



A Bitter-Sweet Duch Ruling

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On 3 February, the Khmer Rouge tribunal's Supreme Court overturned a 2010 verdict by a lower court. The initial verdict sentenced Kaing Guek Eav, otherwise known as Duch – head of the notorious S-21 slayings – to 35 years in prison, a sentence that has been extended to life. An estimated 16,000 people died in Tuol Sleng, a former high school turned secret prison in Phnom Penh. Roughly 1.7 million Cambodians died during the 1975 to 1979 genocide, which included torture, executions, starvation, and malnutrition.

Duch's ruling is a bitter-sweet moment in history.

Those largely unscathed by the brutality of the Khmer Rouge will perhaps cheer the loudest. A monstrous victory has been achieved! Or has it? Cold War diplomats, military strategists and academics (ignorantly romanticizing the fallacy of communism and the Cambodian genocide) may be celebrating even louder, if not to justify an illogical truth that contributed to the madness. And by most accounts there's something to celebrate.

But it's a tough pill for me to swallow. Overshadowed by anger and frustration, I carry an unnecessary weight of resentment. For four long years, from 1975 to 1979, the world quickly turned a deaf ear to the plea of millions crying for help. A synchronous sound of poor, pathetic Khmer voices, resonating from the depths of prison camps, faded into a dark corner of history. No one did anything to save them. Nearly 40 years later, there's still some degree of silence. Today, behind closed doors, countless Cambodians will share their pain of survival with trustworthy friends and acquaintances. In public, they remain muted as if nothing had ever happened. The irony of all ironies, however, is that it's that same submissive quietude that has kept the world in the dark, while the Khmer Rouge waged a bloody war on innocent victims.

For better or worse, I am making a mild attempt to end a culture of submission, and I feel some degree of responsibility to say this:

What people fail to acknowledge is that the Cambodian genocide, similar to the Armenian genocide and the Jewish Holocaust before it, was a huge embarrassment. Everyone should feel some degree of shame for the transgressions that transpired. How could a technologically rich 20th Century, with all its glory of science and rationality, ever allow this to happen? Worse yet, how could a 21st Century world allow genocides to persist still today? The sad truth is that the genocides of Rwanda, North Korea, Kosovo and others put the human race to shame. Apparently, it has been difficult to sidestep

animalistic instincts for the sake of sustained global peace. History has taught us nothing at all.

As a bespectacled academic educated in the Ivy Leagues of Western universities, I would have been whisked away into a private room. Then, I would have been tortured, blindfolded and eventually executed in S-21. I wasn't. But my late father was on his way there. An intellectually gifted boy from a depleted village just north of Phnom Penh, my dad won a scholarship to study in the United States. On his way back to Cambodia, during the mid-1970s, driven by nationalistic pride and a campaign of lies spearheaded by the Khmer Rouge, he was intercepted by my mother in Paris who had a prominent death warrant on her head: She was educated, spoke multiple languages, and came from a successful family. Sadly, everyone else on both sides of the family had died, leaving an enormous black hole in the pages of our family history.

With that, how can I possibly celebrate Duch's ruling with enthusiasm? Justice has been served, but it has come too little too late. I, nor countless other Cambodians carrying a heavy heart, can't bear the fact that we can never reclaim the lives of those we loved and cared about so much.

Three senior Khmer Rouge leaders remain on trial with Case 002. Of the four, Duch was the only person to plead guilty. Time will determine their fate. They also say that time heals all wounds. Unfortunately, time will never heal the emotional and psychological wounds that victims of war and genocide continue to bear.

The world must learn from the history pages of war and violence. It isn't enough to sit in silence while so many people suffer.