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Let sleeping dogs lie in Cambodia

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Who would not have wished, in due time, for a real trial based on the work of impartial historians? A trial that was not only an exorcism, a battle of St Michael against the devil, with a preconceived verdict, but a true act of justice.

Any political process is a difficult exercise _ bringing a defendant to the courts is very often prosecuting through vengeance. We should know by now, after so many failures, that entrusting justice to the righter of wrongs is like asking arsonists to put out the fire.

Confusing justice with chastisement can, in many cases, have worse consequences than the crime we want to punish. On the subject of tribunals on the Spanish Civil War which he had lived through, Michel de Castillo cried out: "As long as we do not reopen a can of worms."

In Cambodia it could be feared the side effects of a trial, over-amplified by television, might set on fire a youthful population ignorant of the past, and rewritten history to portray the "good Khmer" _ the allies of the Vietnamese _ as the victims of the evil Khmer Rouge tormentors coming from the depths of the country. Such a situation would return us to the war zone we left 30-something years ago.

Fortunately, this has not happened. The endless trial of the emblematic figures of the "Democratic Kampuchea" of the Khmer Rouge has been going on for three years in rooms which at times, but for the presence of foreign observers, would be empty. The grandchildren of the victims, by their indifference, have already rendered their verdict.

Is there only one group of culprits? That would be too simple. There were human rights abuses during the time of the Khmer Rouge, and before and after. That is why, though I was one of the first to denounce their crimes, I cannot adhere to the simple equation: Pol Pot + Ieng Sary + Khieu Samphan = two million deaths. In recognising the madness of the mass murderers who seized the country during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, it is wrong to cover up the barbarity of the previous Khmer "bleu" and the vengeance taken by returning victorious Vietnamese collaborators.

Internal terror, fuelled by fear of US bombs and then by artillery provided by the Soviet Union, helped to create the madness. During the much-delayed debates that are now taking place over the fate of a Cambodia only just emerging from a traumatic coma, honesty demands that we strive to spread the responsibility among all actors in the drama.

For those who see in this rationale an attempt at creeping revisionism, let's be clear: The social upheaval did not begin with the Pol Pot regime and it did not stop after his fall.

Accrediting all that happened between April 17, 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took power, and Jan 7, 1979, when the Vietnamese seized Phnom Penh, to the Pol Pot regime would be a lie. It is reassuring that this theory of a single scapegoat meets little echo among a population that wants to keep the shameful and confused melee as a memory of the past.

It is regrettable that the UN, which for six years recognised the exiled government of the Khmer Rouge as the country's sole legitimate representative, has imposed this trial on the competing factions who came to power with the vanguard of the Vietnamese army. For what? The obligation of remembering. But what are we really talking of? It is true that we have a cerebral memory, a voice in the head that speaks out loud and clear. But this is not the voice of the Khmer people. Their voice starts from the stomach and expresses, better than subtle analysis, adherence to an instinctive way of life that has disappeared. This memory is that of the mutilated, the blind, life's ill-treated, the feelings of horror experienced by their parents, who with every fibre of their being shout a refusal to ever suffer so much again.

What an aberration to think that families so long tortured could forget. What pretension on the part of Occidentals to think that so many lives could have simply disappeared. It is absurd to believe that memories disappear in a country where bodies are cremated. The ashes, returned to nature, are dissolved and anchored. This physiological memory does not need words to express. Each Khmer knows, without having to be reminded, that he or she is partly responsible for the collective madness that for twenty years plagued the country and that the responsibility is proportional to their own ignorance.

Both camps suffered deaths, and all were in turn victims and executioners. This dormant memory is much more efficient than ours. Rooted in their ancient history, the spirits of their ancestors are there to maintain it.

It is therefore presumptuous that foreigners who have not experienced their tragedy impose on them, on behalf of a useless pledge of "never again", a legal ritual so unknown to their culture, much like the communism that other strangers wanted to inculcate in them.

In fact, comparable in many ways to the general paranoia that captured rival combatants during the Spanish Civil War or, more recently, that of the Balkans, the devastating massacre of the Khmer people is closer to the damage from a massive ecological disaster than a planned genocide like the Holocaust or what happened in Rwanda. The Khmer Rouge are indeed heavily responsible for the flood of sociological ruin, but they were neither the originators nor the profiteers of the monstrous wave that engulfed both victims and executioners and entangled them in the suicide of a generation.

The trial for the last handful of "Democratic Kampuchea" leaders has cost a massive

fortune which Norodom Sihanouk is not wrong in saying could have been better allocated to improve the lives of peasants in the country. Nevertheless, this price is small compared to that which would have to be paid if the trial were allowed to tear the social fabric that has just barely been patched. Thanks to Buddha, the Khmer people in their wisdom have rejected this trial.

Peace has returned. Poverty remains, but is lessening. As enormous as the death toll was, the birthrate has quickly replenished the population. From nine million in 1975, it was practically double that in 2010.

The nationalistic vision of the future elite has been fulfilled: Cambodia has no more (major) enemies, neither internal nor external. It is important not to interfere in this delicate balance. Cambodia was a divided country. It is now a fallow nation. With the majority of the population under 30 and half of those under 15, most have not experienced war.

The priority should be to avoid rekindling hatred in this kindergarten. But if the Khmer people have not yet completed their growth, they are at an age of reason. All the better if the trial is a flop. It is not the time to reopen a can of worms.