

## Revisiting the Political Process Model: The Case of the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian Civil War

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### ABSTRACT

*Of all the Marxist-oriented movements which mushroomed up around the globe during the Cold War, it is arguable that perhaps the starkest and most extreme example is that of the Khmer Rouge. Under the leadership of Pol Pot (formerly Saloth Sar), the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia officially from 1975 to 1979 before being ejected by a Vietnamese intervention. During this time period an estimated two million Cambodians died through either starvation, disease, torture, or execution. During their rule, the Khmer Rouge undertook a radical social experiment, which was designed to convert Cambodia to an agrarian form of full Communism in one fell swoop. The cities were emptied and currency was abolished, and Cambodian society (then renamed “Democratic Kampuchea”) was thrown back well before the industrial revolution. Lawyers, doctors, engineers, and Cambodians of every stripe were made to work in agrarian communes ran by the cadres of the Khmer Rouge. Where could such a movement originate, and how does it and the Cambodian Civil War fit in with the political process model? To understand this, one must become a little bit more familiar with Cambodia’s past to understand the underlying issues and grievances which coalesced into the Khmer Rouge movement.*

**Keywords:** Communism, Civil War, Political Processes, Grievance, Genocide, Dictatorship, Conflict, Global Security, Southeast Asia, International Relations, Cold War, Interventions

### INTRODUCTION

Abdulgaffar Peang-Meth (1991) wrote that “The Khmer [Cambodians] have a 2,000-year history distinguished by greatness, territorial expansion, and decline to near extinction,” and that “Theirs is a society that has been indelibly marked by the peaks and valleys of its past” (pg. 442). The storied culture of the ancient Khmer kingdom is still a point of intense national pride, and it played a part in inspiring both Cambodian nationalism as well as the Khmer Rouge. From about the year 100 A.D. to the year 802 the proto-kingdoms in modern Cambodia were subject to both internecine war as well as invasion. However, after 802 A.D. the area was unified under the Khmer King Jayavarman II. Jayavarman and his successors ushered in the time period where the Khmer empire was at its peak. Peang-Meth (1991) wrote that “It was the time when the Khmer greatly expanded their territory, art and architecture thrived, irrigation networks were constructed for agriculture, and the people prospered” (pgs. 442-443). The Khmer empire, at its apex, was one of the great

civilizations of the world at the time and was preponderant in modern day Indochina. But the good times were not to last, in striving for greatness the Khmer kings had overextended themselves and their people. Peang-Meth (1991) wrote:

*The territorial extension of Cambodia, from the east coast of Indochina to Burma’s border in the west and from Vientiane in Laos in the north to the Malay Peninsula in the southwest, was accomplished through long and costly wars. The preoccupation with temple building depleted the nation’s great resources and required forced labor; thousands of priests and shrines were maintained and became rich. As a result, the hydraulic systems were not given adequate attention, irrigation suffered, the economy weakened, and the population became discontented and weary. (pg. 443)*

Even worse for the Khmer was that during this time period (around the 1300s) two of their traditional rivals, the Thai and the Vietnamese, began to establish their own kingdoms in Indochina. Although the Thai, Vietnamese, and

Khmer were all from the same geographically connected area, this did not mean that they (or other groups of people in similar circumstances around the world) shared the same culture and/or degree of current ascendancy to power (Honig, 2019, pg. 85). This was an ominous development for the weakened Khmer empire, and the subsequent centuries were filled with conflict, the gradual amputation of traditional Cambodian territory, drought, and misery. The country became a proxy battlefield between the Thai and the Vietnamese. With the encroachment of French colonialism, the Khmer sought the protection of this powerful foreign nation, eventually becoming a French protectorate in 1863. But this brought another humiliating yoke on the necks of the Khmer, and another link in the chain of national subjugation and humiliation. As World War Two wrapped up, many of France's colonies were now in the throes of nationalist fervor. Peang-Meth (1991) elaborates:

