A Master's Thesis:

**The Making of the Cambodian People's Party: Patronage, Power, and Politics after the Khmer Rouge**

by

Iurii Frolov

B.A., Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2021

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Pacific and Asian Studies Department



University of Victoria



We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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# Abstract

This thesis investigates the formation of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), tracing its transformation from a fragmented anti-Pol Pot resistance into Cambodia's dominant political force. It explores three critical dimensions of the CPP's creation: broader Cold War dynamics in Southeast Asia, shaped by the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance that set the stage for the establishment of the PRPK (predecessor to the CPP); the unification of diverse anti-Pol Pot Cambodian left-wing factions into a single party; and the party-building strategy between 1979 and 1981 that solidified the CPP's vanguard structure.

Drawing on memoirs, oral histories, and Soviet diplomatic reports, this research shifts the focus from individual political figures to the institutional history of the CPP, providing a new perspective on Cambodia's power dynamics. It challenges multiple existing narratives, arguing instead that the CPP emerged from Cambodia's grassroots anti-Pol Pot resistance before being institutionalized with the backing of Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The Party's key characteristics—its vanguard design, strong presence in key peripheries, and balanced distribution of authority within its ranks—laid the foundation for the Party's structure. These political trajectories, unfolding between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, collectively defined the process of the CPP's formation.

By offering a nuanced understanding of the CPP's origins, this thesis enriches the scholarship on Cambodia's political history and sheds light on the interplay between Cold War geopolitics and the local political conjuncture that resulted in the Party's formation.

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# Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Assistant Professor at the University of Victoria Thiti Jamkajornkeiat, for his guidance and support throughout the writing of this thesis. His insights have greatly enhanced the academic tone, structure, and argumentation of this scholarly work. I am also grateful to my committee member, Assistant Professor Tri Phuong, whose anthropology teachings have influenced how I approach my work. I want to thank Professor Richard Fox for sharing his expertise on broader Southeast Asian dynamics, which significantly contributed to my research.

Special thanks to Assistant Professor Alexey Kirichenko and Professor Nadezhda Bektimirova at Lomonosov Moscow State University for our enriching discussions on the Soviet Union's role in Southeast Asian geopolitics, as well as for their excellent recommendations and unique connections, which were essential in shaping this manuscript. I would also like to thank Irina Shmiliova, my language teacher, for helping me enhance my knowledge of Khmer.

Also, this research would not have been possible without the financial support from the University of Victoria and the Pacific and Asian Studies Department.

Finally, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Natalie Hutchinson for reviewing my scholarly work and ensuring it meets the academic standards of an English-speaking university.

# Introduction

Contemporary Cambodia is one of Asia's most enduring examples of authoritarian rule. Amid rapid economic growth and rising living standards, the ruling Hun Sen-Hun Manet duumvirate has transformed the country's political regime into a hereditary dictatorship through repression, corruption, and propaganda. Though relinquishing his position as Prime Minister in 2023, Hun Sen arguably remains the most powerful figure in the country as the President of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).[1] Constituting the core of Cambodia's political system, the CPP declares to have more than 7 million members in a country with a 17,5 million population, exceeding even the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)'s membership.[2] These numbers might be nominal or exaggerated, but the fact that the CPP is the party that dominates Cambodia's political landscape today is indisputable.

Hun Sen justifies his authoritarian rule by invoking the narrative of the Party's role in toppling the Khmer Rouge on January 7, 1979, and maintaining peace in the country.[3] Often portrayed as a personalist autocracy, Hun Sen's regime also relies on an extensive party apparatus that perpetrated the country at all levels. Now, to secure good career prospects within the state, one must join the CPP ranks, making party and state bureaucracies deeply interconnected. As the

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[1] Chetra, Rumduol. "*Samdech Houn Sen prakeas lea leng pi neayk rodth monrti chomnuos daoy lok Houn Meanet*" [Samdech Hun Sen announces his resignation as the PM, being replaced by Mr. Hun Manet]. *ThmeyThmey*, 26 Jul. 2023.

[2] "Cambodian PM elected as Ruling Party's Vice President." *Xinhua*, 10 Dec. 2023.

[3] "*Sontoroktha Samdech akkomhasena btei techo Houn Sen brathan krom uttam proeksaea phtal preahmhaksaatr nei preahreacheaneachakr Kampouchea ning chea prathan konapak prachachon Kampouchea knong pithi mittinh romleuk khuop leuk ti 45 nei tivea chyochomneah 7 mokrea*" [Speech by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the King of the Kingdom of Cambodia and President of the Cambodian People's Party at the Memorial Ceremony of the 45th Anniversary of January 7 Victory Day]. *CPP*. https://www.cpp.org.kh/details/364859. Accessed 19 Oct. 2024.

structure for exerting control over society, the CPP serves as a cornerstone of Hun Sen's dictatorship.

Acknowledging that the CPP is dominant in Cambodia's political landscape today, its political formation is debated in scholarship and society. The CPP, then known as the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK), was brought to power in Phnom Penh in 1979 by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) following the Vietnamese invasion. Given the significant role played by the foreign invading force in its ascent to authority, various narratives exist regarding its origins.

