



Committee on Conscience

"Premeditated Murders, Unintended Consequences: Senior Leaders, and Local
Accesses: Conundrums of the Cambodian Case."

March 6, 2002

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Delivered as part of the March 6 panel

"Perpetrators in the Holocaust, Cambodia, and Rwanda: 'The Evil That Men
Do...'"

In April 1975, after a five-year war, the Cambodian Communist movement led by Pol Pot defeated the Khmer Republic regime of the US-backed Marshall Lon Nol. From their rural bases, the Communists seized the capital, Phnom Penh, and took over a country of less than eight million people. These included more than six million Buddhist Khmer, most of whom were rural rice farmers, but who also comprised the country's urban elite. They also included a number of important ethnic minorities: half a million mostly urban Chinese, many of whom were involved in commerce; a quarter of a million Islamic Cham, many of whom were involved in garden farming and petty trade in the countryside; and 20,000 Vietnamese fisherfolk, artisans and labourers who lived in both towns and villages.

In January 1979, Pol Pot was toppled by a Vietnamese Communist invasion. By this time, 1.7 million Cambodians were dead. More than half a million of these were executed. The rest were killed in approximately equal proportions by starvation or disease.

The victims included 15 per cent of rural Khmer rice-farmers; one quarter of urban Khmer; half of Cambodia's Chinese; and 35 per cent of the Islamic Cham; each of which perished in various proportions from execution, malnutrition and illness. They also included the entire Vietnamese community, all of whom were executed. In addition they included 20,000 members of the Communist

Party and its armed forces, perhaps a quarter of each, all executed for purported treason to Pol Pot's revolution.

All the 1.7 million victims died according to what the British political philosopher Ted Honderich has described as a peculiarly left-wing historical calculus of violence for prosperity and equality. According to its seductive but fundamentally flawed moral logic, "an impassioned commitment to the oppressed" makes violence, including political killing, "not only permissible but obligatory." This political violence is justified as essential to make progress towards well-being for all persons without exception. Attempts to argue against such violence on moral grounds is countered by appeal to greater moral necessities.

In other words, given a choice between killing and allowing the continuation of appalling misery and injustice, even a moral person can and should choose killing to alleviate economic suffering and to right social wrongs. Honderich concludes that once this calculus is accepted, no doctrine can give an effective argument against it. The only response to its self-contained logic that the ends justify the means is the pragmatic one that the ends are unachievable, or at least unlikely to be achieved. Pol Pot's revolution showed precisely that, at the cost of 1.7 million lives. His victims died as a result of his futile attempt to establish the world's most productive socialism and most equal society, a society without class or national differences. He set out to show that Communism could be made to work according to its most utopian visions and proved that it could not. Thus, even within the parameters of its own limited and perverse moral

logic, Pol Potism was evil: its means could not be logically or morally justified because he was achieving the opposite of his ends.

When he took power in 1975, Pol Pot had a very clear idea about what he wanted his revolution to do. He wanted it to reinvigorate and rescue Communism from its past failures by reviving and combining what he saw as all the most radical Marxist, Stalinist, Maoist and Vietnamese Communist traditions. He thought that because his Communism took the best from each revolution, it would be better than them all and overcome the weaknesses that had made them failures. Instead, it only made the outcome even worse.

Pol Pot's objective was rapidly to transform the country's entire population into a mass of proletarianized peasants with a Communist culture and capable of high agricultural productivity. He hoped then soon to advance to the creation of society of proletarian equals capable of high industrial productivity.

To reach these goals, Pol Pot's Communism required:

deportation of the general urban population into peoples communes that were supposed to triple agricultural production;

the abolition of markets, money, religion and national difference;

the construction of railroads, steel mills and hydroelectric dams amidst the rice fields;

and killing anyone in the population or in the Party who got in the way.

Pol Pot believed this radical package would mean quick prosperity and equality for all Cambodians, all of course EXCEPT those who would not survive

the transitional killing and hardship necessary to achieve both goals. He insisted that to achieve wealth and justice as soon as possible, quite a few Cambodians would have to be immediately killed, and many others would have to endure temporary inequalities and economic difficulties. He also authorized the use of murder to keep the project on course until everybody could be persuaded and induced to support it. They would do so once the system was up and running and had begun to produce enough wealth. This would make it possible to abolish temporary inequalities. It would also make it possible to achieve another of Pol Pot's goals, which was to more than double Cambodia's population in a very short period of time. The fact that instead the population was significantly reduced reflected the reality that instead of overcoming temporary difficulties and setting the stage for industrial take-off, Pol Pot's economic policies caused severe agricultural and industrial regression, and thus permanent mass starvation that eventually turned almost everybody against his regime.

