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Reconciliation in Cambodia: Politics, Culture and Religion

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Historical Factors

For almost three decades of Cambodia's recent history, its people suffered ongoing wars and social upheaval. The period began in 1970 when General Lon Nol's Republican forces ousted then Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Since then, Cambodians have lived under a variety of political regimes as the country changed from a monarchy to a capitalist republic, to a communist republic, to a socialist republic and then to the current constitutional monarchy. The most traumatic years of this period were undoubtedly those of the "Killing Fields" from 1975 to 1979, when the Khmer Rouge established what they called Democratic Kampuchea and attempted to transform all aspects of society totally. In this endeavour, acts of unspeakable barbarism were committed against the people: out of an estimated population of eight million, some five million were displaced. Most scholars place the number of dead from murder, torture, disease and starvation at around 1.7 million. Unlike other experiences of genocide, where race or religion were key factors, the Khmer Rouge drew their lines in terms of social class: the killing and horror took place amongst Cambodians, a largely homogenous ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural grouping. The violence occurred as Pol Pot and his followers sought to abolish utterly the existing culture and replace it with a newly invented one, which combined Maoist principles with mythical ideals of an Angkorean past. In so doing, they destroyed all the institutions of state - the education, financial and legal systems - as well as religious and other social institutions.

Prior to this Norodom Sihanouk had worked hard to steer a neutral path for the post-colonial nation, but the conflict was largely driven by cold war relations and the world's then superpowers were implicated in it. While local factors had been crucial in bringing the Khmer Rouge to power, China was Democratic Kampuchea's main supporter. Later the USSR financed Democratic Kampuchea's Vietnamese-backed opponents, while China, the USA and other Western and Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) powers provided support to the Khmer Rouge and two royalist anti-Vietnamese factions.

In December 1978 the Vietnamese Army entered Cambodia and, together with a group of Khmer Rouge defectors, mounted a decisive military campaign against Democratic Kampuchea forces, which resulted in a new Vietnamese-sponsored government being declared in January 1979. A mistrust of further socialist experimentation, along with deep-seated historical suspicion of Vietnamese intentions towards Cambodia, undermined support for the new regime. The conflict continued during the 1980s, as Khmer Rouge forces formed an alliance with the two royalist factions to drive out what they characterized as foreign control of Cambodian political and civil life. But, as the cold war drew to a close, international support for all four warring factions dried up. In the face of this lack of resources, and exhausted by years of conflict, all parties found the idea of a political settlement more appealing.

Although a political solution was probably the only acceptable way out of the deadlock, using this method to decide the war raised the political stakes very high. Not only did the Cambodian parties

need to agree: so did all the international players who had involved themselves in one way or another. The stage was set for a lengthy and highly politicized peace process.

The Peace Agreements and the Politicization of Reconciliation Processes

The Paris Peace Agreements of October 1991 were meant to end the war in Cambodia. They were signed by 18 countries and the Cambodian parties, and were based on a “framework” agreement reached by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council the previous year. Within the agreements, the extent of the tragedy was formally recognized and respect for human rights enshrined. In their detail, however, they focused mainly on political issues related to the cessation of hostilities, the provision for national elections and the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Cambodia.

It seems that “reconciliation” was considered synonymous with the involvement of the four factions in a free and fair election. For the Cambodian people at that time, however, reconciliation was largely equated with the cessation of hostilities and the return of refugees. More complex questions of justice and reintegration were yet to become apparent.

Ironically, by proposing elections as the solution to the conflict, the Paris Peace Agreements had ensured that reconciliation was closely linked with a political contest that no party was prepared to lose. The three anti-Vietnamese resistance forces returned to Phnom Penh in preparation for the 1993 multiparty elections; but the Khmer Rouge ultimately withdrew from the electoral contest, which meant that the election process could only ever deliver a partial solution at best.

