

# Pacific Daily News

## **Cambodia must unlearn, relearn** **A. Gaffar Peang-Meth** **September 1, 2010**

Fourteen million Cambodians, many with vivid memories of Pol Pot's atrocities, continue to endure the degradations imposed by a dictatorship that is legitimized by the international community, even though the government's existence is, itself, a violation of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords that ended the Cambodian conflict.

It's encouraging that some scholars and writers have opened a dialogue with me on whether Cambodians can get out of their current plight, considered bleak and, at this time, unchangeable. The world community has shown no willingness to pressure the current dictatorship to change. We disagree on certain points, but in our interactions respect each other's views.

It is, however, discouraging that the widely held perception of Cambodian social culture is negative, and with some justification. A common view is that the society continues to be characterized by promiscuous, divisive gossip that divides and alienates by: entrenched "reproductive" thinking that is lacking in creativity, innovation and criticality; and a pervasive victim complex that encourages the assigning of blame rather than the acceptance of responsibility.

The familiar image is of trapped Cambodians, unwilling, unable and unprepared to learn, unlearn and relearn.

Quality thinking determines the quality of the future. Cambodians' general practice of blind obedience and unquestioned loyalty blocks the road forward. I debate public policies; inherent in quality thinking is assessing and evaluating. Gentlemen can disagree; some detractors are simply disagreeable and quarrelsome.

The French writer and humanist Andre Gide once said, "It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for something you are not."

I am unnerved when I am labeled by some as "anti-Sihanouk" or "anti-Khmer traditions." When I served under President Sihanouk, who led the fight against Vietnamese occupation troops, I

found him, and Princess Monique, his wife, charming, gracious and likable. Today, at age 66, I still bow as I walk in front of Khmer elders, I clasp my hands under my chin or on my forehead to express gratitude; and I kneel for a Buddhist monk's prayer and blessing, etc. How to be more respectful of traditions?

Those who know me know political flexibility and political expediency are not unknown to me. Many also know the intellectual in me never allowed me to practice blind obedience and unquestioned loyalty, a factor that landed me in political hot water quite a few times.

I fear an authoritarianism lurking in Cambodians' behavior and attitudes. Not long ago, Pol Pot's mistrust of intellectuals led his Khmer Rouge to kill everyone wearing glasses; Pol Pot's uncompromising "correct thinking" resulted in "tbaung chawb" (hoe blade) -- used by his Khmer Rouge to strike the necks of those with "incorrect" thinking. "No gain to keep; no loss to take out," they said.

Last April, a Khmer New Year's message that made the rounds in cyberspace, from a Khmer physician in Australia, Dr. Kang Kem, prayed the Tevodas to guide the Khmers to unite, love one another and let go of the disastrous and painful past that split Khmers into "generational enemies."

Why? Because while the dictatorial regime consolidates its power, its critics, the Cambodian democrats and rights activists, are in disarray -- divided, fractious, riddled with victim complex and pointing fingers at others.

Cambodians of my generation had learned since elementary school that "l'union fait la force," or unity is strength. Today, "l'union" is with "me" or "my party" who lead; "you" and "your party" follow.

Recall Benjamin Franklin's words, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately," as he appealed to American rebels either to band together or find themselves hung individually at the British gallows. The 13 American colonies banded together as the United States of America.

And recall Irish statesman Edmund Burke, who warned in 1770, "When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."

Lord Buddha teaches: "Everything changes, nothing remains without change."

Cambodians, in general, like other peoples across cultures and national boundaries, rally behind cliched slogans. They talk the talk, but many don't walk the talk. "Yes, we can!" they say. But as a Khmer saying goes, "trokieak slab s'doak" -- "the hip joint lies dead."

Change is an inevitability. But it may not be the change they wanted to see; it can be worse. Let me repeat another slogan: "We are the change we want to see."

It may not be unreasonable to see Cambodians' future as bleak. Their traditional blind obedience and unquestioned loyalty must be abandoned, and they must start learning and using quality thinking, with its creative and critical components, to imagine and innovate, and to question and evaluate. This is a road to survival.

A respected Khmer-American academic reminds me of Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov's dog experiment in classical conditioning, associative learning, as an example of conditioning reflexes.

But wait. If blind obedience and unquestioned loyalty are conditioned, they also can be unconditioned or reconditioned, a challenge for democrats and rights activists!

The Phnom Penh regime and its foreign backers cannot be blind to the small but growing numbers of unhappy Cambodians, even in the regime's military and bureaucracy as well as abroad, who are dissatisfied with the status quo.

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