Some of the victims of Pol Pot's project of Marxist political modernization were members of political or ethnic groups who were very intentionally targeted for total extermination because they were thought to be irreconcilably opposed to his Communism: these included the remnants of the defeated Khmer Republic and the whole of the Vietnamese community. Other victims were members of social and ethnic groups who were thought to be likely to resist communization. These included urban Khmer and the Chinese and Cham minorities. These three groups were stigmatized in ways that made them vulnerable to being

murdered in increasingly large numbers as Pol Pot's project failed. They were not originally targeted for extermination, but were defined from the beginning as being in particular need of transformation in order to become fully a part of a prosperous society of equals.

Killings then unexpectedly followed of those who were supposed to have had the most to gain from a prosperity that was not forthcoming: disappointed Khmer peasants. Last but not least came killings of the disillusioned Communist Party and army members who increasingly lost faith in Pol Pot's project and leadership.

So, some of the killing was pursuant to pre-meditated, carefully planned mass murder campaigns targeting well-defined categories of victims for total elimination. This extermination was carried out under the instructions of a clear chain of command in which Pol Pot ordered the murder of those he specifically identified as especially dangerous enemies of revolutionary progress. Pol Pot believed that all members of the military and political structures of the defeated Khmer Republic had to be killed because they were die-hard "counter-revolutionaries" who might try to retake power and return Cambodia to endless poverty and social division. Cambodia's Vietnamese were targeted because he was afraid they might act as a fifth column for attempts by Viet Nam to overthrow him and take Cambodia's revolution down a revisionist path. Their extermination was accompanied by a demonization campaign comparable to Nazi anti-Semitism and Hutu extremist propaganda against Tutsi.

Death by Starvation

Meanwhile, more and more people were dying from starvation and related diseases despite and because of Pol Pot's long-term policy to create a countryside that would feed all equally well. They died at first because Pol Pot embarked on a path along which he knew some people would have to starve now in order to create agricultural wealth in the future. They died in increasing numbers because Pol Pot initially ignored mounting evidence that such temporary difficulties were lasting much longer than he had envisaged. They died in huge numbers because as the enormity of the catastrophe became clear, he insisted on forcing the population to persevere regardless of the human cost. Moreover, the execution toll rose as the famine worsened because Pol Pot also insisted that anyone who opposed, doubted or "sabotaged" his economic policies was an enemy who should be executed. He authorized his local security forces to carry out these killings as they saw fit

Creating New People, Killing Enemies

Many of the victims of starvation and related executions were so-called "new people." These were the urban Khmer, Chinese, Cham and others who were forced to the countryside in 1975. Their violent deportation was supposed to make for equality between town and countryside, between the urban bourgeoisie and the so-called "veteran people." "Veteran people" were the peasants who had lived in Communist-controlled zones before April 1975 and

were already organized in cooperatives that Pol Pot wanted to expand into “people’s commune”-type collectives.

Pol Pot’s policy was that new people were to be well-taken care and well-fed by the Communist cadre who ran these cooperatives. The veteran people were supposed to share food with the new people and work hard alongside them to grow rice. Pol Pot also called on the cadre and the veteran people to re-educate the evacuees politically and organize them to work in such a way as to transform them into proletarianized peasants just like everybody else. However, Pol Pot decreed that until this transformation was achieved, new people were to live under a dictatorship of the veteran peasantry that denied them the right to participate in the running of the cooperatives. Cadre were also instructed to screen the new people for incorrigible counter-revolutionaries whom Pol Pot warned existed among them and must be killed.

Regardless of Pol Pot’s hopes, the reality in the countryside was vast political AND economic inequality between new and veteran people that soon showed every sign of becoming permanent. Faced with general famine and given power over new people, most veteran people did not welcome the urban evacuees or share food with them. As new people starved in droves, they at best stood idly by. At worst, the peasants damned them as deserving punishment for their supposedly lazy and decadent urban lifestyles. Similarly, cadre and veteran people overseers sent new people to do the hardest, most dangerous, most malaria-ridden and longest work assignments. This ensured

that the malnourished deportees worked themselves to death or died from disease. Many cadre treated new people as not simply as harbouring enemies, but as subhuman beings whose lives were expendable because they would never be capable of making the transformation Pol Pot demanded of them. Certainly, if they complained about being hungry or sick, if they criticized the system and the power-holders who were starving and slave-driving them, or if they “sabotaged” production by being unable to do the work assigned to them, local cadre exercised their authority to execute them.

Because they were relatively less deprived and because many of them were deeply implicated in violence against new people, the veteran people have sometimes been portrayed as beneficiaries of Pol Pot’s revolution and zealous enthusiasts for his Communism. I think this interpretation is mistaken because they, too, could see that Pol Pot’s ends were not being achieved, and, they, too, were victimized by his means. While veteran people as a group exploited and even killed new people, they became more and more unhappy about a regime that was also making them work harder and harder or less and less food. And as Khmer peasants, they did not like the fact that the Communist Party had abolished Buddhism and other village practices that they considered part of their traditional culture. And if they resisted or opposed or criticized any of this, they, too, were vulnerable to execution. Many were eventually killed for such reasons, just like new people.