In official Cambodian discourse, the CPP is seen as a continuation of the original Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), founded in 1951, linking the Cambodian communists who had fought against French colonialism in the 1950s with the leadership that emerged after the Khmer Rouge era.[4] In contrast to the official discourse, an alternative nationalist narrative argues that the CPP was externally created by Vietnamese communists in 1979 as a tool to facilitate Cambodia's colonization and annexation, thereby challenging the legitimacy of the Party's origins.[5] Current mainstream scholarship, as represented in the works of historians Michael Vickery, Evan Gottesman, and Dmitry Mosyakov, also contends that the CPP was formed in Vietnam in the late 1970s as an eclectic alliance, bringing together scattered groups of pro-Vietnamese Cambodian communists. Furthermore, according to this perspective, the Party was brought to power by the Vietnamese Army and directed its rule from Phnom Penh over other Cambodia's territory.[6]

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[4] "*Pak prachachon kaet chenh pi na?*" [Where did the People's Party come from?]. *ThmeyThmey*, 28 Jun. 2021.

[5] "*Tossana "Tivea 7 Mokrea" samreap polorodtha Khmer*." [The vision of "January 7" for Cambodians]. *KhmerPost USA*, January 22, 2018. https://kh.khmerpostusa.com/detail/11083. Accessed 7 Mar. 2025.

[6] Vickery, Michael. *Cambodia: 1975–1982.* Hemel Hempstead: George Allen and Unwin, 1984; Gottesman, Evan. *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,

Navigating various narratives, my research question is framed around the origins of the CPP, specifically investigating the processes, time, and circumstances surrounding its creation. My thesis presents a new perspective on the CPP's institutional history, arguing that the Party's formation was a gradual process shaped by the interwind of Cold War geopolitics and local political conjuncture that took place from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. I contend that the PRPK originated from the grassroots Cambodian anti-Pol Pot resistance, and was later institutionalized into a single organization and brought to power with the support of Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The CPP's key characteristics—its vanguard party design, strong presence in some peripheries, and balanced distribution of authority within its upper echelons—laid the foundation for the Party's structure. All these political trajectories were set from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, challenging the existing narratives of its creation.

Given the debate in both scholarship and society, the study of the CPP's formation is crucial for understanding contemporary Cambodia's political regime. Shifting the focus of research from individual figures to the institutional history of the CPP provides a new angle on Cambodian history, as mainstream scholarship has traditionally emphasized key personalities while overlooking the role of institutions.

**Literature Review**

Little has been written about the history of the CPP as an institution. The scholarship on its development is explored across two primary dimensions: first, as a subsidiary topic within broader studies of Cambodian history, and second, within political scientific literature focusing on Hun Sen's authoritarian regime. Among recent studies on the CPP's prolonged rule, academic Sorpong Peou, in his article "Cambodia's Hegemonic-Party System: How and Why the CPP Became

2003; Mosyakov, Dmitry. "*Istoriya Kambodzhi. XX vek.*" [History of Cambodia. XX Century]. Moscow: Publishing House IO RAS, 2010.

Dominant," argues that the CPP's hegemony was constructed on three tactics: coercion, co-option, and control.[7] The article largely overlooks the origins of the CPP, examining its position within the competitive political landscape of the 1990s–2010s when its structure was already formed.

Similar to Peou's work, much of the political science literature on contemporary Cambodia tends to analyze the regime's resilience through the lens of Hun Sen's strongman rule, state propaganda and mythmaking, compromised electoral process, and patronage networks. In contrast, this study focuses on the CPP's institutional origins and structural features. My goal is to shift attention from individual figures to the long-term processes of state-building, party organization, and structural integration that shaped the CPP's evolution. Accordingly, I turned my attention to the Party's origins during its formative years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it was known as the PRPK within the newly established People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) following the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

The years of the PRK (1979–1989) have been a lacuna in Anglophone scholarship, overshadowed by the atrocities of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). As historian Sok Udom Deth puts it:

> A visit to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM) tells one how much has been written on Democratic Kampuchea. Currently, the Center continues to host researchers, Khmer Rouge Tribunal personnel, interns, and photographers from all over the world who are interested in Democratic Kampuchea… The period that followed, the People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989, however, has received less scholarly attention, despite the fact that it is more controversial.[8]

Studying the PRPK and the PRK is challenging. Unlike the Khmer Rouge era, there are hardly any documents collected for research in the DC-CAM. Without sufficient archival

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[7] Peou, Sorpong. "Cambodia's Hegemonic-Party System: How and Why the CPP Became Dominant." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 42–60.

