

## historical and cultural context

### Cambodia

Luong Ung's Cambodia is a lush, tropical country in South-East Asia, lying between Vietnam to the east, Laos and Thailand to the north and the Gulf of Thailand to the west. The terrain is mostly flat, rimmed by the Phnom Dang Rack uplands in the north, and the Cardamon and Elephant mountains in the south-west; three-quarters of the country being covered in tropical rainforest. The climate is tropical with just two seasons – the dry and the monsoons. Arable land covers about a fifth of the country; the rest is sandy and infertile. Cambodia is dependent on two bodies of water: its major river, the Mekong, which flows through Laos, Eastern Cambodia and on to its delta in Vietnam in the South China Sea; and the huge lake of Tonlé Sap, a vast basin left after the gulf of a sea receded. Cambodia, a country that traces its roots to the Hindu kingdoms of Funan and Chenla, is the most ancient kingdom in South-East Asia, covering an area of 181 000 square kilometres (about four-fifths the size of Victoria). Originally ruled by 'god-kings' (*devarajas*), the old kingdom of Cambodia contained some of the now-independent states that surround it. Founded by Jayavarman II in the early ninth century, it reached its height in the eleventh century; the Khmer kingdom being re-established in 1444 at the present site of Phnom Penh.

The word *Khmer* (familiar to us for the *Khmer Rouge* or, more correctly, *Khmers Rouges*) derives from *kambuja-desa*, the 'land of lineage of Kambuj', the legendary founder of the Cambodian royal line. *Khmer* is a vernacular name for Cambodians; the Khmer people being of Malaysian stock, and have been the traditional inhabitants of Indo-China since the beginning of the Christian era. For a long time, Cambodia was an important staging post between China and India for European traders. The ancient empire of *Angkor* began at the northern end of Tonlé Sap during the ninth century, and for four centuries it was a wealthy and powerful state. A remnant of this ancient kingdom is the magnificent *Angkor Wat*, one of greatest religious edifices ever built. The old Khmer kingdoms came to an end with the arrival of Buddhism and through constant Thai invasions.

From the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam fought over control of Cambodia; and they have been traditional rivals ever since. For brief periods in the sixteenth century Portugal and Spain

War and strife has been familiar to this part of the world for a long time.

occupied the country. But Thai invasions from the north and Vietnamese traders from the east led to constant struggles over three centuries. During the nineteenth century Cambodia was constantly at war with its neighbours as it defended against incursions into its territory.

The nineteenth century was an age of European industrial and technical revolution, and saw expansion of European interests around the globe. From the Asian region European colonists and traders wanted rubber, rice, tin, spices, copra, tobacco, coffee, sugar and oil. France entered Cambodia, in an expansionary move from their interests elsewhere in South-East Asia, particularly in Vietnam, and declared a protectorate over the country in 1864. France wanted a springboard in the area for trade with China, to give it as much advantage as possible over the British, who were colonial rivals.

Cambodia's economy relies largely on agriculture – rice, rubber, wood products, corn; as well as clothing and mining. Ethnically, ninety percent of the population are of Khmer stock, with the rest of Chinese or Vietnamese descent. They mostly speak Khmer with some French, Vietnamese, Chinese and English. The dominant religion is Buddhism, with some adherents to Islam and other religions.

### the political climate

The government of Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy, headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the leader of his country since 1941, after being installed by the French as an eighteen-year-old. In 1949 Sihanouk, a clever but ruthless political figure, negotiated partial freedom from the French and claimed independence for the country in 1953, while France and Vietnam were at war. In 1954 Cambodian neutrality was recognised by the Geneva South-East Asia Peace Conference, which ordered the communist Viet Minh and the Khmer Rouge based in Cambodia back to Vietnam. In a climate of cold war between the USSR and USA, Sihanouk realised he needed both American support and cooperation with the Vietnamese communists.

