

Khmer Rouge: Another Butcher Goes Laughing to the Grave

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By James Pringle

Ta Mok, to use his nom de guerre, who died last week, was different from other French-educated, "intellectual" Khmer Rouge leaders in that he was a peasant who became a charismatic, if eccentric and murderous, military commander.

Obituaries referred to him as "The Butcher," and 100,000 people are said to have died through his direct orders. He would have been the key defendant in the UN-backed genocide tribunal that has just started investigatory work in Phnom Penh - actual trials won't begin until next year. He knew all the Khmer Rouge secrets.

Neither "Grandfather" Mok nor the other Khmer Rouge leaders were one-dimensional beings.

I once met a carpenter whom Ta Mok had ordered to construct wooden-built houses for party cadres. Ta Mok arrived in a captured American Jeep driven by a 15-year-old boy - no bodyguards - to inspect them. "My knees were literally knocking together in fear as he examined the houses," the carpenter told me. "But Ta Mok appeared satisfied because he took off his Swiss watch and slipped it over my wrist."

A few weeks later, Ta Mok reappeared, asked for the watch back, and gave it to someone else, laughing as he did so - the ban on humor did not apply to him. Laughter was literally banned under the Khmer Rouge; Cambodians were not permitted to show joy or happiness as a new "pure and hard" agrarian society was constructed in fields often fertilized by murdered human beings.

Long after the Khmer Rouge had been driven by the Vietnamese army from Phnom Penh, I heard that Ta Mok was living in the town of Khukhan in northeast Thailand, organizing cross-border raids. He was wildly popular there - the locals called him "good-hearted" because he spent millions on rice for his troops - and was supported by elements in the Thai government.

When I asked about him in the market, people pointed out a young woman whose late father had rented a house to Ta Mok.

I drove there and rang a bell at a large gate. It was opened by Ta Mok's deputy. Inside I saw a dozen uniformed Khmer Rouge soldiers, some wearing state-of-the-art artificial limbs and others without legs but waiting for prostheses. Ta Mok's own right leg had been partially destroyed by a mine. He looked after his troops, who revered him.

Later, the young woman told me her father, who had been in his early 40s and in good health, had abruptly died of a heart attack hours after attending a Khmer Rouge wedding

during which Ta Mok served him a drink.

In 1998, Ta Mok ordered the arrest and trial of former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot - "Brother Number One" - after Pol Pot had ordered his men to kill his defense minister, Son Sen, apparently for contemplating surrender to Phnom Penh authorities. A farcical trial ensued. Pol Pot was found guilty and shortly afterwards died of an apparent heart attack.

After Ta Mok's arrest in 1999, I went to see his home at his last headquarters at Anlong Veng, with an artificial lake full of fish. Ta Mok had ordered an artist to paint idyllic Cambodian scenery on the walls - waterfalls, jungle greenery and animals now probably extinct. It looked like a kind of Khmer Rouge Camelot.

The three most wicked Khmer Rouge leaders are dead now - Pol Pot, Son Sen and now Ta Mok. Kaing Guek Iev, better known by his nom de guerre "Duch," director of the S.21 torture prison, is the only Khmer Rouge now in custody. He became a born-again Christian and has a certificate from an American evangelical group speaking of his "deepening commitment to Jesus Christ."

His defense at his trial will be that he was just "following orders."

Although he was responsible for the killings of 14,000 prisoners, some as young as nine, for "political crimes," Duch had earlier ordered the release of a French ethnologist captured by the Khmer Rouge, a point that may stand in mitigation. In any case, there is no death penalty in Cambodia these days.

Nuon Chea, aged 80, Pol Pot's sidekick and "Brother Number Two," is also still alive. But when I saw him recently at his wooden house on stilts near the Thai border, he had visibly aged from two years before. On the surface, he has always been very polite.

Typically, this former ideologue of the Khmer Rouge's violent reordering of society denies any wrongdoing. Under the Khmer Rouge, religion was banned; Buddhist temples were turned into grain stores and mosques into piggeries. But Nuon Chea's mother was a fervent Buddhist so he kept alive one monk to intone prayers in Pali for her.

There remain two other leaders, Khieu Samphan, 72, and the former foreign minister Ieng Sary. Khieu, who has a chilling manner, portrays himself as a former figurehead who was restricted to a leadership compound during Khmer Rouge rule and knew nothing about genocide.

Ailing Ieng Sary lives freely in a comfortable Phnom Penh villa. He will likely argue that he represented the Khmer Rouge on the international stage and was not involved in the deaths of 1.7 million Cambodians.

It has taken 27 years to come around to a tribunal. Some members of the present regime of Prime Minister Hun Sen were once Khmer Rouge cadres - Hun Sen was a Khmer

Rouge soldier who lost an eye in fighting. Many believe hearts were never really behind a trial in the first place - too much might be revealed.

One can almost hear the mocking - no pun intended - laughter of Ta Mok, in whatever circle of hell he is in.

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