

# Rebuilding Cambodia: A Daring Gamble

By Charles Meyer



PARIS—The Khmer Rouge have done in all Western specialists in Asiatic affairs, or those who were considered as such until now. The downfall of the Lon Nol regime was recognized as inevitable for a long time. But in Washington, Paris, and even in Moscow, it was taken for granted that its end would lead to the return of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

The scenario called for him to return immediately to Phnom Penh, punish a few traitors and then grant amnesty;

Khmer Rouge soldier, carrying flag with a symbol of unknown origin, on the day that Phnom Penh fell. Sjoberg/Photo Reporters.

he would temper the revolutionary ardor of the conquerors, and would then establish an amiable "typically Cambodian" regime. No one took seriously Prince Sihanouk's own repeated statements that in the future power would rest "elsewhere."

But ever since the pro-American coup d'état in March, 1970, revolutionary political power resided with the guerrillas, not in Peking where Prince Sihanouk lived. The Prince was recognized as the symbol of Cambodian nationalism, not of a "monarchical legitimacy" that the Khmer Rouge never accepted.

Prince Sihanouk's declarations and those of his representatives never bound the guerrilla leaders in the slightest. Relations between the two were spasmodic and were limited to exchanges of messages of protocol.

Recent events have revealed the profoundly original character of the Cambodian revolution. For more than twenty years it germinated in the villages of the rice-growing area where, we had been told, the peasants were forever bound by their Buddhist traditions and their habit of submission to the king and his mandarins.

From a Maoist point of view, the victorious Cambodian revolution is exemplary. Long before moving to action, the Marxist intellectuals were learning from the peasants. A political line was patiently worked out, rectified when circumstances demanded, and applied with a minimum of compromise, all in the context of the peasants' experience and with their participation.

In Cambodia, where oral tradition is more important than writing, the fruits of the intellectual-and-peasant political education didn't need to be fixed in texts that would guar-

antee ideological orthodoxy or in a five- or eight- or ten-point program.

This lack of written "references" troubled the Western political specialists in revolutionary movements, especially since there was such abundant Chinese and Vietnamese documentation.

A new society was born in the Cambodian countryside. It was unified and hardened under the attacks of the B-52's. Even more important, over a five-year period it cut the lines that attached it to Phnom Penh. Between the revolutionary guerrilla leaders and the officials of the Lon Nol regime, who had earlier served Prince Sihanouk, the gap became an abyss. There was nothing that could fill it. The guerrilla leaders were always outside the family networks and the shared self-interest that bound together the ruling class for 25 years. This gap meant that any compromise that American diplomacy hoped would limit the ruin of its allies was a pipe dream. The victory of the new over the old, of the pure over the corrupt, had to be total.

The situation was aggravated by the relationship between rural Cambodia and Phnom Penh. The peasants had never liked the city that had been the seat of French colonial power. They grew even more hostile when, from 1955 to 1970, it became the citadel of the new mandarins, who adopted a Western life-style of great luxury in contrast to the dire poverty of the rural peasants.

As early as 1969, hostility toward the "great prostitute" on the banks of the Mekong River was evident in many villages. In 1970, Phnom Penh became even more clearly an enemy city where the Government and the Americans

planned the bombing and raids on the villages.

Hence, the order to totally evacuate Phnom Penh surprised only those who were ignorant of the accumulated bitterness against a city that had been soiled by "the colonialists, the imperialists, the feudal lords, and the corrupt bourgeoisie."

In other times, the peasant army would undoubtedly have razed it, after having exterminated part of the population. In 1975, they were content to empty it of its citizens, who will be purified and re-educated by hard work in the rice fields.

Foreigners judge this measure inhuman, absurd, uneconomical. In reality, it is political, decided with clear cognizance of the facts, in order to reconstitute a Khmer community that has been profoundly altered by Westernization of part of the society.

The peasant revolutionaries' ambition is to reconstruct their country on the foundations they have freely chosen. They think they will only be able to do so if they totally destroy all the material symbols of foreign domination and create a "new man" within a peasant socialist society that is authentically Cambodian.

This is a political, economic and cultural revolution that certainly recalls the Chinese experience. It is perhaps even more radical, and certainly has a distinct style. Its nationalist character could lead to total indifference to the outside world. This is a daring gamble for little Cambodia—not the first in its long history.

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