Cambodia: Marxism or Sadism?

By Yuangrat Wedel

Introduction

Even though the political system brought to Cambodia by Pol Pot has now become history, the impact of this system continues in civil war, economic collapse, food shortages and refugees. During the Pol Pot administration, thousands of Cambodians fled to the Thai border provinces of Prachinburi, Chantaburi and Trad. The exodus accelerated as the government tried to implement its ideology in a radical economic development plan. Ieng Sary, then deputy prime minister described the radical approach as "never attempted elsewhere and following no one." The Khmer Rouge plan created not only the problem of refugees but also conflicts among the Cambodians themselves. The war between the new Heng Samrin government and the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot has become one of the region’s major political problems and has caused further hardship for the Cambodian people. In short, Pol Pot’s political system created political problems among Cambodians, with Cambodia’s neighboring countries and for the entire international community.

This article is an attempt to show how Pol Pot and his followers operated. It will show that the Khmer Rouge leaders’ concern was focused on a narrow, radical concept of economic structure and ignored other aspects of development. I have also tried to show that in applying Marxist theory to the country, the Khmer Rouge leaders altered and violated that theory to an even greater extent than Lenin did in 1917 and Mao Tse-Tung did in 1921.

Lastly, this article will try to show that the way the Khmer Rouge treated the people contradicted the ideas of Marx, which, however mistaken economically, were essentially humanitarian.

This article is divided into four different topics for the convenience of analysis: the development of the Communist Party of Kampuchea; the goals of Pol Pot’s regime; Pol Pot’s social revolution in relation to Marxist theory; and Pol Pot’s methods.

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1 The Communist Party of Kampuchea seized power in Phnom Penh from the government of Gen. Lon Nol on May 7, 1975 and was itself ousted by the Vietnamese army in January 1979. It had held power for roughly four years.
3 This follows the Marxist theory of changing the substructure of economics before anything else. According to Marx, economic substructure determines superstructure, which includes politics, law, various social institutions, culture, tradition, values. Therefore, in changing society it is necessary to change the substructure of economics before changing the superstructure.
4 See the article “kwam khatyaneng thang thisadee khong Marxists” by Yuangrat (Pattanapong) Wedel in Rattasatsarn (March 1979) pp. 1-19.
The Communist Party of Kampuchea seized Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, but did not let the Cambodian people know the identity of the real leader of the revolution until two years later. On September 17, 1977, Pol Pot gave a two-hour speech on the seventeenth anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. He announced that “Democratic Kampuchea” was led by the Communist Party. In his speech, Pol Pot did not mention that the Communist Party was originally from the Revolutionary Cambodian People’s Party, which was founded in 1951 with the help of the Indochina Communist Party led by Vietnam.

Historically, the Communist Party of Kampuchea joined other movements before it achieved its goal in 1975. It joined the Viet Minh and other revolutionary groups to fight against the French and Prince Sihanouk. After the Geneva agreement of 1954 some of the party leaders joined the underground movement and some went to Vietnam.

The top Khmer Rouge leaders had been government-supported students sent to continue their education in France in 1950. They were extreme nationalists and admired Marxist theory. Their leaders included Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary and Hou Youn. The three founded the Association of Khmer Students, which was the center of Khmer student activism. Their major concern was winning full independence from France.

In 1965, 200 Khmer students in France (about one-third of the total number of Khmer students) founded the Union of Khmer Students. It was used as a center for exchanging political ideas. Hence, when these students returned to Cambodia, their ideas, especially those of the leaders, were set. Later, when Sihanouk was elected prime minister, he tried first to co-opt and then to suppress the leftist movement formed around the Union of Khmer Students. Some leading leftists were invited to join the government. A few did not trust Sihanouk and went underground. These included Ieng Sary, Son Sen and Salot Sar.

In 1967 farmers from Samlaut, a town in the west of Battambang province, began an uprising against the Sihanouk government. Sihanouk charged the revolt was led by Hou Youn, a leftist intellectual, and Khieu Samphan, doctorate degree holder from France. They both escaped to the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh. By this time the former student radicals were scattered all over the country. Some went to the jungle. Some went to Vietnam and some joined the Revolutionary Cambodian People’s Party.