Peace was finally secured following a series of defections after 1993. These began with Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary in 1996 and then, following the death of Pol Pot in 1998, other high-ranking Khmer Rouge cadres rallied to the government. The defectors were allowed to resettle in and around the semi-autonomous zone of Pailin, a gem- and timber-rich area near the Thai border. (The infamous Ta Mok, known as “the Khmer Rouge Butcher” for his cruelty, was captured, as was Duch, known for his role as the S-21 Prison Torturer. Both are now in prison awaiting trial for crimes against humanity while in power.)

The strong links between party politics and the peace process persist to this day. The Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), the successor to the Vietnamese-backed regime, is still able to capitalize on its victory over the Khmer Rouge in current political campaigning, promoting itself as the liberator and patron of Cambodian society to whom the people remain indebted. In this way, issues of security and stability have also become politicized.

The Khmer Rouge Tribunal

Currently, the main focus of reconciliation efforts is the ongoing issue of the creation of an Extraordinary Chamber of the Criminal Courts of Cambodia. The UN–Cambodian Khmer Rouge Tribunal, as it is more popularly known, would seek to try key surviving high-ranking members of the Democratic Kampuchea regime.

In securing the defection of Ieng Sary and many others, a number of political deals were struck between the government and the former Khmer Rouge. Most notably, an amnesty was granted to Ieng Sary for a death sentence imposed under a widely discredited Vietnamese-convened war crimes tribunal held in August 1979. Whether he and others who formally defected will be tried under the new tribunal remains to be determined, and there are concerns that key figures will be shielded from prosecution by the mutually beneficial arrangements reached between the former Khmer Rouge and the CPP. Again, the pattern of partisan interests determining peace and reconciliation processes becomes apparent.

The People's Views on Reconciliation

The Center for Social Development (CSD) is an NGO in Phnom Penh which holds regular public forums on issues of national concern. In early 2000, the Center decided to hold a three-part series of debates to consider whether a trial of the former Democratic Kampuchea leaders should be held. At these forums, all sides, including the former Khmer Rouge, stated the need for truth, justice, healing and national reconciliation. Yet it was clear that there are widely different views on what these terms might mean in practical terms.

Each party has its own version of what happened: there is the truth according to the Khmer Rouge, the government, the international community and ordinary Cambodians. If a reconciliation process is to move forward and be seen to be trustworthy, each of these truths must be accommodated to the satisfaction of all parties. From the discussions it was also clear that a tribunal is only one part of a comprehensive process of reconciliation. In addition, there were almost no calls for reparation. It seemed that this was too abstract a concept to consider when the truth is not yet even known. Most people simply wish to be free of their suffering and return to the family life that was so cruelly interrupted through the refugee experience and policies of forced displacement. For them, real reconciliation will be found when trust returns between individuals: when “they can smile at and trust each other again”.

The answer therefore relies on finding a vehicle for addressing these issues at a personal level, and in a manner consistent with the foundations of Khmer culture. One potential path for finding this reconciliation is that of the national religion, Buddhism, to which at least 90 per cent of Cambodians are said to subscribe and which has a powerful influence in daily life. Buddhism has at its heart messages of compassion and reconciliation.

Buddhism and Reconciliation

In dealing with the emotional and psychological scars left by so many years of war, many ordinary Cambodians have returned to the faith that had been so brutally attacked under the Democratic Kampuchea regime. Many Westerners perceive Buddhism as a doctrine of acceptance, which effectively hampers social change. A noted Khmer Buddhist monk, Yos Hut Khemacaro, explains that Khmer Buddhism in particular, arising as it does from an agrarian society that places high value on patron–client relationships and harmony, has provided “a strong disincentive among monks and the wider population to challenge the social order”. Yet, despite these cultural constraints, he goes on to argue that the practice of the Dhamma (teachings of the Buddha) can lead to social action.

