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KHMER ROUGE HISTORY ON THE TROUBLED SPOT

By Dy Khamboly

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The 2013 Cambodian national election put the Khmer Rouge (KR) history on a troubled spot through the resurgent politicization of the history, genocide denial and racist incitement. Dragging master narratives of Cambodian modern history into politics could lead to social division, political classification and violence. The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) employed the KR rhetoric as one of their strategies to win people's votes during the election campaign.

Highlighting the KR crimes and promoting the CPP's leadership as the saviors of the nation has always been the fundamental strategy for the CPP to gain people's votes. The CPP has been successful in this endeavor as every single Cambodian family has at least one member who died or disappeared during the KR. The estimated total death during the KR is between 1.7 and 2.2 million people. The people's suffering during the KR is relevant and the CPP's 7 January Liberation Day resonates with the party's fundamentally political pulse since 1979. With this rhetoric, the CPP has dramatically increased its seats from 51 in 1993 to 90 in 2008. By then, the CPP was able to consolidate almost exclusive power. FUNCINPEC party, which won the first 1993 United Nations sponsored election, has gradually lost power and is fading away from the political stage, becoming subordinated to the CPP.

The opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) became the only major challenge of the CPP in 2008, but could not bring in any substantive change. However, with the CPP's sharp decline to 68 seats according to the temporary result issued by the National Election Committee (NEC) on August 12, 2013 suggests the KR rhetoric appears not to be working in the present context where many young voters who have no personal experiences with the KR era appear to be passionate for leadership change and have thrown their support behind the opposition.

At the same time, a sense of genocide denial unprecedentedly emerged during this 2013 election. On May 18, Kem Sokha, an outspoken opposition leader commented in a public gathering that the very existence of Tuol Sleng prison was a stage and that evidence of torture and execution inside this notorious center was fabricated by Vietnam to justify its invasion of Cambodia. Kem Sokha further explained that the KR would not be "so stupid" to keep Tuol Sleng for the world to condemn and that the KR would have demolished the buildings in order to destroy evidence. Kem Sokha's comments were clear although he later denied of having called Tuol Sleng a Vietnamese-invented stage and accused the government of manipulating the recording of his speech and taking it out of context. His political comments angered the KR victims, especially Tuol Sleng survivor like Chum Mey, who accused Kem Sokha of insulting the souls of the dead,

re-traumatizing the suffering of the survivors and distorting the historical facts. Chum Mey unsuccessfully appealed for apology from Kem Sokha and later led an allegedly politically-motivated demonstration attended by over 20,000 people.

Likewise, opposition leader Sam Rainsy attacked the CPP by linking the latter to several unpopular issues relating to Vietnam and KR. Sam Rainsy's strategy was to enlighten people into the issues of uncontrolled flow of Vietnamese settlers in which he claims to remain active today. This allegation creates the long-time speculations among the Cambodian population of the continued Vietnamese grip on Cambodian political and internal affairs, the disputed border markers and the recent electoral irregularities with the claim of illegal Vietnamese voters and counter arguments that 7 January liberation day was in fact the day of Vietnamese invasion.

Sam Rainsy's speeches could have injected the sentiment of hatred towards the Vietnamese on the social media such as Facebook which influences a large number of the young voters. By implication, his rhetoric could be galvanized into incitement, classification and symbolization, the preliminary stages leading to mass violence although he may not have any intention of provoking conflict or instability notwithstanding mass violence.

Cambodia has gone through a number of major political transitions and difficulties from French colonialism to independence, absolute monarchy, Khmer Republic, Democratic Kampuchea, People's Republic of Kampuchea's (PRK's) moderate socialism, the transitional period under United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), and eventually constitutional monarchy. The structures of these political regimes are largely hierarchical and centralized and dependent on individuals' charisma. However, there has never been a strong democratic systems that we should embrace and enforce. Going through these transitions and difficulties, Cambodian people have developed a potentially high resilience to building up our well-being and nation.

To equip Cambodia with stronger democratic principles, rule of law and the respect for human rights, politicians should put a hold on politicizing history. Instead, we should equip the 3.5 million young Cambodians who are born after the KR through education. Without scientific study and research, our young people will lose the chance of knowing their own history. The Ministry of Education have embarked on this urgent mission to try and ensure the younger generations have the opportunity to study, analyze and evaluate their history in a way that will institutionalize a culture that values human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Historical empathy, tolerance and forgiveness are key ethos's that are crucial to a thriving post-conflict democracy. The youth should be encouraged to question and challenge the authorities that guide the country in the wrong direction so that they can become competent leaders and active agents in the quest for peace and national reconciliation.

Liberating KR history from the troubled spot through education characterizes the first important step in this endeavor. KR history is undeniably our history. It belongs to all Cambodians and so does the genocide.

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<http://www.cambodiasri.org/bio/boly.php>

http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/DK_Book/DK_History--EN.pdf