In 1970 Lon Nol took over the government while Prince Sihanouk was traveling abroad. Sihanouk sought asylum in Beijing and later joined forces with the Khmer Rouge, but visited them openly briefly in the jungle. The later accepted him for their own interests. Sihanouk acted as spokesman for the Khmer Rough and asked his people to join him in the struggle against Lon Nol. He established his own government he named “The Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia.”

The Khmer Rouge was helped by Vietnam from the beginning, but that help increased in 1973 despite frictions between the Khmers and the Vietnamese. The revolutionary movement was
divided in several factions and at least two major groups – what became known as the Khmer Rundas under Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge under the Communist party. In fact, the Khmer Rouge Communists were also split between an intensely xenophobic faction supported by China and a more moderate faction backed by Vietnam. They put aside their differences to work together in the fighting out of common hatred for the US-backed Lon Nol regime, but mutual suspicion was strong.

After the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, US officials tried to negotiate with Sihanouk, asking him to leave the Khmer Rouge and set up a multi-party government. But Lon Nol, fearful of the political power of the Sihanouk-Communist alliance, called on the Americans to intensify military action against the rural insurgency. Hence from March 1973 American forces bombed rural Cambodia without advance notice. Thousands of Cambodians were victims. Survivors turned to the Khmer Rouge for protection and revenge. Corruption and incompetence by the Lon Nol government led to steady Khmer Rouge military victories – directed by the Communist leadership following the Maoist doctrine of the countryside surrounding and defeating the cities. American opposition to its involvement in the Indochina conflicts led to the end of the intense bombing and doubts about its support for Lon Nol. Crammed with panicky refugees, the cities became ungovernable and indefensible.

On April 17, 1975 Sihanouk, the supposed leader of the insurgency, was informed at a reception of what was really a Khmer Rouge victory. In July he traveled to Phnom Penh in the hope of becoming the leader of the country as promised by the Chinese. Instead the Khmer Rouge kept him under house arrest in his own palace for the rest of the nearly four years of Pol Pot’s Communist Party rule.

II. The goals of Pol Pot’s regime

The top leadership of Democratic Kampuchea announced on April 13, 1976 consisted of the leaders of the Communist Party:

**Khieu Samphan** was named President, officially the chairman of the Presidium. The vice-chairmen were identified as So Pim and Nim Ros. Khieu is an idealist. He graduated from Paris with a Ph.D. in Economics in 1959. His thesis was titled “Cambodia’s Economy and Problems of Industrialization.” The thesis was well-known among leftist Cambodian intellectuals and was used as the blueprint for economic development under Pol Pot.

**Noun Chea** was identified as Chairman of the People’s Committee of the General Assembly and Vice-chairman of the Liberation Army of Kampuchea. He was the chief of the political and military section during the war.

**Pol Pot**, previously named Salot Sar, was identified as the Prime Minister. He is from a peasant family. After he graduated from Technical College in Phnom Penh, Salot Sar went to Paris to study engineering under a government scholarship. He is well-versed in Marxist theory and is the leader of the Communist Party.
Ieng Sary is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. He comes from a wealthy peasant family. He is known to be personally pleasant, talkative and a good mathematician. Ieng Sary, previously known as Kin Trang, like other leaders studied in Paris.

Von Vet is responsible for the economy. The government established several economic departments, including committees on agricultural development and industrial development. Other departments identified included trade, transportation, energy and rubber.

These leaders had goals that were greatly influenced by Marxist-Leninist and Maoist theories. They believed that “in Cambodian society, there is a class struggle between the oppressors, who are the imperialists, the feudalists and the capitalists, and the oppressed, who are the peasants and laborers.”