*The Khmer struggle against colonial rule began in 1945—a time when only an estimated 150 Cambodian nationals had completed a high school education—and in November 1953 France granted complete independence to the country. In 1955 King Norodom Sihanouk...announced his abdication from the throne to create and lead a mass political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Nium (People's Socialist Party), which won the first elections in Khmer history. Prince Sihanouk became prime minister of the first Sangkum cabinet, and in 1960 a national referendum approved the prince as Cambodia's chief of state...As the Vietnam War spilled into Cambodia, Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970 by General Lon Nol, who transformed the kingdom of Cambodia into a Khmer republic. (pg. 444)*

Although Sihanouk had formed an ostensibly socialist political party, while in power he did his best to root out foreign-supported or nonaligned communists. However, after being forced from power Sihanouk formed his own resistance movement manned by not only government loyalists, but also fellow royals and supporters of the former monarchy. He then did what was traditionally unthinkable and formed an alliance with his former enemies, the communist Khmer Rouge (who by that time had become active and were a considerable military opponent of the corrupt Lon Nol government). Peang-Meth (1991) observed that "On April 17, 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot took over Cambodia, bringing down the short-lived republic...Their victory left

Sihanouk a virtual prisoner in his own palace, and the Khmer Rouge's draconian rule and genocidal policies led to the death of at least two million Khmer" (pg. 444). The Khmer Rouge promptly put into place a totalitarian regime, with absolute control over politics, the military, and the media. The Khmer Rouge used what media they had (much of it radio broadcasts and political pamphlets) to influence their population and alter their basic day to day interactions with each other (Honig, 2019, pg. 1). This omnipresent reign lasted four years, before the Vietnamese forced the Khmer Rouge out of power and back into the jungles. After a protracted guerilla struggle reflecting the increasing amount of civil wars worldwide (Honig, 2019, pg. 1), the movement formerly surrendered in 1999. Cambodia and its people continue to deal with their grim past, however, and justice for war criminals has not been a complete process by any means.

### THE KHMER ROUGE AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS MODEL

By and large, the political process model offers a good vehicle for understanding the emergence of the Khmer Rouge. Each segment of the model has a ready correspondence to events from the conflict. This provides a useful way of analyzing the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge's reign.

#### Broad Socioeconomic Change

The geopolitical origins, which led to the creation of the Khmer Rouge, took place during the collapse of the French colonial system and gained traction during the ideological battleground of the Cold War in Indochina. Nella Van Dyke and Sarah A. Soule (2002) wrote that "Strain theories, which were popular through the 1950s and 1960s, argue that groups mobilize when they face broad-scale social changes, including economic crisis or restructuring, wars, the loss of supporting social institutions, or mass migrations" (pg. 498). For Cambodia this was most certainly the case. According to Philip Short (2004) "The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe and France's defeat by Germany meant that from July 1940, Cambodia was administered by Marshal Petain's collaborationist regime in Vichy, under the tutelage of Germany's ally, Japan" (pg. 28). During this time period, although under occupation, the Cambodians first witnessed the humiliation of the French by another Asiatic people, a concept previously unheard of. The French had been viewed as

omniscient and the sight of their defeat stirred emotions stemming back to the ancient Khmer empire, that of the dream of throwing off the shackles of invaders. The war had disrupted the “quotidian,” a term which originates in Latin, and according to David A. Snow, Daniel M. Cress, Liam, Downey, and Andrew W. Jones (1998) means “...the routines of daily life or what in sociology today is called ‘everyday life’” (pg. 2). Snow et al (1998) go on to state that “We contend that the kind of breakdown most likely to be associated with movement emergence is that which penetrates and disrupts, or threatens to disrupt, taken-for-granted, everyday routines and expectancies” (pg. 2). Short (2004) elaborates about the continued disruption of the quotidian for the Cambodians as World War Two wrapped up:

