



Facing Cambodia's past. Or not.

Karen J. Coates

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How is the Khmer Rouge Tribunal playing in the quiet corners of Cambodia?

PHNOM PENH — The executioner has a new routine. Trailed by guards, he assumes a seat inside the cool, cavernous chambers of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. He faces his judges with the public at his back. A thick glass wall separates the frail, aged man from an audience mostly too young to remember what is commonly called Pol Pot Time. Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, stands when called to speak.

“Please leave an open window for me to seek forgiveness,” he tells the court. “Now I am very regretful and very shameful.”

At least 12,000 prisoners died while Duch oversaw the infamous Tuol Sleng torture prison during the 1975 to 1979 Khmer Rouge regime. In those years, the country lost a quarter of its population to murder, disease, overwork and starvation. For the next three months in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Duch will confront what he did.

The world has waited three decades to hear Duch speak — yet remarkably few Cambodians say they are following his trial. “Most people don’t care because they’re busy with their life,” says Ly Bun Hai, a police officer in a fishing village near the ancient Angkor temples.

It’s a common sentiment. This is a country largely populated by farmers and fishermen, many of whom linger near the poverty line; tomorrow’s dinner takes precedence, as it has for more than 30 years. Yet a few Cambodians are urging their compatriots to stare hard and straight into the past — lest history repeat itself.

Nearly 70 percent of Cambodians were born after the Khmer Rouge regime, and many know little or nothing about those years. Khmer Rouge history is not generally taught in Cambodian schools.

A 71-year-old rice farmer named Nga says she recounts stories of Pol Pot Time so that youngsters understand their past. “Sometimes I tell the children, the young generation, about the food we grew behind our house but the Khmer Rouge did not allow us to eat,” she says.

“Today is different, it’s getting better. We have cars, motorbikes, fields to grow food. But some families are still poor, not enough food to eat.”

The battle for daily survival is an ancient thread that binds Cambodians through ages of war and peace.

“I fought the Khmer Rouge,” says a 46-year-old veteran named Sok Samat. He recalls the front lines of a civil war that lasted 19 years beyond the 1970s regime. “I think, when I go to fight the Khmer Rouge, I must shoot. If I don’t shoot, the Khmer Rouge will shoot me. I shot a lot.” These are tough memories for Sok Samat, but he says, “I had to do it to protect the country.”

These days, Sok Samat centers his thoughts on immediate needs of a far different nature. “I think only about being a motor-taxi driver and supporting my family.” In principle, he’s happy about the Tribunal, but he wants “all the people connected to the Khmer Rouge to face trial.”

So far there are five defendants. Does he think his wish is feasible? “Maybe not.”

As court proceedings progress, Chan Soratha, a young college student majoring in journalism, is writing his university thesis. He attempted to survey hundreds of high school teachers about their knowledge of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal — basic questions about the name of the court, the number of former Khmer Rouge in detention, their names, their dates of arrest and the sources from which participants get their information.

“Most lecturers, they refused to answer my questions,” Soratha says, adding that they claimed lack of time, knowledge or desire to respond.

But some teachers told Chan Soratha they envied Duch and his comrades, in a way. Those facing trial received good food, clean bathrooms and decent living quarters “while the victims just stay outside on the street,” they said.

These teachers told Chan Soratha that perhaps society could repeat a Khmer Rouge-style revolution and “have better conditions than those living in the countryside.” Even if the perpetrators are caught, the consequences do not constitute “a punishment.”

Chan Soratha is still analyzing his survey, but the results so far provoke grave thoughts. He grew up hearing the stories of his mother, who lost her father and several siblings during Pol Pot Time, and he chokes when confronted with questions about family history. He never wants to see a repeat of that era, but he says many young Cambodians don’t understand the Khmer Rouge. And if people don’t understand the past, they can’t prevent its recurrence. “Everything happens again and again,” he says philosophically.

This is precisely why the Venerable Muny Van Saveth, a monk and orphanage director across the country at Wat Norea in Battambang, says it is crucial for Cambodia’s children to learn about human rights. “Because we don’t want the second Khmer Rouge.”

Can that really happen again?

Many say no. But not all. “If the people are not educated, if they don’t have human rights, if they don’t have money — yeah, maybe,” says Muny Van Saveth. The Khmer Rouge movement began with a segment of the population that was angry at society’s powerbrokers and money-holders.

Duch has told the tribunal that a pivotal Khmer Rouge policy was “smashing the oppressor class.” Today, Cambodian society is again divided between those with power and money — and those without. “They don’t have the food, they don’t have the land,” the monk Muny Van Saveth says.

"Maybe they are angry." Again.