The xenophobic Khmer Rouge, once they had seized power, believed that they could develop the country without any help from foreign countries. This policy was similar to Mao’s. They saw Cambodian society, outside of the rural pour, as “the garbage of the old society, full of the ruins of the palaces, corrupted aristocrats and greedy landlords. The cities were populated by the oppressing capitalists, including foreign capitalists and American imperialists who had committed aggression against Cambodia.” A key goal was to eradicate all these ruins from society. The Khmer Rouge believed that this goal required the “complete destruction of the old society and its replacement by a new society characterized by a new social structure, culture and economy for Cambodia.” This tearing down of the old structures to build something completely new was the goal of the new economic development policy.

How could the new government develop the economy? The Khmer Rouge leadership did not hesitate to implement the economic measures in Khieu Samphan’s thesis. They were all familiar with it and it gave them a radical way forward that conveniently destroyed the economic base of their political enemies – the landowners, aristocrats and urban middle class. In writing his thesis, Khieu Samphan borrowed directly from the African scholar, Samir Amin. Khieu Samphan pointed out that Cambodia’s economy had been held back by the exploitation of the imperialists. He wrote:

We can conclude that the Cambodian economy is backward because of the under development of agriculture. This is caused by economic activities dominated by the stage before capitalism and those controlled by capitalism, combined with foreign investment. The Americans replaced the French in controlling the Cambodian economy. The International Committee of Phnom

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5 Problems of Communism, loc. cit.
7 Problems of Communism, p. 31.
8 Ibid., p. 31.
10 Radio announcement by the new Cambodian government shortly after taking power in Phnom Penh. This reflects the analysis of the economic problems of Cambodia according to Khieu Samphan from Ibid., p. 22
11 Indochina Chronicle, op. cit., p. 3.
Penh, which was responsible for distributing funds from the United States, became the magnet, more powerful than the Indochinese bank.\footnote{12 Indochina Chronicle, p. 25.}

Khieu Samphan suggested the way to cure the backwardness of agriculture was by “withdrawing from the world economy and rebuilding a new economic structure based on self-reliance.”\footnote{13 Far Eastern Economic Review, Asia 1979 (Hong Kong) South China Morning Post, 1979) p. 161.} By sending all the people to the rural areas in order to eradicate the old colonial economy and replace it with an economy based on socialist agriculture. After agriculture and industry become strong enough, then Cambodia could re-enter international trade. “Cambodia has to enter the world economy on its own terms,”\footnote{14 Ibid.} he wrote. Khieu Samphan described the tactics needed to develop Cambodia’s economy:

The tactic of self-reliance is above any other. It has to be established first in the smallest unit of society, which is the village, land then move on to the state and regional levels. To achieve the national goals, we have to consider the primary level first. This is a tactic that will achieve the goal in the long run.\footnote{15 Indochina Chronicle, op. cit., p. 19}

Even if independent sovereignty could be achieved only through agricultural development, industrial development should not be ignored, according to the thesis. However, Khieu Samphan suggested, the best method to develop industry in Cambodia was by starting from agriculture. He stressed that Cambodia should rely on itself. Cambodia should have its own way to develop industry. Imports must be abolished. In the summary of the first part of the thesis he wrote:

In developing Cambodian industry, it is necessary to decide first whether to do it with other nations or to do it by ourselves. It is clear there is a limit to development through integration with foreign countries. Under this (international) system machinery is used and things produced by hand will disappear. In cooperating with other countries, we have to accept their economic structures and this will create an unbalanced economy. This will lead to disaster. In fact, there is already a conflict in introducing the international integration method. So, it is necessary to set the goal of developing by ourselves.\footnote{16 Ibid, p. 25.}

III. Social Revolution: Analysis

Khieu Samphan’s theories became the heart of the Khmer Rouge strategy for economic development. Once the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh the plan was put into immediate effect – with brutal oversimplification that disregarded the human suffering involved. The plan fit neatly with Khmer Rouge fears they would not be able to control the cities and could not stop the infiltration of their new society by agents of the Vietnamese and the Americans. The plan
resonated with the deep frustration and envy their peasant army harbored against the urban population. By replacing the old system with a new regime based on total self-reliance and primitive agriculture, Cambodia’s new rulers would sweep the country clean of the “garbage” of rich capitalists, corrupt bureaucrats and foreigners.