[8] Deth, Sok Udom. *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: A Draconian Savior?* Master's thesis. Athens, OH: Ohio University, 2009, p. 17.

materials, the PRPK's formation is often portrayed through the official discourse or memoirs of its Secretary-General in 1979–1981, Pen Sovan. Lawyer and historian Evan Gottesman reconstructed one of the most detailed accounts of the early PRPK from Sovan's statements in *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, though acknowledging that some of them were difficult to confirm.[9] Serving as Secretary-General during the PRPK's formative years, Pen Sovan aimed to portray the creation of the Party as mostly his achievement, significantly exaggerating his own contributions while downplaying the roles of others. Despite never engaging in direct combat with the Khmer Rouge and remaining largely obscure within Cambodia due to his long-lasting exile in Hanoi, Pen Sovan endeavored to present himself as a key figure in the anti-Pol Pot resistance. In advocating for this position, he provided inconsistent interviews and authored memoirs that contradicted each other. To arbitrate Sovan's vision of the PRPK development, historian Dmitry Mosykov, in his *A History of Cambodia in the 20th Century,* consulted Soviet and Vietnamese sources along with Sovan's famously conflicting accounts. In an over 700-page book, an author provided a comprehensive analysis of Cambodian history, including the PRK years. During the 1980s, he conducted multiple assignments in the PRK, interviewing key PRPK figures, and later, in the 2000s, he did archival research in Russia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. However, his book does not primarily focus on the institutional history of the PRPK, instead concentrating on broader dynamics in Cambodian history.

My thesis also considers the works of prominent scholars in Southeast Asian Studies. For Chapter I, which examines the Soviet Union's involvement in Southeast Asian geopolitics amid the Cold War, the writings of Russian and Soviet scholars Nadezhda Bektimirova, Yuri Dementyev, and Evgeny Kobelev proved especially valuable in shedding light on the Soviet view of Vietnam-Cambodia dynamics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In Chapter II, which explores

[9] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 130–131.

Cambodian communist resistance against the Khmer Rouge, the scholarly works of Ben Kiernan,[10] Harish C. Mehta, and Julia Mehta[11] were instrumental in highlighting the agency of Cambodians in their struggle against Pol Pot's genocide. Particularly insightful was *The Rise of the Brao* by Ian Baird, the first study to examine the role of Cambodia's Indigenous communities in the northeast in resisting the Khmer Rouge, emphasizing the importance of the country's peripheries in shaping historical events.[12] For Chapter III, which focuses on party- and state-building in the PRK in 1979–1981, I drew upon the scholarship of David Chandler[13] and Penny Edwards,[14] as well as insights from Cambodian intellectuals such as Sun Suon, Serkan Bulut, Sok Udom Deth,[15] and Kosal Path.[16] Their works provided a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between Vietnam and Cambodia during the first years of the Vietnamese occupation.

By linking these works, this thesis will illuminate the creation of one of Cambodia's most powerful institutions, the CPP, and its role within both the Cambodian and Southeast Asian contexts.

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[10] Kiernan, Ben. *Cambodia: The Eastern Zone Massacres.* New York City, NY: Columbia University Center for the Study of Human Rights, 1986; Kiernan, Ben. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008; Kiernan, Ben. "Massacres in the Eastern Zone of Cambodia." *Media Entertainment, Inc*., USF Library Special & Digital Collections Exhibits, 1999; Kiernan, Ben. "The Demography of Genocide in Southeast Asia: The Death Tolls in Cambodia, 1975–79, and East Timor, 1975–80." *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2003, pp. 585–597.

[11] Mehta, Harish C., and Julie B. Mehta. *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen: From Pagoda Boy to Prime Minister of Cambodia*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2013.

[12] Baird, Ian. *Rise of the Brao: Ethnic Minorities in Northeastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation.* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

[13] Chandler, David. *A History of Cambodia*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008.

[14] Edwards, Penny. "Imaging the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse Before and During the UNTAC Period," in: Heder, Steven; Ledgerwood, Judy (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia. A Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-Keeping.* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 50–72.

[15] Deth, Sok Udom, Suon, Sun, Bulut, Serkan. Cambodia's foreign relations in regional and global contexts. Phnom Penh: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017.

[16] Path, Kosal. *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

**Sources**

Due to the mismanagement or loss of documents and the lack of written records for most events about the CPP's early party-building, the few remaining materials include the memoirs of the Party's officials and their oral history collections. Key PRPK leaders of the late 1970s—Pen Sovan, Hun Sen, Ros Samay, Tea Banh, and Heng Samrin—published their autobiographies and gave interviews, shedding light on their struggle against the Khmer Rouge and their efforts in building the PRK. Many of these sources are posted on the largest online archive of Khmer-language materials, eLibrary of Cambodia.[17] I employed a comparative method to validate this data by cross-referencing the same events across multiple memoir accounts, carefully purging inconsistent details. However, this approach has obvious limitations, as it is impossible to bracket out all biases. To address this, I incorporated reports from the Soviet Embassy in Phnom Penh that give a third-party perspective. Enjoying the privilege of being a native Russian speaker and a graduate of Lomonosov Moscow State University, I accessed these rare Soviet materials in the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation with the help of my colleagues in Russia. Additionally, interviews conducted by the US Department of Defense officials with Ros Samay and Pen Sovan regarding their experiences in North Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s offered valuable insights. These oral history collections are stored at the US Library of Congress and available online. These sources, along with many other accounts, collectively enabled me to reconstruct the institutional history of the CPP and provide a new perspective on its formation in the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

[17] "*Bannaly elechtraunich Khmer*" [Khmer Electronic Library]. www.elibraryofcambodia.org. Accessed 9 Oct. 2024.

