Cambodia Essay, Research Paper

THE POL POT RULE OF CAMBODIA

The worst blow fell in 1975, when the Khmer Rouge (red Khmer) guerrillas under the leadership of Pol Pot overthrew the Khmer Republic and established Democratic Kampuchea.

The Khmer Rouge were, at least partially, a reaction to the loss of political power and the social disorder brought on by the regional wars of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as an extreme and localized response to the growing question of Khmer identity in a region dominated and fought over by world powers.

Shortly after its independence in 1954, Cambodia felt the pull of the superpowers. The U.S., China, and Vietnam already had significant interests in the country, but Sihanouk, Cambodia s king, maintained control and declared neutrality. China was one of the first countries to send military aid in 1963. China supported Sihanouk publicly throughout his reign as king and president, but radical parties in the government supported the inner circle of the Communist Party of Kampuchea.

From the 1950s to the mid 1960s, Cambodia prospered. Modernization, development, and substantial foreign aid flowed in under Sihanouk’s rule. As in the past, this success was dependent on the behavior of Cambodia’s neighbors and on the policies of more powerful nations. Cambodia was neutral for as long as it served the interests of other states.

From the mid 1960s, Cambodia became more and more entangled in the regional war. By the early 1970s, as the Khmer Rouge gained strength and control over vast areas of the countryside, the war absorbed Cambodia. Though global factors clearly transformed Cambodia against its will after the 1960s, internal conditions set the stage for the results that followed. These conditions include Khmer cultural factors, the history of nationalism and racism, peasant culture, and the effects of economic development in a global economy.

Khmer culture tends toward respect and fear of authority. Khmers view the country as one large family, with the monarchy as chief elders. During their rule, KR officers in the villages simply replaced traditional authorities, and received the traditional public obedience designed for survival.

Historically, Cambodia s Khmer Empire was seen as a glorious past and a model for the future, emphasizing the ability of ordinary people to accomplish huge tasks through sheer will. Nationalism and racism have also long marked Cambodian politics.

As the religion of over 90% of the population, Buddhism is extremely important in Khmer society. Khmer Buddhism is marked by anti-individualism and egalitarianism, as well as stress on internal self-purification, self-denial and anti-materialism. The wide spread belief in reincarnation may also have brought such a devaluation of life, which may explain the historically high levels of rural violence in Cambodia.

Finally, one more internal situation to consider is the effect of a rapidly spreading world economy on a developing country. An urban-rural split in the 1960s Cambodia, was a consequence of joining the global market. As the urban economy developed, an urban aristocracy emerged which was tied to the cities and disconnected from the peasants.

Little is known about Pol Pot. He is one of the most mysterious and secretive leaders in world history. His real name was Saloth Sar. He was born sometime between 1925 and 1928 in Kompong Thom, in central Cambodia. Pol Pot became a Communist in the 1940 s and studied in Paris. Returned to Cambodia, he continued his revolutionary activities and became a leader of the Khmer Rouge forces. Pol Pot opposed both Sihanouk, the anticommunist king of neutral Cambodia, and General Lon Nol, the leader of Cambodians calling for stronger ties with the U.S. and other Western countries. He was determined to rid Cambodia of all opposition of the Khmer Rouge rule, especially those officials who cooperated with the United States, and to establish a strictly communist country.

By 1974, the Khmer Rouge operated as a formal army and millions of refugees fled to escape rural fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Republic forces, while farming and most economic activities remained at a standstill. On New Year s Day, 1975 the Khmer Rouge launched a full attack and after three months of heavy fighting, Phnom Penh, Cambodia s capital, surrendered. The Khmer Republic was dissolved and the nation was renamed Democratic Kampuchea with Pol Pot as its leader. He took the title of prime minister but ruled as a dictator. All Khmer Rouge soldiers swore to obey his every order, and all who disobeyed the government were put to death. Military and government officials who supported the Khmer Republic were immediately killed.

Pol Pot planned to turn Cambodia into a self-sufficient agricultural nation modeled after the old Khmer Empire, in which the peasants worked to produce wealth for the government.

All city residents were forced to march into the countryside to work on government farms; leaving factories, schools, and hospitals abandoned. The country was transformed into an immense work camp. Uneducated peasants were called Old People and made up most of the DK government, while educated Cambodians who were called New People were executed or posed as ignorant farmers in order to survive. People under the DK lived in fear of the angkar (the system). The extreme communalism went as far as to abolish most personal possessions, enforce communal eating, and require that everyone wear black peasant clothing. Public executions were carried out daily, prisons and torture centers were filled, and families were separated on farms. The government eliminated schools, postal services, and forbade the use of money, trade, and modern medicine.

The actions of the Democratic Kampuchea were secretive. During the war, peasants who joined the Khmer Rouge army rarely knew anything about the group’s goals. Khmer tradition expected peasants to obey authority, and few asked questions or criticized the guerrillas.

Another of Pol Pot s main goals, which is directly tied to the country s religion, was to purify Cambodia by ridding it of all but Khmer people. DK outlawed all religion except Buddhism and forbade the practice of cultural traditions of other races. All languages other than Khmer were banned.

An anti-Vietnamese fixation was one of the major features of the Khmer Rouge’s radical nationalism. The problem between the two nations resulted partly from a growing conflict between the Soviet Union and China. Vietnam had ties with the Soviet Union while Cambodia backed China. DK provoked Vietnam into a bizarre border war by massacring border villages, claiming several islands, and urging each Cambodian to kill 30 Vietnamese. The population of the Eastern Cambodian Zone, bordering Vietnam, was said to have been contaminated by Vietnamese influence. They were marked with blue scarves and sent to work camps and torture centers in other regions. In 1975, all Vietnamese Cambodians were ordered to leave by DK, and all those who remained were executed.

By mid 1978, Vietnam and Cambodia were engaged in heavy combat. Later that year a new Cambodian government was formed in Vietnam. Before the government could be enforced, in early 1979, Vietnam invaded and captured Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge and DK fled toward the Thai border. A puppet government controlled by Vietnam was established in Phnom Penh, and the nation was renamed the People s Republic of Kampuchea. The PRK had opposition, and in 1991, the UN gained control of Cambodia, providing them with their first free elections. The election s result was a multiparty democracy within a constitutional monarchy. By 1997, the Khmer Rouge had almost completely collapsed and Pol Pot was removed from its leadership.

Overall, the estimated death toll under Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979 was 21% (about 1.5 million) of a population of 7.9 million. The death toll for Vietnamese inhabitants stands at 100%, while the death toll for the Chinese was 50%, the Chains 36% and Lao 40%. For those defined as New People, the total death toll was about 29%, while for all Old People it was 16%. One estimate indicates that as many as 400,000 people may have died in the Eastern Cambodian Zone, a death toll of 27%. Clearly, those who fit the allowed definition of Khmer suffered somewhat less than members of minorities or groups contaminated by foreign influence , who bore the wrath of the regime that committed one of the century’s worst crimes against humanity.