The first thing they did was to force every individual out of the cities. The old, the young, even the sick, were forced to leave the capital within three days. In other big towns, such as Battambang and Sisophon, the methods were the same. In the rural areas the population was divided into groups, each group consisting of 100-200 families. They were initially controlled by armed Khmer Rouge soldiers. Each group was called a commune or “sahakorn.” The people in the communes had to build their new homes using whatever they could find in the forest. Their daily tasks were growing rice, building dams or digging canals. They were forced to live primitive lives and were given limited amounts of food.

Why did the Khmer Rouge want to speed the implementation of this drastic development plan? Pol Pot admitted that he had set up the plan in February 1975 to move the population to the rural areas because:

We realized we did not have enough forces to protect our system. By assessing the fight during 1973-74 we knew that we had so many enemies, in many forms. If we destroyed them completely, they could not revive. The enemy could not attack us from outside so they would have attack secretly from within. So, we had better destroy the enemies’ organization before they destroyed us.18

To destroy their enemies, the Khmer Rouge tried to sort people into particular groups to be dealt with. Execution was ordered for the most hated and feared groups. The first group to be disposed of was made up of high government officials and military officers from the Lon Nol regime, then the lower officials and finally the intellectuals. City dwellers and rural people who had not lived under Khmer Rouge control during the war were considered virtual slaves under the control of those who had already experienced Khmer Rouge rule.

The other reason given by the Khmer Rouge for moving people out of the towns was to provide the work force needed for agricultural development. But the question of how effectively the children, the sick and the old, as well as the town people without farming skills could contribute to agriculture was ignored.

It seems the Khmer Rouge tried to create an idealized rural communist society instantly. According to Marx, the ideal society is one with no class distinctions, where everyone is equal. If

17 The word “sahakorn” or cooperative has a different meaning for the Khmer Rouge than for Thais. The Khmer Rouge sahakorn does not mean, as in Thailand, that the members are owners of the cooperative and receive the benefits according to the number of shares they own. The Khmer Rouge sahakorn is a state-controlled working unit and all Cambodians are required to be members of a sahakorn. The members of a sahakorn cooperate in terms of working and living. The members, however, do not own any shares or have the rights to receive a specified portion of the benefits from the work of the sahakorn.

18 Problems of Communism, op. cit., p. 37.
the Khmer Rouge plan was truly Marxist, there should have been no difference between town and country people, no difference between manual labor and intellectual work. The Khmer Rouge may have believed they were following Marx earnestly and literally, but Marx saw the destruction of class-based society as something that would have to come step by step. The Khmer Rouge rushed into it by forcing the entire population to become peasants within three days.

In destroying the differences between town and country people, Marx suggested that wealth should be evenly distributed according to need. The Khmer Rouge, however, simply destroyed most wealth. They eliminated the differences between town and countryside by eliminating the towns, or at best, making them as backward as the countryside. In eradicating the differences among the various kinds of work, the Khmer Rouge eradicated virtually all kinds of work except manual labor. Marx, however, had simply wanted all work, including manual labor, to be valued equally.

Furthermore, Marx did not specify how much time each country would need to move towards communism. According to the Communist Manifesto\(^\text{19}\) the process of changing society would take significant time, even in the most advanced countries. In less developed countries such as Cambodia, the process should take even longer.

Marx wrote:

> When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another.\(^\text{20}\)

The Khmer Rouge instead created a military class to suppress other classes. Marx also recommended compromise with the farmers in the creation of the cooperative system, but the Khmer Rouge forced all farmers to abandon their privately-owned land without compensation in order to join communes.

