

Introduction

The influences and events that have shaped the Khmer nation and its people are many and complex. For those who are not students of Cambodian history this introduction paints a broad backdrop for the images that follow.

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a small, beautiful country of some 180,000 square kilometres. Ethnic Khmers constitute over 90% of a population of 12 million. The country's rich culture dates from the 9th century when the Angkor Empire dominated parts of the neighbouring states of present-day Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. Hinduism, emanating from India, influenced early religious ideas but in the 11th century, King Jayavarman VII, the greatest of the builder kings, converted to Buddhism. Today, 40,000 monks and a landscape dotted with Wats attest to its continuing dominance.

The most obvious legacy of the Angkor Kings is a massive religious and spiritual temple complex, which, despite the ravages of theft and decay, yearly draws thousands of tourists and their dollars to one of the world's poorest nations. The Angkor Kings also constructed roads, bridges and hospitals and a complex system of canals and dykes to help water the huge rice bowl that sits astride the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers. Rice, fishing and timber dominate an agriculturally based, largely subsistence economy. Inland, Lake Tonle Sap turns into a huge fish breeding ground when it more than doubles in size during the annual wet season. In the wet, pressure from the volume of water flowing down the great Mekong causes the Tonle Sap River to reverse and amazingly flow upstream to swell the lake. Water continues to be Cambodia's lifeblood and although many of the old canal systems have fallen into ruin, an answer to Cambodia's future prosperity lies in again

harnessing a massive water resource.

Although the country has generally been free of natural disasters, it has been far less fortunate with disasters inflicted on it by other nations and more significantly, those it has inflicted upon itself. Its near neighbours have variously invaded it, occupied it and until recently, continued to dominate it. France, in the 1860's, probably saved Cambodia from subjugation by its neighbours, but it cost Cambodians almost a century of colonial rule. In 1953 the colonial master delivered the country's destiny back to itself in particular, into the hands of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. A master survivor, Sihanouk may wish to be remembered as a divine leader and a saviour of his people, although numbers of his subjects did not survive his early authoritarian reign, which spawned the insurgent movement of Saloth Sar, now known as Pol Pot.

In 1970, while absent from the country, Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup d'etat by the pro-US General Lon Nol. Sihanouk had been attempting to walk a tightrope of professed but unconvincing neutrality at a time when the US was waging a war against the domino theory in Vietnam. Lon Nol's pro-US stance spurred North Vietnam's deployment of the Viet Cong deeper into Cambodia and, influenced no doubt by massive US B52 bombing raids, drove more people and areas into the hands of the Khmer Rouge (KR). America's loss of the war in Vietnam and its decision to withdraw also spelt the end of a corrupt and puppet Lon Nol regime. Cambodia's darkest hours descended on the country on April 17, 1975, when the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh.

The events -which flowed from that day, are

well recorded and well known. Phnom Penh was emptied of all people and the Pol Pot leadership through ANGKA, 'The Organization' as it became known and feared, commenced an experiment to attempt to create a classless, harmonious, agrarian society. Over one and a half million people died in this experiment. It touched every family.

In less than four years, a nation lost a generation of almost everything at the hands of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Much of the prose in this book describes that loss, not so much in material terms but in the untold damage inflicted on the psyche of a nation and reflected in the way ordinary Khmers now think, speak, and act. The horrific regime also set in train a series of events that were to make recovery from such trauma an even longer and more painful process.

In 1977, urged on by China, the KR determined to wage war on their traditional enemy Vietnam. Cross border raids and larger scale clashes finally led Vietnam to take the decision, in late '78, to undertake a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. By the end of 1979 they had cleared the KR from most of the country. Though rightly considered saviours, the new Vietnamese masters delivered little in the way of assistance needed for a traumatized people. There was also little access to international assistance as in the West, Vietnam was now considered a pariah state. The Chinese continued to support the KR while the West supported the other major factions opposing the Vietnamese occupation, namely the Nationalist KPNLAF and the Royalist FUNCINPEC. In the late 80's there were over 250,000 Cambodian refugees in Thai border camps as factional armies waged a guerilla war against the Vietnamese and its 'puppets'. All factions were eventually allied under Prince Sihanouk, albeit temporarily, in the Cambodian Government of Democratic Kampuchea, a government in exile, which was even granted a seat in the United Nations (UN).

In 1989 the Vietnamese decided that the national and international cost of the occupation of Cambodia was too high and withdrew. They left in their wake four competing factions seeking control of the country. A French sponsored International Conference on Cambodia in late '89 eventually led to the Paris talks of October 1991 and The Peace Accords. The KR, although opposed to many issues, planned to comply with essential elements of the Accords.

The UN, 26,000 military and civilian staff and over two billion dollars, delivered Cambodia back to itself through supervised elections in May 1993; the KR, in the end, choosing not to participate. But many consider the result achieved by the UN's massive investment flawed, because although FUNCINPEC won more seats, a compromise put the country into the hands of dual and equal Prime Ministers, Prince Norodon Ranariddh (Sihanouk's son) and Hun Sen (the former Prime Minister under the Vietnamese and leader of the Cambodian People's Party, the CPP). The dual system extended through ministries and even into the provinces. It succeeded in making an 'art form' out of 'cutting through red tape'.

As one General described the overall situation "You have to pull Cambodians by the nose to get them to the table to negotiate anything; if they are of equal rank, impossible!"

For the people, the UN certainly delivered on two counts; first there was a huge dollar boost to the economy and second they experienced a real taste of the democratic process, in the form of a free vote in a secret ballot. However, principally because of the KR threat, the election still left the country awash with guns with an Army on paper of over 125,000, including, 2,000 generals.