Anti-colonial sentiment had been growing in South-East Asia over a number of years, and to some, like Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, communism was seen as a way of expelling the colonials and assuming home control over their own affairs. France and Holland tried to hold on to their colonial empires after WWII while other European countries had begun

to relinquish their colonial influence. Indonesia at the time was trying to repel the Dutch during the late 1940s, as they sought independence. The Vietnamese fought the French between 1946 and 1954, when the French formally withdrew.

Despite a communist/nationalist movement emerging during the 1930s, there was little significant activity in Cambodia till after the war, as the traditional ruling class and social structure had been preserved, unlike in Vietnam. Many Cambodians felt that the French helped keep the Vietnamese, their traditional enemies, in check. Cambodian independence was proclaimed in 1953, but Sihanouk abdicated in 1955 to contest popular elections and extend his political involvement in the country. To one observer, Sihanouk was:

*Charismatic, charming and flamboyant, he was also arrogant, deceitful and calculating in the pursuit of his two major aims: to maintain the loyalty and support of his people and to keep his country neutral at peace. (Schanberg and Pran, 1984)*

A skilful diplomat, Sihanouk tried to protect Cambodia from becoming embroiled in the conflict raging in Vietnam, and for a while he impressed foreign powers with an attempt to keep Cambodia neutral. According to Martin Wright, after 1956 Sihanouk:

*... began his astonishing tightrope act balancing rival pressures from Hanoi, Moscow, Saigon, Washington, Peking and Bangkok. (Wright, 1989)*

Pro-American sentiment led Sihanouk to put down Khmer Rouge in the country, but later he allowed communists sanctuary inside Cambodia while keeping open Vietnamese supply routes through the country. Tensions during the 1960s led to a breaking-off of diplomatic ties with the US, as Sihanouk was critical of US involvement in Vietnam. As the Vietnam War spilled into Cambodia, a massive US bombing attack was launched in 1969 against communist headquarters inside Cambodia. The bombing campaign continued till 1973, in an act that was declared illegal by the US Congress, reducing much of the country to a ruin.

In 1970 tensions escalated between Sihanouk and his Prime Minister, Lon Nol, a devout Buddhist who saw fighting communism a duty. Sihanouk was overthrown; Lon Nol dissolved the monarchy and declared the Khmer Republic in October 1970. In January 1971 the Viet Cong wiped out the Cambodian air force while they were training the Khmer Rouge in the north-east of the country. America and South Vietnam supported Lon Nol's government, despite its corruption and

**The domino theory:** it was believed that the S.E. Asian states would fall like dominoes to communism once it gained a foothold, unless Western intervention stemmed the spread by force.

inefficiency, in an effort to contain the spread of communism throughout the region. The US President, Richard Nixon, proposed the 'Nixon Doctrine', a shift in policy from its massively unpopular involvement in Vietnam. This allowed Cambodia, or any other Asian state for that matter, to fight its own war, though America would support its effort without direct military engagement. The Paris Peace Agreement of 1973 ended direct US military involvement.

By 1974, people had been fleeing the desolation of the countryside and poured into the capital, Phnom Penh, looking for work. From a size of 600 000 the city grew to two million during the five years of war. Inflation was running at 250 per cent, and the Khmer Rouge finally launched an assault on Lon Nol's troops in the city. In April 1975 the Khmer Rouge marched into the city, the Lon Nol government formally surrendering on 17 April. On the pretext of a US bombing raid on Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge evacuated the city, forcing everyone into the countryside.

Observers note Lon Nol was weak in international relations and had little political acumen. He looked to the US for support, but was militarily naïve. He presided over the disintegration of the country as a communist victory seemed certain and fled early in April 1975 after the American protectors had gone, just before the Khmer Rouge, as 'liberators', captured the capital.

To justify America's assistance to Lon Nol, an American Embassy official is quoted in March 1975 as saying:

*Our side is more civilised ... If the other side took over, they would kill all the educated people, the teachers, the artists, the intellectuals and that would be a step backward toward barbarism. (Schanberg and Pran, 1984)*

Loung Ung's memoir, the film *The Killing Fields*, and many other published accounts of the atrocities in Cambodia confirm the barbarity of the Cambodian revolution.