**Rule by “Angka”**

In the communist society envisioned by Marx the state is supposed to gradually disappear allowing the proletariat to rule themselves without a state organization. Under the Khmer Rouge, however, “Angka,” the Organization, became the sovereign that controlled society, including economic, political and social activities.\(^\text{21}\) Every citizen had to follow the orders of Angka without argument. The idea harked back to the absolute authoritarianism of the ancient Khmer empire that built the magnificent temples of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom with legions of slave

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\(^{20}\) *Ibid.*., p. 352

\(^{21}\) Phnom Penh radio announced that from the 17\(\text{th}\) of April 1975 the Khmer people have come under the just and all-knowing leadership of Angka. Ponchaud, op. cit., p. 6.
labor. The Khmer Rouge made this connection overt, both in the new national flag and in its exhortations to the people. Because “Angka is like the new Angkor Wat. It is sacred and people have to devote both body and mind to it.”

Angka – actually the shadowy Communist Party of Kampuchea – seemed to have a quasi-religious character. The Khmer Rouge were very cautious in selecting the words used to refer to “Angka.” For example, everyone has to have “faith,” has to “love” and “thank Angka for liberating them from worldly needs.” “Whoever denies Angka’s orders will be punished severely,” “even in the rains or in the storm or when you are sick for days and nights, you have to obey Angka without complaint.”

The principles laid down by Angka included:

- Independence-sovereignty
- Depend on our own labor
- Protect the country
- Direct our own fate

Depending on our own labor means to use only our labor in our work. Machines are not to be used. Khieu Samphan explained:

> Because when we use our own labor, we can fully work by ourselves. It shows that the people are brave and the force of the people is the supreme force. With their bare hands, they can still do everything.

The most important principle is to build an independent and sovereign Cambodia based on agricultural development. In developing the rural areas, one has to have “economic spirit” which means “renunciation of personal attitudes, renunciation of material goods and renunciation of personal behavior.” Renunciation of personal attitudes means devoting oneself totally to work and being happy as Angka’s instrument. Renunciation of material goods means abandoning all private property and personal attachments, whether it be hone, wife, husband, or children. Renunciation of personal behavior means being humble and patient.

In order to create “economic spirit,” the Khmer Rouge began the process of forcing everyone to live in rural communes under the harsh discipline of Angka. Life in the sahakorn was directed by the Khmer Rouge administrators and soldiers. Wives were often separated from husbands, children from parents. Everyone had to work. Young infants were cared for by the elderly. Life was strictly controlled. Working hours were long – at least 10-15 hours a day. There was a

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22 Ibid., p. 108.
23 Phnom Penh radio from Ibid., p. 136.
24 Problems of Communism, op. cit., p. 36.
25 Ponchaud, op. cit. p. 94
26 Problems of Communism, op. cit. p. 40.
27 Successful experience in development is considered to come from defeating agricultural problems, overcoming floods, overcoming nature. From Ponchaud, op. cit., p. 131.
28 Ibid., p. 133.
communal kitchen where food was scarce. At night, everyone had to attend meetings for evaluation of their work and to demonstrate their faith in Angka. Children had to be education by Angka because “the future of Cambodia depends on the youths. After they are educated, they will deny private property and will devote themselves to the revolution. But political education is successful only when their minds are fully reformed.”

The Khmer Rouge saw the importance of socialization of the young, so they destroyed the existing education system and replaced it with their own. The new system taught only the most basic literacy. The curriculum focused on the leadership role of Angka and the duty of the children to serve it through agricultural labor. The real school is the rice field.

The Khmer Rouge paid only the slightest lip service to religion. According to the new Cambodian constitution, article 20, “Every Cambodian has the right to believe in any religion, or not to believe in any religion.” But then it added that “every reactionary religion is dangerous to Kampuchean democracy. No one will be allowed to follow them.”

In practice, the phrase “reactionary religion” seemed to mean every religion in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge was successful in destroying all religious symbols of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Religious rites were banned. Religious items such as Buddha images or crosses were confiscated. No one was allowed to become monks or ministers. In Battambang, Khmer Rouge soldiers warned farmers that “Buddhism does not help you to have rice, only Angka can help you.” In fact, Angka and the radical Cambodian communism it enforced was the new religion.

Marriage ceremonies were organized in the name of Angka. Forced marriage appears to have been common. The marriage ceremony consisted simply of an announcement by the chief of the Sahakorn and everyone clapping.