Although poorly paid and supplied, the cost of keeping this 'paper army' was, and still is, a huge impost on the national budget. Prince Sihanouk, an occasional but significant player in the negotiation

and election process was lured back from Beijing and North Korea, where he had been in exile since 1979 and in September 1993, was invested King of Cambodia.

For a time, under close international scrutiny and propped up by international financial support, the system of a 'two headed' government did manage to stumble along. However; in a country where autocratic, authoritarian, normally royal leadership was the norm and where the word trust had disappeared from the language, it was destined to fail. Many issues contributed to the breakdown, but a March '96 decision by FUNCINPEC to try to match Hun Sen's CPP militarily, by building up its own forces, was the beginning of the end. The FUNCINPEC aim, for the planned 1998 elections, was to be militarily powerful enough not to be forced again into a compromise with the CPP, as they had been after the elections of '93.

As the Government disintegrated, the Khmer Rouge continued to cast its shadow on the nation with units operating throughout the country and main forces firmly entrenched in no-go zones in the north and northwest. The Government spent over half its yearly budget supporting a divided and largely untrained military on yearly dry season offensives against the Khmer Rouge. Because the factionalized army was bloated with ghosts, the fodder for these offensives was reinforced by the youth of the rural poor, young men, recruited or conscripted from villages and sent without proper training or equipment against mines and seasoned KR soldiers. The waste was further exacerbated by an almost nonexistent evacuation system backed by military hospitals lacking everything. Meanwhile, politicians, generals, local warlords and lawless groups grew fat on a variety of corrupt practices, including illegal taxing, illegal timber felling and smuggling. Little money reached government coffers as the international community heavily subsidized the budget. While the wealth of individuals and parties grew, minimal benefit accrued

to the ordinary people who remained some of the poorest in the world.

As factional conflict simmered between the coalition 'partners', conflict was also occurring between Pol Pot's hard line lieutenants based in Anlong Veng and the more wealthy elements of the KR in the gem and timber rich northwest areas of Pailin and Malai. This provided an opportunity, first for the Royalists and then for the CPP, to try to entice the defection of significant Khmer Rouge units and zones into their own camps. At this, the Royalist FUNCINPEC, former brothers in arms with the KR against the Vietnamese, was more successful and in late '96 negotiated the defection to the government of the strongest KR elements from Pailin and Malai.

In July '97, triggered by the Hun Sen claim that Khmer Rouge soldiers were reinforcing Royalist forces in Phnom Penh, the simmering factional conflict exploded into a battle for the city. The Royalists fought well, but totally outgunned and out-numbered, inevitably lost. Some of the Royalist political leadership had already 'left town' prior to the battle and although their commanding general did escape north, a number of his officers died in the battle or were subsequently murdered. In the north, the Royalists planned to defend a significant portion of the country and wage a civil war against the Hun Sen regime. For this, they hoped to win international support, particularly from the US. On the ground, they believed they could count on the support of all current or former KR as well as the strong military units of the former nationalist KPNLAF faction that were stationed in the northwest province of Banteay Meanchey. However their plan failed and although Pol Pot's Anlong Veng KR provided support, the former Khmer Rouge of Pailin and Malai, who had previously defected to the government, remained neutral. The same was the case for the military units of the former KPNLAF, who opted, at the eleventh hour, not to support the FUNCINPEC cause.

The FUNCINPEC loss delivered the country back to one boss, Hun Sen, who set about trying to convince the international community and the Cambodian people that he was a worthy and strong leader who could deliver the reforms necessary to at last take the country forward. This master strategist was eventually 'persuaded' to let the FUNCINPEC leadership return to the country to fight the '98 election and to also allow the vocal opposition leader Sam Rainsy, to participate. Internal disputes, fractures and leadership problems among the Royalists; their late entry to the race, lack of funds and lack of media exposure, meant that the election was virtually 'in the bag' for Hun Sen's CPP well before polling day. On the day, in what appeared a fair and credible result, the CPP won a simple though sizeable majority in the National Assembly. However, needing a two-thirds majority to govern, this merely represented a beginning to the game of rhetoric, negotiation and bluff conducted for months by King, Prince and politician while the nation and its people were left dangling. Eventually and inevitably the dealing delivered a Hun Sen led coalition. With the reins of power again firmly in his grasp, Prime Minister Hun Sen is showing that he has the will and the strength to try to move the country forward. He is young, autocratic, and uncompromising, not only a master survivor but also a master strategist. He continues to run rings around any opposition and his detractors, both nationally and internationally.

Cambodia now has stable government and the economy is slowly moving forward. The country has seen the last dry season offensive and there is a plan for military demobilization. Pol Pot is dead and the Khmer Rouge, all of whom have now defected, are gradually being drawn into normal government processes.

There are fewer guns on the streets and law and order is slowly improving. The people have tasted some of the fruits of the democratic process (real democracy may

come later). There will be another election in 2003.

But ordinary people are still poor and die needlessly of disease. Corruption is endemic and a culture of impunity still exists. It will take a generation for the country to heal the disfigurement of mind caused by the Khmer Rouge and to produce untainted young leaders who can speak without fear, from the heart. And already the young are part of the next disaster being inflicted upon the nation and itself; an HIV/AIDS epidemic. There is little doubt that a 'soft, gentle, loquacious people' will again be driven to their knees, but there is no doubt they will find again that something they have inside to struggle back to their feet and continue on, searching for the path to a permanent peace.

*—David Mead
Phnom Penh, In the Millennium Year*