Chinese, Cham and other “Nationalities” (*chun-cheat*)

Still, some victims remained more unequal than others, and in proportional terms, the killings of veteran people never approached the figures for the Chinese and Cham minority “nationalities.” Some have inferred from the fact that half of the Chinese and 35 percent of the Cham perished that they were targeted for extermination as such. However, one searches in vain for any anti-Chinese or anti-Cham racist discourse in internal Pol Pot regime documents or its public pronouncements. In fact, the evidence suggests that Chinese and Cham were targeted not for extermination but for transformation. Like veteran and new Khmer, they were to be transformed into proletarianized peasants with Communist culture and to be subsumed in the new society of prosperity and equality. Their transformation did have additional elements, such as being required to stop using their own languages, but most Chinese and Cham perished the same reasons as Khmer, new and veteran. They died of famine and disease, and they were executed because they complained about hunger and exhaustion and because they resisted or failed to make basically the same transformation as Khmer, such as giving up religion.

Additional proportions of them died :

first, because stereotypes about their livelihood tarred them as upper class, which meant that more violence was applied to them than to Khmer peasants;

and, second, because they were required to make a greater transformation than Khmer generally. This meant that cadre concluded even more quickly than they did with regard to Khmer new people that Chinese and

Cham were enemies whose survival was not a gain to the revolution and whose death was no loss to it. However, they were not targeted for total extermination in the same way as Khmer Republic remnants and Vietnamese or, for that matter, Jews or Tutsis.

I would add that killings of Chinese and Cham, like the killings of new and veteran Khmer, were NOT carried out through the same narrow and tight chain of command as those of the comprehensively targeted groups like Khmer Republic remnants and Vietnamese. Instead, they were killed by a much looser and more diffuse hierarchical structure of delegated and discretionary authority which had Pol Pot at the top and all of the Party's local administrative, military and security organs at the bottom. In this structure, Pol Pot instructed those lower down to identify and execute enemies of the revolution under their authority, but in vague and general terms that granted those lower down much latitude to ascertain who was and who was not an enemy. Even though Pol Pot and others at the top bear ultimate responsibility for what happened, the lower downs certainly were not "just following orders."

Purging the Party

But here we must also confront a paradox. Although some of these lower-level perpetrators dispatched Khmer Republican remnants, Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, new people and complaining veteran Khmer peasants in with gusto, others were not happy about all the killing they were doing or about the regime they were protecting with murder. Indeed, the evidence seems clear that

at every level with Pol Pot's Communist Party and army, there was an ever-growing malaise that reflected an increasing realization on the part of cadre and combatants that Pol Pot's violence for prosperity and equality, the very violence his subordinates were committing, was not achieving the promised results, that in terms of the regime's own goals, it was a disaster.

They were therefore killed as "traitors" to Pol Pot's revolution through a chain of command in which he presided more or less directly over the secret Security Office S21 (known as Tuol Sleng). S21 executed at least 14,000 people, most of them Communist Party members or members of the Party's armed forces. They included many members of the top Party leadership, long-time associates of Pol Pot whom he concluded he could no longer trust to support his project, as well as many lower downs.

Other alleged traitors within the revolutionary ranks were killed in the field by forces under Pol Pot's more or less direct command. These victims were overwhelmingly Khmer. Like the earlier killings of the Khmer Republic elite, their purge showed that for Pol Pot, political orientation was more important than ethnicity. Being culturally or "racially" Khmer was no protection: treason to his revolution was political, and could be committed by anyone suspected of disloyalty to his correct political line.

Conclusion

Pol Potism was an effort to construct a highly advanced socialism. In his system, the only way anyone's life could have any value was if he or she could

make the transformations and achieve the production and other goals Pol Pot demanded of them as part of the effort to construct his dream society. The penalty for refusal or failure was death. Ultimately, hardly anyone attained the ideal, and thus almost everyone was subject to execution. Some, like the Khmer Republic remnants and Vietnamese, never had a chance because they were deemed ineligible to try. After them, negatively stereotyped social and ethnic groups perished in the highest proportions because they had the greatest transformation to make and their supposedly temporary inequality put them in a severely disadvantaged position. But even positively stereotyped and originally privileged groups, including members of the Communist Party itself, became more and more vulnerable as the system went more and more wrong.

In the Cambodian case, the use of evil means to achieve good intentions justified crimes against humanity and led to something close to genocide. All this tells that when violence is deemed legitimate as a means of advancing equality and prosperity, all communities, collectivities and individuals are at risk. Pol Pot and other senior Cambodian Communist leaders certainly bare primary and ultimate responsibility for the crimes that were committed. But a focus on this level obscures the extent to which the lower downs played a pro-active part in expanding the killings, even if many of them ended up disillusioned and dead or on the purge list before the regime disintegrated. Any historical or legal accounting must take full account of the importance their role while recognizing the existence of ambiguities in some cases.