One practical example of this is the Dhammayietra, or annual “Pilgrimage of Truth” marches, which began in 1992. The first saw hundreds of refugees who had been living in camps along the Thai–Cambodian border return to their homeland as they marched for four weeks from Battambang in the north-west to Phnom Penh. The spiritual leader of the pilgrimages, Maha Ghosananda, nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, also made explicit the idea that the adoption of a Buddhist process does not mean that justice will not be served. He argues that reconciliation “does not mean that we surrender our rights and conditions” but instead that “we use love” to address these questions.

If Buddhism is to prove a useful tool in the process of national reconciliation, we must therefore ensure that it does not become as politicized as other aspects of reconciliation have. King Sihanouk has suggested holding a cremation ceremony of victims’ remains, but opposition to this from Prime Minister Hun Sen, who believes that the remains must serve as a historical legacy, also threatens to become polarized. While the Prime Minister’s view is probably more pragmatic, both claim to be

devout and manage to use religion to justify opposing positions. To avoid politicization Yos Hut Khemacaro advocates following the “Middle Path”, the traditional metaphor for the Buddhist way - neither joining the fight nor hiding from it. The Middle Path of non-violence and compassion provides a model for solving undoubtedly political problems outside the adversarial framework implicit in partisanship. As these ideas arise from traditional Khmer concepts, they can help the Cambodian people to find their own peace instead of feeling that their problems can only be solved by outsiders.

Local Initiatives

The accumulated history of oppression, repression and ongoing trauma has had a profound, continuing effect. In responding to these, a range of very different organizations has been working on a variety of strategies that are an important part of Cambodian reconciliation and provide a useful complement to more formal processes.

Most closely linked to the question of the Khmer Rouge trial is the project of the Documentation Center of Cambodia. Originating in an academic programme of Yale University, USA, this now independent Cambodian-run centre serves as a permanent resource for providing information about the Khmer Rouge, both in order to support potential litigants and to prevent such a tragedy happening in the future. Its mission is perhaps best summed up in the title of its regular publication, *Searching for the Truth*. By stressing the importance of the truth above all else, this project has chosen the non-partisan Middle Path in dealing with these extremely sensitive issues.

Even as we move away from the fields of politics and history, we can see the continuing effects of the “Killing Fields” period in Cambodian daily life. There is a high prevalence of mental illness, including many chronic cases, which has reduced the ability of many people to cope with everyday problems. As children grow up with mentally ill parents, they are far more likely to become depressed and abusive themselves, creating a vicious cycle with consequent social implications. Until now, ordinary people have relied on their understanding of the law of karma and their instinct for survival as their means of healing, but many of these problems have undoubtedly been made worse by the lack of adequate treatment services or facilities. This problem has been acknowledged, and Cambodians are learning to deal with the question of mental illness in more constructive and healing ways. The work being done by some health sector organizations and emergent psychiatric facilities is another important step forward in facing up to the past.

Concluding Remarks

The messages of non-partisanship in reconciliation are fundamental to the proper practice of Buddhism. It is this type of leadership that is required of Cambodia’s politicians, if they and the population are to move beyond their painful past. Cambodians need to overcome the deep-seated mistrust of, and animosity towards, each other that arose as the consequence of the Khmer Rouge and their aftermath. Open discussion, improvement in social justice and human rights, education and health care for all - these are all fundamental to a step-by-step process of building mutual trust and understanding.

There are many elements to this overall process of national reconciliation. The Paris Peace Agreements were one step and the proposed tribunal will be another. Negotiations over the running of the tribunal broke down in February 2002 because of what the UN saw as the failure of the current proposal to address concerns over potential political interference by the Cambodian Government. At the time of writing, it seems that this process is tentatively restarting. It is hoped that the key issues can be tackled and that the process will regain momentum. A tribunal is important as it will uncover

the truth and thus educate people about the past, provide justice for the victims, and promote the return of the rule of law to Cambodia. There must also be a role for ordinary people to play in reaching reconciliation at the level of everyday life, where old wounds are still deeply felt. The forums were a step, as are the other grass-roots programmes described here. Above all, these steps should be taken along the Middle Path, in full consultation with the Cambodian people.

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