

Grandfather Mok: 'Pol Potism Par Excellence'

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By John Maloy

Ta Mok, the former Khmer Rouge military commander and Central Committee member who died on Friday, was one of the longest serving and most feared leaders of the regime.

Ta, or “Grandfather,” Mok served as secretary of the Southwest Zone during the 1970s, and used an extended surd ideologically stringent family network to consolidate power.

Under his control, the zone produced vast numbers of the regime's most ferocious cadres. His forces carried out many of the executions and purges across Cambodia in the 1970s, which would later earn him the nickname “The Butcher” in the media.

More than 6,000 mass graves recorded by the Documentation Center of Cambodia in the Southwest Zone bear witness to the brutality under his rule.

After Democratic Kampuchea fell in 1979, Ta Mok served as commander of its military, eventually taking full control of the rebel group in its final days.

At the time of his arrest in March 1999, he had served as a leader of the Khmer Rouge, or its precursors, for more than 35 years. Unlike many of his peers, he never defected, remaining defiant as the regime collapsed around him.

Ta Mok was born in 1925 in Pra Keap Village in the Tram kak district of Takeo province, the eldest of seven children, according to Justin Corfield and Laura Summers' “The Historical Dictionary of Cambodia.” His real name has been given variously as Oung, Chhit or Ek Choeun.

Despite the brutality with which his name would later become synonymous, he was schooled in the traditional Buddhist manner and attended the Pali language school in Phnom Penh.

After taking up arms against the French in the late 1940s, he became a member of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party, Cambodia's first national communist party, in 1951.

In 1963, he was appointed to the Central Committee of the Pol Pot-led Workers' Party of Kampuchea, which would later become the Communist Party of Kampuchea.

In 1968, Ta Mok was named secretary and military chief of the Southwest Zone, initially comprising all or parts of Taken, Kampot, Kompong Chhnang, Koh Kong and Kompong Speu provinces.

He was able to quickly consolidate power in the zone, which would become notorious even by Khmer Rouge standards.

In total, he had four sons, two daughters, two brother-in-law and five sons-in-law working under him—including son-in-law Khe Muth, future commander of Democratic Kampuchea's navy. This strong network was able to take control of much of the zone well before the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975.

Under Ta Mok and his family, the zone became what historian Michael Vickery calls, “The zone of 'Pol Potism' par excellence, the power base of the Pol Pot central government.”

In 1973, the zone saw the first Khmer Rouge-style agricultural collectives. Almost three years before the fall of Phnom Penh, it was already restricting religious activity and compelling peasants to wear the soon-to-be-ubiquitous black pajamas.

Part of this evolving system in the Southwest Zone was the establishing of an “interrogation” center under Ta Mok's control at Krang Ka in Takeo, in which 477 people, some scarcely teenagers, were executed, according to the Historical Dictionary.

Evidence gathered by historian Stephen Heder and collected in his 2001 book “Seven Candidates for Prosecution” points to Ta Mok's participation in the executions of the regime.

Comrade Duch, whose real name was Khang Kek Ieu, the commander of Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, said “Ta Mok had his own prison,” in the Southwest. “Many people were killed there,” Heder quotes Duch as saying.

In a 1999 interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review shortly before his arrest, Duch compared his own methods to Ta Mok's. Duch claimed that he used psychological tactics as one means of extracting information, whereas “Ta Mok didn't care about the mental state of victims. He just tortured and killed them.”

According to Heder, Former Democratic Kampuchea Foreign Minister Ieng Sary said that although decisions on “massacres and killings” were made by “Pol Pot, Nuon Chea [and Defense Minister] Son Sen,” they relied on Ta Mok, as zone secretary, to carry out their will.

Confessions from the S-21 archives implicate Ta Mok in the regime's many purges, according to Heder's book. The archives contain the confessions of more than 30 cadres sent from Ta Mok's zone. There are also numerous confessions marked with phrases such as “Sent to Brother Mok Already” or “Comrade Mok Has Read Already.”

One confession contains a marginal note written by Duch stating that a cadre referred to as “the contemptible Tan Meng” was already “smashed” by “Brother 15”—an alias for Ta Mok.

A DC-Cam mapping team has determined that the Southwest Zone was home to 38 security centers, 78 execution sites and 6,032 mass grave sites. All of the zones' secretaries were purged, except for Ta Mok.

Cadres from the zone were used around the country to enforce the will of the regime. One of its severest purges occurred in the Eastern zone in 1978 when Southwest Zone forces played a major role in the killing of between what historian Ben Kiernan estimates to be at least 100,000, but probably more like 250,000, people.

When the Vietnamese invaded in December 1978, Ta Mok was forced to flee to the Thai border. He was subsequently named deputy commander in chief and chief of staff of the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea.

In the ensuing war with the Vietnamese forces and the armies of the Hanoi-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea government, Ta Mok lost a leg when he stepped on a land mine in December 1982.

As the 1980s progressed, he was ironically to emerge as something of a venture capitalist as he sought funds for the military.

According to the Historical Dictionary, he was involved in major logging operations along the Thai border from large concessions in rebel-controlled territory auctioned to Thai entrepreneurs.

His troops also collected taxes and other payments from foreign gem miners and merchants seeking mining concessions around Pailin municipality, the dictionary states.

“Ta Mok was based in Anlong Veng in June 1997 when Pol Pot ordered the execution of former Democratic Kampuchea Defense Minister Son Sen and his family. Ta Mok subsequently broke from his former leader and claimed control of the Khmer Rouge.

“Ta Mok pursued Pol Pot, capturing him as he tried to flee to Thailand and presided over a “Tribunal” set up to try Pol Pot on July 25, 1997. Pol Pot died in Anlong Veng the following year while still in Ta Mok's custody.

But Ta Mok's own position was also far from secure. An April 1998 mutiny of Khmer Rouge forces at Anlong Veng drove him across the Thai border, where he remained until pressure from the US led Thai authorities to force him back into Cambodia.

After his capture in 1999, he was charged by the Military Court with crimes against humanity in 2002 and war crimes in 2005.

In a rare interview, Ta Mok admitted to the Far Eastern Economic Review in 1997 that “hundreds of thousands” of people died during the Khmer Rouge's time in power.

He did not, however, admit personal responsibility. Instead, he blamed Pol Pot for everything.

“Pol Pot's hands are filled with blood,” he said.

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