



**Cambodia's trial of the century, televised**  
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Like any pair of good TV news hosts, Neth Pheaktra and Ung Chan Sophea deftly play off each other, finishing each other's thoughts and building on each other's ideas. But unlike the playful banter of most local news shows, neither host ever cracks a joke, or even smiles. Instead, the two veteran Cambodian journalists look directly into the camera and talk to viewers every Monday at 1 p.m. about torture, murder and the law.

Neth Pheaktra and Ung Chan Sophea's 24-minute weekly show summarizing and analyzing the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, better known as 'Duch,' the chief of the Khmer Rouge's notorious S-21 interrogation facility also known as Tuol Sleng, has become a sleeper hit in Cambodia. With one in five Cambodians watching the show every week, Duch on Trial has become the main way many young Cambodians, who were not taught about the Khmer Rouge in school, learn about the historic Khmer Rouge tribunal unfolding in Phnom Penh — and, in a lot of cases, hear about this dark chapter of their country's history for the first time.

From 1975 to 1979, the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge emptied Cambodia's cities, abolished money and turned its upper classes into de facto slave laborers in an attempt to form a radical agrarian utopia. More than 30 years later, Cambodia is still rebuilding — both economically and socially. For overseeing the execution of more than 15,000 people during that era, Duch has been charged by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a hybrid Cambodian-international court backed by the U.N., with war crimes, crimes against humanity, homicide and torture. S-21, the facility that he headed from 1976 until 1979, was a local Phnom Penh high school that the KR transformed into what one scholar later called "the anteroom to death."

Not surprisingly, testimonies at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) have been grim since the trial started in February of this year.

Duch, a mathematics teacher before joining the Khmer Rouge, admitted that his guards smashed babies against trees. One guard on the stand outlined the process of live blood-letting, and a rare survivor described the pain of having his toenails ripped out.

Despite the gruesome tales, Duch on Trial has attracted up to three million viewers a week in recent months — a whopping 20% of the country's population. The success of the show, which premiered in April, rests on its ability to decode the trial's complex proceedings to a mass audience — no small task in this largely rural, poorly educated

country where only about 30% of students who enter school graduate from grade 9. The ECCC was established as a hybrid court after years of negotiation between the U.N. and the Cambodian government, and the result is a complex hodgepodge of international and domestic law.

Matthew Robinson, the British producer of *Duch on Trial* and executive director of Khmer Mekong Films, took the show's predecessor — a pretrial miniseries about the ECCC — to focus groups around the country, fine tuning the show's language to ensure it could be understood. But while the show may keep it simple, it is still able to highlight complex themes raised in the trial — like mental health and forgiveness — that are relevant to people's daily lives in a nation still suffering from collective post-traumatic stress.

The endeavor was something of a gamble. With the Khmer Rouge only being introduced into the school curriculum this fall, many born after 1979 know little about Cambodia's darkest period. And for those who did, before the Duch trial, over two-thirds of people born after the Khmer Rouge rule said they rarely or never talked about the era. Robinson said before he produced the first episode, he went to his local eatery and asked the staff if they would be interested in a half-hour show about the Duch trial. "They said, 'No, no, no.' But I was there on the Monday [when the show first launched], and all of them were watching. At the end, they gave me a big thumbs up." Now the restaurant shows *Duch on Trial* every Monday at lunch.

The show, largely funded by the British government, is played on the Cambodian Television Network (CTN), Cambodia's most watched channel. Controlled by Cambodia's richest businessman, Kith Meng, CTN is not playing the show in a prime-time slot as a public service, but because it glues so many Cambodians to the TV screen.

Nonetheless, *Duch on Trial* is helping fulfill one of the Court's central mandates, according to ECCC chief spokesperson Reach Sambath: to educate Cambodians about the Khmer Rouge. In the last seven months, some 23,000 Cambodians have come to the courts to watch the trial, and the Documentation Center of Cambodia has discussed the trials with nearly 100,000 villagers throughout the country. The trial "is an education. It's equal to a professor of history," says Reach Sambath.

But with its millions of viewers in Cambodia, television has proven to be better positioned to bring the trial into people's homes. "You'll go out to the local little village in the middle of Kampong Speu [a province in Cambodia], and there will be almost nothing there," says Gregory Stanton, the president of the Washington-based NGO Genocide Watch. "Yet there will be a TV set hooked up to set of car batteries, and people watching."

Though the government has not publicly commented on the show, Robinson says he's heard that high-ranking government officials also watch it to keep tabs on the trial. The current government contains many former members of the Khmer Rouge, including Prime Minister Hun Sen, who was a low-level cadre and even lost his eye fighting for the

Khmer Rouge during the invasion of Phnom Penh. It was Hun Sen who initially asked the U.N. for help in establishing a tribunal in 1997, but he has since been accused by critics like Human Rights Watch for trying to limit the trial's scope in order to protect members of his own Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

But for Reach Sambath and many other Cambodians, this trial is not just about teaching the public or finding justice but about accelerating a long-overdue healing process. "The witnesses cry. The accused cries. The audience that comes to the court or watches on television cries," Reach Sambath says. "But they cry not to be more painful, but to release their pain that they have been holding for 30 years."

Duch is only the first Khmer Rouge member to sit behind the bulletproof glass at the ECCC. A joint trial of four other defendants will start within the next two years, and on Sept. 8 despite objections from Hun Sen, prosecutors submitted a list of five additional former high-ranking members of the Khmer Rouge who may one day end up at the tribunal. No matter how open Duch is about the horrific details of S-21, he cannot supply all the answers about the Khmer Rouge, as he played no policy role.

"The people we've interviewed say, 'We want to know why these educated people did this to our country?'" Robinson said. "And they won't really get this answer through the Duch trial."

The next hearings, however, expected begin in 2010, will include several people who did derive the Khmer Rouge philosophy, like Pol Pot's second-in-command Nuon Chea and the Khmer Rouge's former head of state Khieu Samphan. Robinson is hoping Khmer Mekong Films will be there too, helping give millions of Cambodians the answers they've been waiting three decades to hear.