

Khmer people's 1970 revolt

Gaffar Peang-Meth 1:14 a.m. ChST March 18, 2016



(Photo: PDN file)

Premier Hun Sen's continuing assertions that the destruction of Cambodia's neutrality, the country's "civil war," Khmer Rouge genocide and the U.S. B-52 bombings of Cambodia, were the outcomes of a coup d'état led by Lon Nol-Sirik Matak on March 18, 1970, deny the Khmer people true knowledge of their country's history.

Hun Sen's thesis has several purposes:

- to neutralize the last Khmer God-King Sihanouk and the royalists;
- to fuel royal distrust of independent-minded Khmer democracy advocates, fomenting animosity; and
- to keep the people ignorant in order to enable him to stay in power in a "devaraja-esque" manner.

A devout Buddhist, Srey Pheach (1938-2012) was a 16-year veteran of Cambodia's foreign ministry and director of its press and information department from 1966 to 1968. Shortly before his death, he produced two handwritten essays accusing Hun Sen of fabricating Khmer history. He gave me his essays. From his

sickbed, he reminded me of Lord Buddha's teaching that "there are three things that cannot be hidden: the sun; the moon; and the truth."

Today, I write this article with a heavy heart in remembrance of March 18, 1970.

Pheach's direct experiences

When Jacqueline Kennedy visited Cambodia in 1967, AP reporters McArthur and Faas, and UPI reporter Herndon, slipped out of Phnom Penh and discovered a Vietcong/North Vietnamese, or VC/NVN, sanctuary in Minot, Kampong Cham, four miles inside Cambodia. The royal government denied the report. Pheach was tasked to invite the International Control Commission to investigate.

As customary, "arrangements" were quickly made. The governor of Kampong Cham "arranged" with VC/NVN troops to vacate the area, and converted the sanctuary into a Khmer training camp. Pheach and two Khmer officers took an ICC team (Indian, Canadian, Polish) by helicopter to Minot. The Polish investigator hugged and congratulated Pheach for a "job well done" after finding no VC/NVN base.

In another incident in Rattanakiri and Mondulkiiri, Pheach pleaded with the VC/NVN embassies to withdraw their troops before the ICC's arrival and to return after the visit. A surprised Srey Pheach reported to his chagrined boss, Foreign Minister Prince Phurissara: "The representatives of both embassies rejected the plea and told me if I and the ICC will visit, they will shoot."

Destruction of Cambodia's neutrality

In 1970, it was in vogue to speak of the destruction of Cambodia's neutrality. In 1980, I included two Communist publications, among other references, in my doctoral dissertation at The University of Michigan to explain that destruction.

A summary of the "protocol" of the agreement for Communist Chinese military aid to Cambodia, signed on Nov. 25, 1965, by Cambodian Gen. Lon Nol and China's People's Liberation Army Gen. Lo Jui-ching, appeared in Chang Hu's article "Kung-fei shen-tou chien-pu-chai shu yao" ("Essential Account of the Chinese Communists' Penetration in Cambodia") in *Fei-ching youeh-pao* ("Communist Questions Monthly"), in 1969: "1) Cambodia will permit the passage and the refuge of the Vietnamese combatants in the frontier region, provide them with protection if necessary, and permit them to establish command posts. 2) Cambodia will permit the passage of materiel coming from China and destined for the Vietnamese combatants."

State-owned Korean Central News Agency in Pyongyang news release of April 30, 1972, reported Prince Sihanouk's alleged confession that he had "voluntarily decided" to provide "three most important aids" to the Vietnamese Communists since "1963":



"1) Supply of rice, dried fish, medicaments, etc. ... to the combatants of the (National Liberation Front of South Vietnam), officialized (sic) a commercial agreement with Vietnam, without counting the amicable and fraternal presents of the (Cambodian) National Organization of Mutual Aid, of which I (Sihanouk) am president; 2) Secret permission to set up in the Khmer territory, in the frontier zone, of small bases for the rest of combatants of the NFL and the medical care of the wounded; 3) Free access to the port, Sihanoukville, of the ships of the socialist countries (China in particular) carrying arms and military equipment to the NFL, and transport by the trucks of the Khmer Royal Armed Forces (FARK) of arms aid and equipment from Sihanoukville to the Khmer-South Vietnamese border."

Ground situation

The Khmer Rouge's genocidal campaign in Cambodia still resonates in the country. (Photo: AP file)

In those years, Khmer lawmakers told the National Assembly that Khmer villagers in some parts of their electoral districts must carry a VC/NVN "safe-conduct pass" for travel. In 1969, Prime Minister Lon Nol came under fire during an inspection tour of Cambodia's northeast; Khmer military units reported ambushes.

In early March 1970, about 3,500 square kilometers of Khmer territory stretching from Rattanakiri province in the northeast to Monduliri, Kratie, Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, Kandal, Takeo, Kampot, in the south bordering the gulf, were either partially or fully occupied by the VC/NVN troops.

Beginning on March 8, 1970, Khmers in Svay Rieng used sidearms to attack individuals suspected of helping the VC/NVN. Anti-Vietnamese rage spread in the country. On March 11, protesters attacked the VC/NVN embassy buildings in Phnom Penh.

In a frenzy, Lon Nol dispatched seven telegrams to explain events to Prince Sihanouk, who was abroad, and proposed to send two emissaries to meet with him, to no avail. The prince's angry words reached Phnom Penh. He promised to deal with "a handful of traitors." On March 18, 1970, the National Assembly and the Council of the Kingdom met in full session and decided unanimously to strip Prince Norodom Sihanouk of his functions as chief of state. On March 23, Prince Sihanouk called for a revolt against the authorities in power.

I am posting a PowerPoint (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR0tRn_mpp0) that provides a brief history of Cambodia through pictures and songs. I include photos of Khmer men and women who marched against the VC/NVN occupation. I, myself, withdrew from graduate school for a semester and joined Khmer compatriots in the battles of Sa-ang and Taing Kau. Khmers' demand for change in 1970 was not fomented by a coup d'état nor undertaken without years of provocation.

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