

Khmer Rouge background

To better understand the comparison between the two groups, the author spoke with and reviewed two documents written by Dr. Kenneth M. Quinn:

“Political Change in Wartime: The Khmer Krahom Revolution in Southern Cambodia, 1970 – 1974,” published in the Naval War College Review in 1976, recorded Kenneth Quinn’s findings as a young U.S. Foreign Service Officer stationed from 1969 to 1974 in Chau Doc Province, in southeastern Vietnam near the Mekong River, contiguous with the Cambodian border. From his post, he observed events in Cambodia (from some hilltops he could actually observe the burning of Cambodian villages) and interviewed dozens of Cambodian refugees fleeing Khmer Rouge-controlled areas before they came to power in April 1975. His article catalogues the type of Khmer Rouge polices and actions they reported; and,

The Origins and Development of Radical Cambodian Communism, Dr. Quinn’s 1982 doctoral thesis at the University of Maryland.* Dr. Quinn’s thesis traces the origin of the Cambodian Communist movement and describes in detail how it gained power and later carried out the program which has made its name notorious.

The author has relied on these two reports to compare Maoist conduct to date with that of the Khmer Rouge, both before and after they gained power; and to compare a few of the factors which have influenced both groups in their efforts to attain power. With Dr. Quinn’s kind permission, his reports are paraphrased in the following two sections.

Khmer Rouge pre-1975 conduct

The 1976 Quinn report catalogues numerous types of Khmer Rouge conduct in areas of southern Cambodia under its control beginning in about 1973 until it came to power in April 1975. According to Dr. Quinn, mainly from 1971 to 1973, “in the newly ‘liberated’ areas, the [Khmer Rouge] dealt with the population much less strictly than after a year of control.” In its most radical ‘signature’ conduct between 1973 and 1975 included:

- Mass destruction and total uprooting of communities through the burning down of all the houses in target villages and forced abandonment of all personal property and family heirlooms;
- Mass resettlement of such communities to work camps or new locations where the new Khmer Rouge society would be built, with no schools or health facilities;
- Replacement of the traditional pattern of individual homes with communal barracks living;
- Intense twice-monthly (night-time) political indoctrination of civilian population, following long arduous days of farm labor, to which each family had to send a representative;

* Dr. Quinn served as U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia from 1996 to 1999.

- Radical transformation of the economy, including collectivization of agriculture, communization of harvest distribution, common ownership of the means of agricultural production, elimination of private trade and its replacement by Party-controlled cooperative stores;
- Assault on the basic family structure and intensive political training away from their homes for youngsters beginning at age twelve. Youth returning from these sessions fiercely condemned religion and traditional culture, rejected parental authority, and were passionately loyal to the Party. Some were indoctrinated into violence through the use of torture games using monkeys and small animals as victims;
- Social leveling, in which previously affluent or university-educated people were assigned menial tasks such as tending pigs and manual farm work;
- Banning of the Buddhist (and Muslim) religions (all monks defrocked and forced to work); ethnic and religious festivals and traditional dress were strictly forbidden;
- From 1967 to 1973, the 'feudal' elements of society were the target – landowners, moneylenders and merchants against whom the peasants might hold grudges;
- However, from 1973, there were large-scale disappearances and killings of 'class enemies' and regime opponents carried out by new cadres "never seen before," fanatics who allowed no dissent or even questioning of directives. Fear of punishment and death was a key ingredient in securing obedience from the civilian population. Dr. Quinn adds that "the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that the peasantry was opposed to almost all of the [Khmer Rouge] programs...and had to be coerced and brutally forced into participation;"
- Highly-disciplined organization in which dissent and opposition were suppressed by harsh and brutal punishments through a local government apparatus at the village and hamlet level which allowed them to exercise tight control over every family; and
- Rigid enforcement by constant police and militia patrols of a system of permits for travel outside one's immediate village; travel outside the district required District Party Secretary approval.

All these measures resulted in the exodus of tens of thousands of refugees who, even at that time, were telling outsiders about this Khmer Rouge conduct.

These types of policies and actions, using terror and internal purges, were intensified and carried out nation-wide from 1975 to 1978. How had the Khmer Rouge achieved the power necessary to carry out this program?