*...the defeat of Japan and Germany had opened the way for the return of the French. In October 1945, British troops entered Phnom Penh, ostensibly to disarm the Japanese garrison...The following January, the Cambodian and French governments signed a Modus Vivendi, which provided for the resumption of French rule but also acknowledged Cambodian autonomy, leaving the door ajar for further discussion of the country's political status. (pg. 34)*

Far from a return to the status quo, this much weakened position by the French emboldened Cambodians, and overt resistance began to try and dislodge the returning colonial power. With the anti-colonialist rhetoric that had come into vogue after World War Two, the French found themselves vulnerable in several newly reacquired colonies. Van Dyke and Soule (2002) wrote that “The same conditions that create favorable conditions for collective action by one movement may present an increased threat for another” (pg. 499). After the broad socioeconomic changes that had been wrought by the war and its aftermath, the French found themselves on the losing side of that statement. This set the stage for the next act in the development of the Khmer Rouge.

### Cognitive Liberation

On October 1st of 1949, Pol Pot and a group of other privileged Cambodians (many of which became luminaries of the Khmer Rouge) disembarked in Paris to begin university studies. Pol Pot and several other students joined the Khmer Student Association (known in French as l' Association des Etudiants Khmers or AEK). There they were exposed to members of the expat Khmer community in Paris, creating

networks of formerly isolated countrymen living in the land of their colonial masters. As these solitary individuals made contact, they began to imagine how they could bring back what they learned to create a different way of life in Cambodia. In Paris at that time there were a plethora of different ideologies and intellectual ideas to explore, such as existentialism, nihilism, Stalinism, and Leninism. In this cacophony of ideas and ideologues the Khmer found them “Turning on, tuning in, and dropping out,” proverbially speaking, eventually coming across the classic works of Marx. The moment of cognitive liberation in the political process model for the students in the AEK came during their attendance of a “World Youth Festival for Peace” in Berlin, which was a staunchly pro-Soviet organization. During this festival the students in the AEK met communist delegations from across the world including the Chinese, Laotian, as well as the Vietnamese. This growing sense of community between the different nationalities of Indochina led to a critical mass, and according to Short (2004) “The effect of the Berlin Festival...was to move the political center of gravity of the Khmer student movement in Paris sharply to the left” (pg. 62).

### Expanding Political Opportunities

The disparate groups of Khmer, Chinese, Laotian, and Vietnamese activists at the Berlin festival were representatives of the political opportunities that were present before the national agendas of the Indochinese states were brought into alignment in the pursuit of Marxism. One salient matter which Cambodia, Laos, China, and Vietnam had significantly in common was the collective grievances brought on them by their current or former colonial masters. J. Craig Jenkins, David Jacobs, and Jon Agnone (2003) note that the influence of collective grievances “...is strongest in settings where there is a history of intergroup conflict and discriminatory treatment by the advantaged group that is seen by the disadvantaged as responsible for group subordination” (pgs. 295-296). This common enemy, the colonial system, was a threat to all the countries in Indochina (in the point of view of the emerging leadership of the Khmer Rouge) and respected no borders.

However, with the advent of international communism and the political opportunities it presented, the defeat of imperialism seemed to become a realistic goal. Short (2004) noted that a Vietnamese tactician named Pham Van Ba during political training classes attended by



other Indochinese communists "...used to tell his Khmer listeners that Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were 'like lips, teeth and tongue; each needs the other two'" (pg. 105). By learning to work together beyond their borders through political cooperation, the disparate indigenous communist forces of Indochina (the PLA, Viet Cong, North Vietnam, the Pathet Lao, and the Khmer Rouge) turned the region from a colonial backwater into the central arena of the Cold War.

