that it will never happen again. But this objective can be achieved by various other methods than the costly and highly controversial tribunal. One is through the setting up of a Truth Commission, an approach that by last count has been launched in forty countries around the world. Secondly, educating the youth about the recent past is a much more cost effective – and positive - way to achieve this objective than keeping aging Khmer Rouge leaders in air-conditioned cells, a luxury in poor Cambodia. In fact, the recent publication by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) of a book on the Khmer Rouge in both English and Khmer will go a long way to this end and provides an example that should be followed by others.

A less evident problem is that the past role of international actors in the Cambodian tragedy has been whitewashed. It should be remembered that during the cold war, Cambodia had, because of its geopolitical location, seen itself subjugated to the ongoing power struggles for hegemony in South East Asia. The meteoric rise of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, fully supported by communist China from the beginning, was fueled largely by two events: the indiscriminate and secret carpet bombing of Cambodia by the US military under the direction of the Nixon regime during 1969-73, and the ouster of head of state Sihanouk by a pro-American general which in turn drove Sihanouk into the arms of the Khmer Rouge.

Today, almost in unison, the Western press asserts that the Vietnamese liberation of Cambodia from Khmer Rouge rule, in January 1979, was followed by “ten years of civil war”. In fact, there was no civil war since in 1979, the Cambodian people chased the hated Khmer Rouge from the entire country out to the Thai border. The so-called civil war was initiated in faraway New York, where, incredibly enough, and spearheaded by the US, China and ASEAN, the United Nations continued to recognize the ousted Khmer Rouge regime as the legitimate government of Cambodia, rather than the new People’s Republic of Kampuchea in Phnom Penh, which soon gained control over 90% of the country. The alleged reason given was that Vietnam had invaded Cambodia, but the obvious truth was that Vietnam was on the wrong side of the cold war.

Opposing this UN decision to maintain Khmer Rouge representation were the Soviet bloc, India and a number of others, who were easily outvoted in the UN. This stalemate continued for 11 years during which time the Khmer Rouge flag continued to fly over Manhattan. To disguise this outrage, the Khmer Rouge was persuaded to form a coalition, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) with two non-communist factions—the Royalists’ FUNCINPEC and a pro-American group, the KPNLF. In the field, the CGDK received ample aid from its Western and Chinese backers, initiating, fueling and prolonging the so-called “civil war”.

Thus, having succeeded in seating the Khmer Rouge in the UN General Assembly for eleven more years, obviously the West was not in a big hurry to put the Khmer Rouge on trial. In 1979, the Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) did put the Khmer Rouge on trial in Phnom Penh and condemned Pol Pot and Ieng Sary to death in absentia. Naturally, the international community chose to ignore that trial.

With the end of the Cold War, in 1991, the Paris Peace Agreements were finally signed, and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) brought the stalemate to an end by organizing elections that established a new legitimate coalition government in Cambodia. The Royal Government, in June 1997, asked the United Nations for help in putting the Khmer Rouge leaders on trial but insisted that this should be done in a Cambodian court assisted by the United Nations, not in an international tribunal. Negotiations between Cambodia and the United Nations continued for years and finally, in June 2007, twenty-eight years after the Khmer Rouge was ousted the ECCC became fully operational as a Cambodian court with international assistance.

It is ironical that the international press and Western academics, almost in unison, now insist that the K.R. trials must continue, and that the Cambodian government should not protect anyone from the tribunal. If the international tribunal were to end tomorrow, Cambodia would continue on its path to progress and reconciliation, aided by private investment and generous donors. This, understandably, is the subject that concerns Cambodians today.