It is clear that the Khmer Rouge way of social revolution is a perversion of Marxism. The Khmer Rouge used violence to transform society in a very short time. Their emphasis on the role of the mysterious, all-powerful Angka was certainly a dictatorship, but it gave no power to the common working people, so it was far from Marx’s idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Classless Society?

While the majority of the Cambodian people had more or less an equally miserable life, the Khmer Rouge soldiers and leaders gave themselves a much different lifestyle. “They told us there is no class, but we eat gruel with salt while they eat rice with pork. We live in a hut, they live in a house. We work days and nights, but they only supervise us,” one refugee complained.

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29 Ibid., p. 134.
30 Ibid., p. 225.
31 From an interview by the author with Mr. Bun, 35, a Cambodian refugee who said he was a farmer who previously lived in Battambang. He was interviewed at a refugee camp in Ta Phraya, Prachinburi province on May 12, 1978.
32 From an interview by the author with Mrs. Namani, 21, a Cambodian refugee who said she was a farmer who previously lived in Sisophon. She was interviewed at a refugee camp in Buriram on July 5, 1978.
33 From an interview by the author with Mr. Sawnkawn, a Cambodian refugee interviewed at the refugee camp at Pong Nam Rawn on March 14, 1978. He said he was a tractor driver from Battambang.
People were treated differently according to a new communist class system that turned the pyramid of the old society upside down. The Khmer Rouge divided people into “old people” – those poor rural people who supported the Khmer Rouge before the fall of Phnom Penh – and “new people” – those forced to migrate from the towns. Those town people included those at the top of the old society. Most of those in the political and military elite had already been killed or had fled, so most of the new people were merchants, workers and professionals such as teachers or medical workers. They were now at the bottom of the new social structure, subject to harsh controls by the Khmer Rouge soldiers and officials and given less food and more work than the “old people.” Hence the Khmer Rouge did not create a classless society along Marxist lines. Marx suggested a proletariat which would receive equal wages for equal work. The Khmer Rouge made all the old people into peasants with only a small ration of rice as wages, just enough to maintain life. The Khmer Rouge might argue that they tried to build a society where “each individual works according to his ability and receives according to his need,” but the needs of the people were considered limited to a small amount of rice. Other needs, such as clothing, housing and medicine, were considered extravagances by the Khmer Rouge. The rejection of these needs contradicts Marx’s ideas. Marx said that man has to have the basic requirements of food, clothing, housing and medicine before he can participate in social activities or before he can create any idea.

In summary, Cambodian society under the Khmer Rouge did not represent Marx’s ideal society. It was a society led by a strong, feared organization under iron rule. Therefore, people lacked freedom to develop their personality in the sense that they did not have any choice in selecting their activities. To Marx, the freedom to develop one’s personality was vital in communist society. He wrote:

> In communist society, where nobody has one sphere of activity, but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.\(^{34}\)

By contrast, the Cambodian people became nothing more than peasant slaves without any freedom of choice. The Khmer Rouge alienated the people from themselves, from their families and from society. They did not have free time to spend as human beings, to enjoy themselves or be with their families. They did not trust each other and did not have any kind of human relationship except as servants of Angka under the supervision of Khmer Rouge officials and soldiers. Their products did not belong to them because they were sent to Angka. Marx believed that alienation destroys the humanity of man and the objective in creating a communist society was to eliminate the alienation he saw in the lives of workers in the capitalist, industrial societies of Germany and England.

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IV. Marxism or Sadism?