**Structure**

I have divided the institutional history of the CPP's formation into three chapters, each addressing a key dimension of this process: the broader geopolitical context, the Party's origins, and party-building strategies. The rationale for such division is as follows. The analysis begins with the geopolitical context, as the Vietnam-USSR alliance laid the foundation for the Vietnamese invasion and created the conditions for the PRPK to gain power in Phnom Penh. Then, my thesis explores the origins of the PRPK, tracing how four distinct political forces were incorporated into the organization, influencing its evolution from a grassroots resistance movement into a centralized party. Finally, the analysis focuses on the early years of the PRPK in power, a critical period in which key political decisions were made that ultimately defined the structure and direction of the Party. Each section presents a distinct sub-argument, and together, they collectively address the research question of how the CPP was formed.

Chapter I examines the roots of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979 and the motivations behind multiple forces in the conflict. Challenging the Khmer nationalist narrative that presents the PRPK as a tool to facilitate the colonization of Cambodia, I argue that the decision to help Cambodian revolutionaries form the Party and bring them to power was a reactive measure in response to the prolonged provocations of the Khmer Rouge and the final step in Vietnam's broader strategy to secure its safety. Having no time to "groom" their own loyal subordinates, CPV strategists united multiple independent groups into the PRPK, helping to shape the Party not as a puppet but as a force with the potential to govern Cambodia independently someday in the future. To carry out this plan, Moscow sided with Hanoi, and its crucial backing facilitated the Vietnamese invasion that brought PRPK leaders to power. The Kremlin's decision to align with Vietnam was driven by a belief in a fraternal friendship with Hanoi, the USSR's only longstanding ally in Southeast Asia.

Chapter II analyzes the political conjuncture in Cambodia before and after the Vietnamese invasion, tracing the origins of the PRPK. While recognizing the crucial role of CPV advisors in

its formation, I argue that the Party was not merely a Vietnamese creation of the late 1970s. Instead, its origins can be traced back to the decentralized anti-Pol Pot resistance that emerged within the Cambodian communist movement as early as the mid-1970s, before Hanoi identified the Khmer Rouge as an adversary. This grassroots resistance employed multiple tactics in different regions of Cambodia, representing four distinct groups that became PRPK factions once the anti-Pol Pot movement was institutionalized into a single party. These factions were linked to various peripheries, ethnic groups, and centers of resistance, which influenced the PRPK's administrative positions, regional support bases, and future development.

Chapter III focuses on the PRPK party-building strategy in 1979–1981. Challenging the CPP's official narrative, which traces its origins to the founding of the KPRP in 1951, I argue that the PRPK was a new party rather than a continuation of its predecessor. It was re-established from scattered groups of anti-Pol Pot communists, with its core apparatus forming in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this time, PRPK leaders gained more autonomy in decision-making from Hanoi, strengthening their positions in Cambodia and challenging multiple Vietnamese initiatives. Some PRPK officials, first and foremost, former Eastern Zone cadres Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin, demonstrated a pragmatic approach to party-building, which laid the foundation for the CPP's structure as a vanguard party. They advocated for the establishment of key organizational principles, such as running a mass and public organization, adhering to Leninist discipline, and balancing authority within the upper ranks. The PRPK Secretary-General was the primary obstacle to this shift and was removed from power by other PRPK leaders who secured Vietnam's support. As a result, the decisions made in 1979–1981 largely shaped the CPP into the Party it is known today.

The conclusion bridges the thesis together, showing how the processes of the mid-1970s to early 1980s critically influenced the CPP's structure, constituting the Party's formation.

Now, let us trace the geopolitical situation in mainland Southeast Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

# Chapter I. Between Moscow and Hanoi

## The Soviet Union and Indochina

In February 1980, more than a year after the liberation of Phnom Penh, the official delegation of the PRK led by PRPK senior official Heng Samrin visited the USSR to sign treaties of friendship and cooperation and first met Soviet leaders. The meeting did not inspire the Soviet officials, as the delegates left an impression of being inexperienced and introverted.[18] Even a 1980 propagandist film, *USSR-Kampuchea*: *Visit of Friendship*, could not hide that Pen Sovan and other officials never spoke freely and always read off a piece of paper, even in a semi-official setting of a workers' meeting.[19] An especially contrasting example was the look of 28-year-old Hun Sen—then the PRK's Minister of Foreign Affairs—sitting in front of Andrei Gromyko, his famous colleague, known as "Mr. No" in the West. Such frustration made the Soviet officials doubt that PRPK cadres could govern the PRK independently any time soon. Moscow was once again persuaded that maintaining the stability of the new regime in Cambodia required Vietnam's political patronage of the PRPK leaders, who were political unknowns for the Kremlin.

"My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love," says famous graffiti on the Berlin wall that shows a socialist fraternal kiss between Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honneker and symbolizes people in East Germany being caught between two brutal regimes. Brezhnev's kisses with CPV leader Lê Duẩn have never attracted much attention but embodied even deeper meaning: the two powers aligned to determine the fate of the Cambodian people. In this context, Vietnam played a pivotal role in shaping the establishment and structure of the PRPK. Moscow endorsed this

[18] Bektimirova, Nadezhda. "History of the People's Republic of Kampuchea." Class lecture, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Apr. 20, 2021.