### Indigenous Organizational Strength

While in Paris, the Khmer communists in the AEK began to form the core nucleus of what would become the leadership of the Khmer Rouge. They ultimately became the overseers of organizational strength on the part of the native Cambodian resistance to first the royalists, then the short-lived republic headed by General Lon Nol and his American and French allies. This nucleus was known as the "Cercle Marxiste." According to Short (2004) "The Cercle was built up of individual cells, each comprising between three and six people...It was rigidly compartmentalized: one member of each cell was in contact with a single member of the leadership, and no cell member knew who belonged to the other cells or how many cells existed" (pg. 62). In this way the Cambodians controlled the leadership of the Khmer Rouge and were responsible for marshalling and managing their human resources as well as providing legitimacy to their native constituency. But unfortunately for the fiercely independent Khmer, they had to go hat in hand to others in order to obtain material resources (such as money, weapons, and vehicles). To do so, members of the Cercle Marxiste tutored under the elites in China and Vietnam and were expected to toe the line according to their benefactors in terms of viewpoints and strategy. Daniel M. Cress and David A. Snow (1996) reflected on the effects of external support and control:

*Does external support or patronage lead to co-optation or control? There are two overlapping hypotheses: The social control hypothesis argues that external sponsorship moderates [Social Movement Organization] goals and tactics, thus dampening the prospect of militant collective action. A second hypothesis contends that external patronage does not necessarily mute radical dissent, but channels it into more professional and publicly palatable forms. (pg. 1091)*

If one was to ask the Vietnamese and Chinese which hypothesis they preferred in reigning in

and controlling their Khmer Rouge beneficiaries, more than likely they would have chosen the second. But the Khmer, with their history of being subjugated and dominated, more than likely would have preferred the first hypothesis as they felt that the Vietnamese in particular were trying to dilute their revolution. To them their revolution was theirs alone, and moderating it for others was anathema. But as the organizational strength of the Cercle Marxiste grew tighter and the indigenous Khmer became able to satisfy their own needs for military and financial aid, the Vietnamese in turn had to learn how to play by the rules of the Khmer Rouge. Short (2004) wrote that despite what "...the Hanoi leadership saw as Khmer bloody-mindedness...the Vietnamese relied on Cambodian cooperation to keep open their supply lines at the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail," and that "In the late 1960s, Khmers and Vietnamese were uneasy bedfellows, but bedfellows all the same" (pg. 171).

### CONCLUSION

The model does an effective job of explaining the main components necessary to create the perfect storm which led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge. The vast socioeconomic changes affected by the Second World War, the fall of colonialism, and the rise of Marxism and the Cold War left the old culture and institutions in shambles as the Khmer struggled to find their place. Simultaneously a group of the country's elite travelled to France to study, and like the children of the elite who formed the social phenomenon at Berkley in the United States during the 1960s, these students soon found themselves becoming "enlightened" and ready to forge a new way of life for their nation. As the Cold War came into swing, the communists in the various countries in Indochina saw the opportunity to band together to expand their political opportunities across borders. And wrapping it all up was the indigenous organizational strength in the leadership of the Khmer Rouge which was forged during meetings of the AEK in Paris, coupled with the external material support of elites from other outside sympathetic nations (such as China and North Vietnam). The political process model is a solid way of understanding how the Khmer Rouge movement came to be in Cambodia.

However, there are some things about the movement, which cannot really be explained by the model. For one thing, the model suggests that there is something of a semi-linear path

between the components. But with the Khmer Rouge, it is arguable that there was a broad overlap with at least three of these components (broad socioeconomic processes, cognitive liberation, and expanding political opportunities) as they occurred during roughly the same time period. Furthermore, the deep-seated insecurities in the Khmer as a culture due to the collapse of their former empire had left them with inter-generational psychological scars. The preoccupation with the past had become a national phenomenon which helped numb the Khmer Rouge to their genocidal deeds as they sought to recreate their lost empire, one known to them only in the age-old stories passed down from generation to generation. The political process model doesn't seem to encompass such a psychological burden, one which had embedded itself deep into the subconscious of the Khmer. Ultimately, however, the political process model is a useful tool in understanding the emergence of the Khmer Rouge movement. Perhaps it would not be imprudent to examine other Marxist movements through the lens of the political process model, as well.

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