The extent and rapidity of the revolution in Cambodian society under the Pol Pot regime have never been attempted in any other society – not even in the China of Mao Tse-tung. It was carried out with violence and in a short period of time. The abandonment of all the towns in the country was accomplished in only three days. The speed of this action, apparently prompted by fear of opposition from townspeople as much as ideology, led to terrible human tragedies: patients dragged out of hospitals, children abandoned, summary execution of the reluctant and deaths and injuries on the arduous treks from the towns to distant, unprepared sites in the countryside. The human suffering did not end with the establishment of rural sahakorn. Food shortages due to the export of much of the rice crop, overwork that led to exhaustion and sickness, the abandonment of the existing health care system that increased deaths from disease and the political suspicion and in-fighting that led to torture and execution made the new Khmer Rouge society a humanitarian disaster. All this, along with the emphasis on agricultural development, however, were not simply a result of cruelty or hatred (although that played a part), but of the ambition to destroy the old society in order to create a new one based on Khmer Rouge understanding of Marxist ideas. That understanding was often crude and literal, particularly as it filtered down to the operational level of the sahakorn based on often ambiguous pronouncements from Angka.

Why was the revolution so violent and so quick? The Khmer Rouge leaders later blamed the need for speed on Vietnam and Vietnam’s attempts to win control of the Cambodian revolution. But in fact, Vietnam had already withdrawn most of its troops from Cambodian territory to join in the final assault in the south before the Khmer Rouge began its program. Some Cambodians blamed China, claiming that their country was used as China’s laboratory for experimenting with Mao’s theories, but the thesis of Khieu Samphan shows that the basic ideas of the Cambodian communist party were conceived long before their military victory. Clearly Maoism gave some international legitimacy to his radical plan, but the plan and more importantly the ruthlessness with which it was carried out were largely indigenous. Hatred and envy of the city-dwelling oppressors of the countryside combine with radical revolutionary ideas in a complex and dangerous political-military situation after the Khmer Rouge victory.

Knowledge of their own organizational weakness and fear that their enemies could undermine their victory played a major role in the decision to empty the cities and instantly create the new society. That fear and the brutalizing experience of the war led to the violent methods they used to achieve their aim of building a new society and destroying the old one. They believed that independent economic development based on a vast pool of highly disciplined agricultural labor was the key to social and political development. Pol Pot announced to the world that:

We have to create unity in order to achieve independence and sovereignty. We have to use the people’s force to build an egalitarian society. There will be no rich, no poor. We have to increase production according to Anka’s policy. When the economy is developed this way, society will develop.\(^{35}\)

\(^{35}\) Ponchaud, p. 94.
In brief, the Khmer Rouge’s way of creating a supposedly egalitarian society is unique and cruel. It is far from the Marxist theories that were its supposed inspiration. Although beginning with Marx the successively more radical and more authoritarian interpretations of Lenin and Mao found their ultimate perversion in the practices of the Khmer Rouge. The essential humanitarianism that was the inspiration for Marx in the face of dehumanizing 19th century capitalism is completely lost. It is thus doubtful that the ideas and practices of the Khmer Rouge, despite similar rhetoric, can be classified as a form of Marxism. The appearances of agreement with Marxist economic principles and social goals are deceptions. The Khmer Rouge embarrassed many communist leaders and went far beyond even the unrestrained Maoism of the cultural revolution in China.  

Under the Pol Pot regime, even the most basic human rights were denied to large numbers of Cambodians. Evidence of these abuses have now become clear from the testimony of the mass of refugees that have fled the country in the past three years. Interviews conducted by the author confirm the general outline of the numerous accounts given to foreign reporters and other observers. The more systematic research on human rights in Cambodia conducted by the Canadian embassy in Bangkok in August 1978 came to similar conclusions. From these sources and the author’s own interviews it is clear that Cambodians were deprived of human rights in the following areas:

- **Justice.** There was no established judicial system under the Pol Pot regime. Government and military officials had the right to arrest, imprison and execute people as they wished. Punishments were often extreme and unwarranted. For example, the death sentence was sometimes carried out on people who came to work late or complained about their work situation. No legal defense was allowed. The burden of proof was on the accused. People had no right to appeal.
- **Cruel and unusual punishment.** People were punished cruelly. Conditions in prisons were horrible, with the accused often dying before any judgment could be rendered. Torture was commonplace. Execution was carried out in crude ways such as striking with an ax or shovel or being buried alive.
- **Freedom.** People had no freedom. No one was allowed to move without administrative approval. No one was allowed to express their opinions or associate with whom they wished.
- **Religion.** Buddhist monks, Christian ministers and Islamic Imams were physically forced to abandon their religious practices – or they were killed. All religious rites were banned.