[19] Bobrov, Georgy. "*SSSR-Kampuchea: Visit Druzhby*." [USSR-Kampuchea: Visit of Friendship]. Moscow: Studio CSDF (RCSDF), 1980.

ambition, welcoming Hanoi's decision to take a leading role in managing the PRPK affairs during the first years of the decade-long Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

The Vietnamese occupation of the PRK strengthened a Khmer nationalist viewpoint that asserted Vietnam traditionally aimed to annex Cambodian land and undermine Khmer statehood. In this view, the PRPK appeared as a mere facade, a mechanism designed to facilitate the Vietnamese colonization of Cambodia. Contrary to this, I contend that bringing the PRPK to power in Phnom Penh was not solely an act of domination. Rather, it represented a crucial part of a broader strategy aimed at creating a stable, Vietnam-aligned government in Cambodia that would ultimately safeguard Hanoi's national security. The PAVN command only undertook this military operation after gaining diplomatic, military, and financial backing from the Soviet Union, which was Vietnam's sole strategic ally in the area. This chapter explores the geopolitical context of the early years of the PRPK, especially focusing on three-way dynamics among Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet split.

The role of the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia is a point of debate in scholarship. Paul Kelemen, Douglas Pike, Robert Ross, and many other historians of the Cold War era often portrayed the relations between the Soviet Union and Vietnam in the 1970s–1980s via superpower-proxy narrative.[20] According to this perspective, Vietnam was just a pawn in a game played by the USSR in its hegemonic ambitions in mainland Southeast Asia. Contrary to this perception of the Soviet Union being a dominant force in the region that exercised power via its proxy in Hanoi, academics of a new generation—Kosal Path, Tuong Vu, and Hoang Vu—showed Vietnam's agency in the regional geopolitics, encompassing its autonomy in making decisions that the USSR

[20] Kelemen, Paul. "Soviet Strategy in Southeast Asia: The Vietnam Factor." *Asian Survey*, 24 (3), 1984, pp. 335–348; Pike, Douglas. *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987; Ross, Robert S. *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979.* Studies of the East Asian Institute. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988; Haas, Michael. *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard.* New York, NY: Praeger, 1991.

could not control.[21] However, their convincing evidence did not overlap existing scholarship on early PRPK development. Scholars Michael Vickery, Ian Baird, Sak Udom Deth, and some others maintain that the USSR might have pursued its own strategic agenda during the early years of the PRK as a means of circumventing Hanoi's influence, for example, by establishing direct connections with PRPK leaders.[22]

However, today we know from Soviet sources that between 1979 and 1981, Hanoi and Moscow had no major disagreements regarding Vietnam's role as the dominant force in Cambodia. The Soviet Union's only concern was the risk of being drawn into a full-scale war with China, Pol Pot's primary ally, prompting the Kremlin to define the limits of acceptable escalation for Vietnam. In contrast to geopolitics, Vietnam's approach to building the PRPK bureaucracy was not a significant issue of Soviet foreign policy, and the Kremlin relied on its longstanding ally in Hanoi. This complex geopolitical landscape, influenced by the Sino-Soviet split and the Cold War, set the stage for the establishment of the PRPK. Meanwhile, Vietnam shaped the strategic agenda in the region while the Soviet Union supplied the essential diplomatic, military, and financial support.

The roots of aligning with Hanoi's vision of Indochina lay in the organic development of Soviet foreign policy and academia, in which Southeast Asia had never been a major priority. The region was too distant from the USSR, so the Kremlin did not put much effort into strengthening its presence there. In the Soviet Union, where the leader's visit had layers of ceremonial meanings, Nikita Khrushchev was the only one who had visited the region. In 1960, he traveled to

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[21] Vu, Tuong. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking;* Vu, Hoang Minh. "The Third Indochina War and the Making of Present-Day Southeast Asia, 1975–1995." PhD dissertation. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2020.

[22] Sok Udom Deth, Ian Biard, and Evan Gottesman cite Pen Sovan's interview, where he claimed that his direct contacts with the USSR were among the reasons for his arrest. See "Interview with Pen Sovann (Part 85)," *Radio Free Asia*, 10 Jan. 2009. Michael Vickery also highlighted possible direct PRK-USSR contacts that might have angered the Vietnamese. See Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982*, pp. 243–244.

Burma and Indonesia in an effort to expand Soviet influence in the Global South, promising humanitarian aid and other forms of support.[23] Strengthening cooperation between the region and the Soviet Union was particularly difficult, as the Kremlin prioritized alliances with communist or left-leaning governments. However, many Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, aligned with the United States. The same occurred in Indonesia, which severed ties with the USSR following Suharto's 1965 coup, shattering Moscow's hopes of establishing a foothold in the country. As a result, the Soviet Union concentrated its attention on former French Indochina.

From the mid-1940s to the late 1980s, Moscow had only one continuous ally in Southeast Asia: North and then reunified Vietnam. The relationship between the two was not ideal, as the Kremlin considered Communist Vietnam too assertive and not seeking compromise with South Vietnam and the United States. For example, the bilateral ties between the USSR and North Vietnam cooled in 1960–1964, when Hanoi leaders decided to escalate and start armed conflict against Saigon. This decision contradicted Khrushchev's vision of peaceful coexistence between socialist and capitalist states, as well as his preference for non-violent resistance over military actions, a stance he had articulated during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956.[24] Although the relationship improved during Brezhnev's tenure in the USSR (1964–1982), Hanoi still demonstrated its independence by not adhering to the Kremlin's directives.