### ***the revolution, the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot***

Most commentators observe that it is difficult to explain why such a radical government emerged in Cambodia in the mid-1970s. After Pol Pot left Phnom Penh in 1963 for the countryside, the Khmer Rouge gradually gained strength. The new government, bent on eradicating all vestiges of the previous social order, proclaimed the state of Democratic Kampuchea, gaining power in April 1975, with a wish to remove the

corrupting influence of foreign and capitalist societies. Phnom Penh was evacuated and the population moved into the countryside to work in labour camps. Loyalty to *Angkar* (The Organisation) was paramount.

The Khmer Rouge grew from a tiny force of 2500 in 1969, to 50 000 in 1972 as its cause gained popularity amongst the people; growing again to about 73 000 in 1978. They were trained by remnants of the Viet Minh who had been ordered to withdraw to Hanoi. The Khmer Rouge leaders were Saleth Sar (Pol Pot), Leng Sary and Son Sen, all of whom had been student activists in Paris and teachers in Phnom Penh.

In 1967 a peasant revolt in Battambang encouraged some popular support for the Khmer Rouge but was put down by Lon Nol's government. The revolutionary arm of the Khmer Rouge was formed after the 1970 coup and Sihanouk, in a change of direction, used the US bombing of Cambodia as a means of enlisting support for himself, aligning with his former enemies. The nationalist character of the Khmer Rouge agenda marked it as different from its revolutionary counterpart in Vietnam, and hence led to disagreement with Hanoi. While Vietnam had been backed by the USSR, the new Cambodian revolution enlisted Chinese support.

Pol Pot emerged as leader of the Khmer Rouge and his vision for Cambodia was for a "self-sufficient agrarian communist state" (Sharp 2001), a truly classless society. It advocated the abolition of markets and private property, evacuation of people from towns to the country, abolition of currency, execution of leaders of Lon Nol's government, defrocking of Buddhist monks and expulsion of foreigners, particularly the Vietnamese. The purges of the ranks of government sought to remove all official opposition to the new order.

Everyone worked for *Angkar* or *Angkar Loeu*, terms that mean 'The Organisation' or 'Supreme Organisation'. It was deemed infallible; questioning it or resisting its authority met the severest punishment. People addressed each other as *comrade*, social purges sought to root out all dissenters; even children were enlisted to expose family members who were disloyal to *Angkar*.

In 1977 Pol Pot became Prime Minister, aligning with China in a Marxist/Leninist government. He feared that Cambodia would be dominated by Vietnam in an Indo-China federation. The Vietnamese

incited Cambodians to rise up against the Khmer Rouge and the reported brutality of the regime provided a pretext for an invasion; and in January 1979 the capital fell to Vietnamese control.

It has been estimated that during Pol Pot's three and a half year reign (1975–79) between about one and a half and two million people, some 15 to 20 per cent of the population, died. There have been few revolutions like it – cities were emptied, property abolished, and homes and families destroyed. There was no gradual transition period; everyone became peasant farmers as the country was turned into a 'nation of slaves'. Pol Pot's regime represented an era of state-sponsored terror. Conditions were inhumane, with malnutrition, disease and overwork killing many. As another Cambodia survivor, Someth May, testifies in his own story, "starvation, hard labour and terror were the normal circumstances of my life" (May 1986, p. 18). The Khmer Rouge were particularly brutal in creating a government "founded on doctrinaire delusions" (Sharp 2001). The Vietnamese invasion of late 1978, by a strong and well-equipped force, pushed the Khmer Rouge back to the hills and forests. Evading capture for many years, and finally being deposited in an internal power struggle, Pol Pot died (of natural causes) on 15 April 1998.

#### focus questions

- Carry out extra reading on the history of South-East Asia and its conflicts. Summarise the social and political conditions people found themselves living under, and comment on the effect these sorts of conflicts had on the civilian population.
- Look for references to historical issues in Loung Ung's book. How would you evaluate the impact the Cambodian crisis subsequently had on the country?
- Is it clear how imperative it was for the Ung family to flee the city and to keep their identity secret?