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36 Even though China supported and supplied the Khmer Rouge, the Chinese delegate to the United Nations said that China did not agree with the violations of human rights committed by the Pol Pot government. Other communist governments made similar statements.

37 The author conducted interviews in several refugee camps in Thailand between the middle of 1978 until the beginning of 1979, visiting a camp every four or five months, usually spending four to five days on each visit. The Cambodians interviewed included farmers, merchants, civil servants and soldiers. The camps visited included those in Buriram, Mairut, Klong Yai, Pong Nam Rawn, Ta Praya, Wat Koh and Aranyaprathet. Some interviewees spoke Thai. For most, however, the author employed a translator to translate from Khmer to Thai.

38 **Concerning the Human Rights Situation in Democratic Kampuchea**, submission by the Canadian government to the UNHCR on Sept. 8, 1978.
Family Life. Few Cambodians, especially those considered ‘new people’ were allowed to live in a traditional family unit. Family members were often separated.

The Pol Pot administration led directly or indirectly to the death of perhaps 1 million people. Many of these were executed, but most were killed by disease and starvation. The hardships caused by the regime brought waves of refugees into both Thailand and Vietnam. By the end of 1978 there were at least 33,648 Cambodian refugees registered in Thai refugee camps.\(^{39}\)

It is difficult to be precise about the number of deaths in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. The regime began in the chaos of war and ended in the chaos of a Vietnamese invasion and an ongoing guerrilla war. Many of the facts are in dispute. David Boggett, for example, the ex-editor of Ronin magazine argued in his article “Democratic Kampuchea and Human Rights: Correcting the Record”\(^{40}\) that the massacre of Cambodians has be exaggerated. He claimed that only a few thousand people were killed in the process of the Khmer Rouge implementation of the new society, not the millions reported by many Western reporters and governments. He argued that interviews conducted by Western news reporters were unfair and unreliable because they bribed refugees to produce sensational tales. Besides, he wrote, Cambodian refugees have a tendency to exaggerate their suffering in order to receive sympathy and a better chance for resettlement. Other Khmer Rouge defenders in the West have made similar arguments. Khmer Rouge leaders themselves denied the allegations, saying they would never execute the work force they needed to develop the country.

Boggett and others have admitted that there were massacres. The evidence is overwhelming. The questions are whether it was policy and on what scale it took place. My interviews and other material strongly indicate such mass executions were part of a policy to eliminate potential political opposition and part of the drive to create the new society instantly. The policy issued by the leadership, however, may have been misunderstood and perverted in implementation due to the confused and fearful situation in the country. The widespread deprivation of human rights appears directly connected to the economic development developed by Khieu Samphan. This plan and the way it was carried out without regards for life were responsible for the deaths of many. The exact number of victims is not as important as the fact that the deaths occurred due to government policy, implemented by government officials with senior government knowledge and often at express government orders. Importantly, the Khmer Rouge leaders have never expressed concern or regret about the killings denounced by the world. To the country, they declared that those who resisted change or fled the country or tried to escape from their sahakorns deserved to be executed because they opposed the revolution. In one statement they said the deaths were not a concern because the Party needed only two million people to build the new nation.\(^{41}\)

\(^{39}\) Statistics from the UNHCR: 16,890 refugees entered Thai camps in 1975, 5,709 in 1976, 7,912 in 1977, and 31,370 in 1978. Some of these were resettled or returned to Cambodia by the end of 1978, leading to a total of 33,648 still in the camps.


Once he was freed from captivity by the Khmer Rouge, former nominal leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk emerged to denounce the actions of the Khmer Rouge as the actions of “insane people who were bloodthirsty and happy to see others tortured and killed.”

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42 This quote is from the documentary film “Sihanouk in World Politics” directed by Stephen Hildephand of the Swedish National Broadcasting station. It was shown at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand at the President Hotel on July 12, 1979.