The Soviet and North Vietnamese perspectives on the ongoing war in Indochina were particularly contrasting. In rhetoric, both sides united in their goal to defeat the "American imperialists and their South Vietnamese puppets," but in reality, a significant debate was taking

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[23] Semenova, Marianna. "*N. Khruschev v Birme*." [N. Khruschev in Burma]. Moscow: CSDF (RCSDF), 1960.

[24] Kobelev, Evgeny. "*SSSR/Rossiya-Vietnam: fragmenty istorii.*" [USSR/Russia - Vietnam: fragments of history]. Yugo-Vostochnaya Aziya: aktual'nyye problemy razvitiya, no. 2, 2014, pp. 45–54.

place.[25] In Moscow, the conflict was considered an obstacle to *Détente*—the process of easing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. As a result, the Kremlin opted to prioritize negotiations over confrontation, pressuring Hanoi to sign a peace treaty with Saigon and then try to unite the country in a non-violent way instead of pursuing a complete military victory. The call was reasonably disputed in North Vietnam, which considered unifying the country under Communist rule by any means necessary its main objective.[26]

Contrasting with global developments, such as the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese perspective on local affairs, particularly in former French Indochina, was highly regarded in Moscow, as the Kremlin lacked knowledge about the region as well as other close allies to rely on. That being said, the Soviet-North Vietnamese alliance, though not always perfect, fostered a demand for specialists on Vietnam—scholars of its history, language, and politics—within the Soviet Union to maintain this close cooperation, which the Soviet state apparatus strategists referred to as the unique phenomenon of fraternal friendship. Academic training played a crucial role in shaping Soviet foreign policy, as Area Studies in the USSR was not a neutral field of regional research but a strategic tool designed to advance state interests.

Since Hanoi was the Soviets' only longstanding ally in the region, a tiny field of Southeast Asian Studies in the USSR since the mid-1960s was dominated by scholars with a focus on Vietnam. As a chain reaction, this imbalance in academic training led to the fact that the intelligence services, the CPSU Central Committee apparatus, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs predominantly hired people who had studied Vietnam and, to a large extent, relied on the

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[25] Anosova, Lyudmila, et al. "*Polnaya Academicheskaya Istoriya Vietnama. Tom IV: noveyshaya istoriya. Chast' 1 (1897-1975).*" [A Complete Academic History of Vietnam. Volume IV: Modern History. Part 1 (1897–1975)]. Moscow: Author's Book Publishing House, RAS, 2014, pp. 213–214.

[26] Kobelev, *SSSR-Rossiya*, p. 47.

Vietnamese perspective on the developments in Cambodia, including the approach to building the PRPK.

Apart from this Viet-centrism, these people, whom one might call apparatchiks, articulated an official discourse through which they understood Southeast Asian geopolitics. Words and phrases like "clique," "petty bourgeois tendencies," "American imperialism," "fraternal friendship between Soviet and Vietnamese peoples," and so forth were an integral part of their expert language. One can find them not only on the pages of the propagandist *Pravda* newspaper but also in academic books and internal document circulation. Most Soviet foreign policy analysts, educated and immersed in such a setting, could not comprehend and explain the reality without these signifiers.

Contrary to a common perception of this discourse as being rigidly indoctrinated, it was not tied to Marxism-Leninism but rather co-existed with it. Thus, this language was so powerful that it outlived the USSR and its ideological bankruptcy, and its vocabulary is still relevant for some Russian officials and scholars of the older generation. For example, Dmitry Mosyakov, Head of the Center for Southeast Asia, Australia, and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in his recent article "Russia and Vietnam Before and After Sanctions," suggested that Vietnam now behaves as if it has forgotten the fraternal bond between the two nations, implying that the USSR-Vietnam relationship was driven not by mutual pragmatic interests but by genuine friendship.[27] This sincere but misguided belief clouded the judgment of many Soviet ideologists, making their understanding of Cambodia heavily reliant on their fraternal ally, Hanoi. It was not until the mid-1980s, when foreign policy came under the influence of pragmatic figures like Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze (1985–1990), that a serious crisis began to emerge in Soviet-Vietnamese relations over Cambodia, with the Soviet side

[27] Mosyakov, Dmitry. "*Rossiya i Vietnam do i posle sanctsii*." [Russia and Vietnam Before and After Sanctions]. Yugo-Vostochnaya Aziya: aktual'nyye problemy razvitiya, vol. 4, № 4 (57). pp. 117–125.

demanding gradual withdrawal to end the occupation. However, when the PAVN command launched its invasion in 1978, Moscow backed Hanoi, viewing it as a necessary step for Vietnam's national security that aligned with the Soviet strategic outlook.

