

History a work in progress in one-time KR stronghold
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Sitting under a tree outside Malai High School, 20-year-old Phen Soeurm offers a dismissive approach to his history class typical of many his age.

As the teacher lectures, “the class just listens without paying attention at all,” Phen Soeurm says. “They just want to kill time.”

Here in this dusty district of Banteay Meanchey province, however, there is more to this phenomenon than a simple case of student laziness. The lecture in question covers the history of the Democratic Kampuchea regime, an understandably sensitive topic in this former Khmer Rouge stronghold.

“Most students don’t want to study Khmer Rouge history because they don’t want to be reminded of what happened, and because all of their parents are former Khmer Rouge,” Phen Soeurm said.

In schools throughout the Kingdom, the introduction of KR-related material has been a sensitive project.

Prior to last year, high school history tests drew from a textbook that gave short shrift to the regime and its history, omitting some of the most basic facts about it. But on the 2010 national history exam, five of the 14 questions dealt with the Khmer Rouge period.

In addition to identifying regime leaders, students are asked to explain why it is said that Tuol Sleng prison was a tragedy for the Cambodian people; who was behind Tuol Sleng; how the administrative zones of Democratic Kampuchea were organised; and when the regime was in power.

These new additions to the exam follow the 2007 introduction of a government-approved textbook created by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia titled *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*.

DC-Cam has distributed roughly 300,000 of the textbooks to date in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, and plans to give away 200,000 more in 2011 and 2012.

Students at Malai High School received the text in 2009, but to date, it has played a limited role in their curriculum.

The book, complete with graphics and photographs, stretches 90 pages in Khmer and 73 in English. A teacher in Malai said, however, that he had compressed the material into just one lesson for 12th grade students in their second semester.

“We don’t mention the Khmer Rouge leaders because the parents of the students are Khmer Rouge,” the teacher said, declining to be identified by name. “If those students were reminded of the leaders’ names, their parents would be upset.”

A school principal in Malai, who also asked to remain anonymous, agreed that the local climate in the district made addressing Khmer Rouge history in the classroom a challenge.

“The parents are all former Khmer Rouge, and although everything is finished now, they still respect the [Khmer Rouge] leaders,” he said.

Youk Chhang, director of DC-Cam, said his organisation had seen similar intransigence in other former Khmer Rouge areas such as Pailin province and Anlong Veng district in Oddar Meanchey province. In other provinces, he said, teachers had been reluctant to teach the material for fear of rekindling painful memories of the period.

“This has been a political topic for nearly 30 years,” Youk Chhang said. “We all have to face it and address it.”

Many parents in Malai had warily followed the introduction of the new material, said Teng Ong, 56, a farmer in the district who was formerly a member of the Khmer Rouge.

“I have never told my children that I am a former Khmer Rouge soldier because I’m afraid I would scare my kids,” Teng Ong said. “I don’t want my children to study Khmer Rouge history because the Khmer Rouge were not always bad, and I’m afraid my children will hate all Khmer Rouge leaders.”

But the lessons, Youk Chhang said, seek not to demonise the entire Khmer Rouge movement, but to give students a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the period.

“In some areas, students face discrimination if they are known to be the children of former Khmer Rouge members,” he said. “Including Khmer Rouge history in the school curriculum is a way to promote reconciliation on the national, local and family level.”

Some students, at least, say they have internalised the horrors of the regime, even if they are reluctant to study them in class.

Puth Sophy, a 10th grade student at Malai High School, said she had attempted a few times to read her Khmer Rouge history text, but had never been able to study it at length.

“Whenever I read that book, I get a headache and I feel like I’m going to vomit, so I put it back,” she said. “I am angry with the Khmer Rouge because they punished their fellow Cambodians, so I don’t want to study or be reminded of this history.”

Den Raya, an 11th grader in Malai, said he had no need to study the regime in class because he had heard enough about it from his parents.

“My mother always tells me that during that time, she was forced to work very hard, was not offered enough food to eat and had no time to talk to her family like she does today,” Den Raya said.