To justify Vietnam's actions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, senior Soviet foreign policy analysts developed conceptual frameworks to interpret geopolitics in mainland Southeast Asia based on Hanoi's vision of the region, where it de facto controlled both Cambodia and Laos. These frameworks relied on a specific vocabulary and were enforced through a top-down hierarchy that directed official discourse. The Soviet leadership placed particular importance on the concept of Indochinese solidarity among Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam under Hanoi's patronage. The invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia were framed as acts of friendship between the Cambodian and Vietnamese peoples in their struggle against the Khmer Rouge and its allies, China and the United States. This idea of a special bond between Cambodian and Vietnamese revolutionaries, rooted in the shared history of resistance against French colonialism, was first introduced by Vietnamese ideologists and quickly picked up by CPSU theoreticians.

Relying on this notion, the Soviets underestimated the level of anti-Vietnamese sentiment among Cambodians, who had a long legacy of a troubled relationship with their eastern neighbor. The conflict between Cambodians and Vietnamese traces its origins to the 17th century when Vietnamese settlers began establishing communities along the Mekong Delta, gradually expanding their control over the region in the following centuries.[28] After years of forced Vietnamese assimilation and occupation in 1834–1841, fears became more concrete, fostering deep mistrust toward Vietnam in Khmer nationalist discourse. While this conflict had an ethnic nature, Soviet analysts interpreted it through the lens of class struggle, emphasizing economic factors. From their perspective, historically, both Vietnamese and Cambodians were oppressed—first by the feudal

[28] For the roots of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Khmer nationalist discourse see Luong, Ngoc Tram. "The Optics of Hatred: Visualizing the Vietnamese Other in Cambodia." PhD Dissertation. New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2022.

ruling class and later by French colonialism—making both of them victims.[29] Consequently, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao patriots united under the umbrella of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and were fighting together against colonialism and feudalism. There was a clear distinction between the Vietnamese feudal lords who forced assimilation and the Vietnamese communists who fought for the common good of all Indochina. For CPSU ideologists, this interpretation fit their anti-imperialist agenda and Marxist-Leninist interpretation of world history. Given that Soviet leaders failed to recognize the growing nationalisms within the Soviet republics—one of the key factors in the USSR's collapse in 1991—there is no surprise they struggled to fully grasp the extent of nationalism in Cambodia, a distant and largely alien country to them.

Another reason for the weak understanding of Cambodian specifics within the Soviet administrative apparatus and academia was the challenges in the formation and development of Khmer Studies in the Soviet Union. Until the mid-1980s, the USSR had no senior specialists dedicated to Cambodia and lacked established expertise on the country. The structured training of Khmer language graduates—including a formal five-year interdisciplinary education, lessons with native speakers, and connections with hiring state organizations—only emerged in the 1970s, nearly two decades after the first Vietnam-focused specialists had landed their jobs. In the Soviet system, recent Area Studies graduates usually began their careers as interpreters, journalists, or junior analysts, with no real involvement in decision-making and a strict obligation to follow their superiors' orders. As a result, analysts specializing in Cambodia remained overshadowed by their more senior counterparts focused on Vietnam.

This delay in training analysts on Cambodia can be attributed to several factors. First and foremost, before the establishment of the PRK in 1979, Cambodia had never been a close ally of

[29] Bektimirova, Dementyev, Kobelev, *Noveishaya istoriya Kampuchii*, pp. 6–36.

the USSR, creating almost no demand for Khmer Studies specialists within the Soviet apparatus. Moreover, the Soviet foreign policy towards the country up to the late 1970s lacked continuity and focus on one political force. Unlike Soviet-Vietnamese relations, where the USSR persistently supported the communist side, in Cambodia, it initially endeavored to cooperate with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, recognized Lon Nol's government as legitimate once he carried out a coup in 1970, and then tried to establish ties with the Khmer Rouge after it became clear that sooner or later Pol Pot would take over Phnom Penh.[30] All three regimes exhibited hostility toward the Soviet Union at various points—Norodom Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge aligned with China during the Sino-Soviet split, while Lon Nol was a right-wing politician who relied on the United States in the Cold War. In Soviet academia, where Moscow's relationships with other countries dictated the need for specialists, this complex geopolitical situation was an obstacle to building expertise that required both resources and connections.

In line with the Soviet tradition of Area Studies, linguistic training was supposed to be established first. However, because Cambodia was drawn into the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, only a few Soviet linguists managed to travel to the country and get experience before the armed conflict started, and it became unsafe to work there. In the 1960s, scholars Dmitry Elovkov and Yuri Gorgoniev were assigned to Cambodia and spent a couple of years learning Khmer. After they came back to the Soviet Union, Dmitry Elovkov started to teach at Zhdanov Leningrad State University and Yuri Gorgoniev at Lomonosov Moscow State University. The first college was recognized for producing academics, while the second focused on training cadres for the state apparatus.[31] Unexpected troubles continued to beset Soviet Khmer Studies. Yuri Gorgoniev, a

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[30] Mosyakov, Dmitry. "*Neprostaya istoriya Rossiisko-Kambodzhiyskikh otnoshenii*" ["The Complicated History of Russia-Cambodia Relations"]. *ASEAN Center at MGIMO University*, 4 June 2021, asean.mgimo.ru/opinions/russia-cambodian-complicated-history. Accessed 5 Mar. 2025.

[31] Kurbatova, Zinaida. "*Luchshie iz luchshih: Institut Stran Azii I Afriki sobral imenityh vypusknikov."* [The best of the best: The Institute of Asian and African Studies brought together its distinguished alumni]. *Rossiya 24*. May 16, 2016.

Khmer language instructor and the author of the inaugural Khmer-Russian dictionary, died in a car accident in 1972, thereby abruptly terminating the tradition for a few years until it was restored in the late 1970s.[32]

However, this first generation of historians trained as specialists on Cambodia lacked the experience required for senior positions. As a result, during the PRPK's formative years, they typically worked as Khmer-Russian interpreters who were unable to influence the decision-making process that relied on a Vietnamese perspective.

One of the bodies influenced by Hanoi's vision of Indochina was the Southeast Asian section of the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU, a leading Soviet think tank and policymaker that developed strategies toward socialist states and communist organizations after the Comintern was dissolved in 1943.[33] In this unit, there were separate divisions to cover all the countries in the region except for three. Since the Soviet apparatus officials considered Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to be bonded together rather than three separate entities, the three nations were united under the umbrella of the Indochina division. This effort to establish a unified policy for all three countries began during the Comintern era in the 1920s and persisted even after the Indochinese communist network was split into three parties in the 1950s and continued beyond the Geneva Accords, which in 1954 formalized the independence of four nations in Indochina: Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam.

From 1968 to 1991, Evgeny Kobelev worked in the Indochina division, rising to its lead in the late 1970s. In this role, he oversaw Cambodia-Vietnam relations during the PRPK formation. Trained as a scholar of Vietnam, he worked as a TASS correspondent in Hanoi in the 1960s, where

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[32] In the mid-1970s, linguist Irina Shmeliova introduced Khmer language instruction at Lomonosov Moscow State University and guided the first group of students to graduation.

[33] Schapiro, Leonard. "The International Department of the CPSU: Key to Soviet Policy." *International Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1976, pp. 41–55.

he met Hồ Chí Minh, wrote his panegyric-style biography, and eventually became one of the most important figures who advocated for strengthening ties with Vietnam in the USSR.[34] Believing in close solidarity between Cambodia and Vietnam and driven by his close ties with Vietnamese officials, Evgeny Kobelev viewed anti-Vietnamese sentiment among Cambodians as a marginal issue, attributing its rise during the PRK era to the manipulations of the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique," US imperialism, and Maoist expansionism.[35]

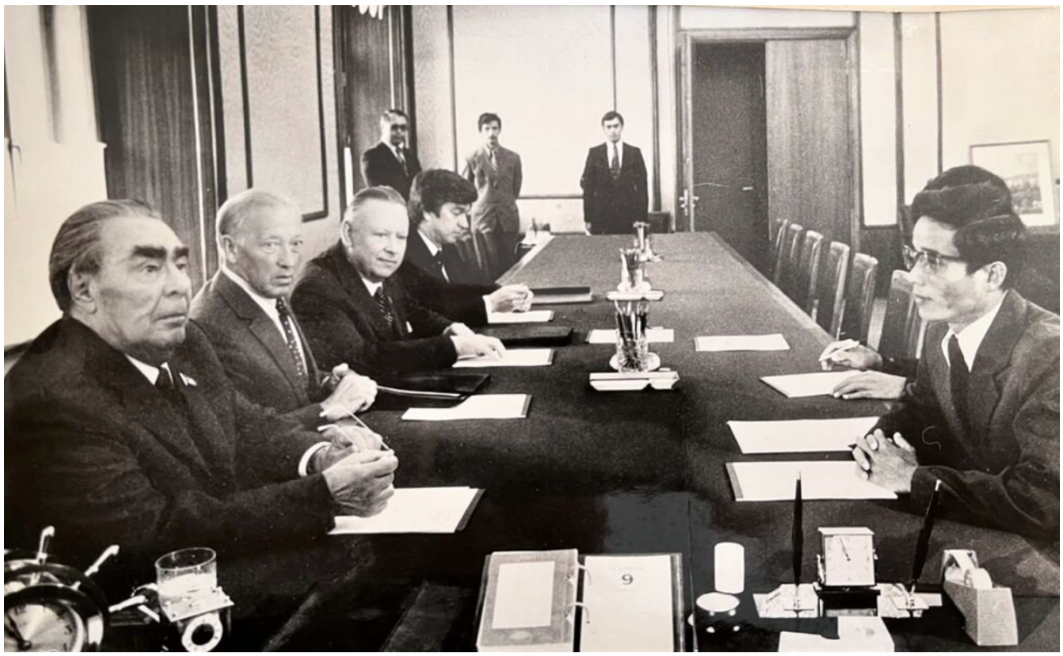

*Figure 1*. Leonid Brezhnev (first on the left) and Evgeny Kobelev (fourth on the left) with Pen Sovan (on the right) in Moscow.
*Source*: Vladimir Musaelyan's archive.

One might well say that he adhered to the Soviet narrative and disseminated official propaganda, while in reality, he was likely aware of the complexities and variations in local conditions. However, a comparison of his works from the 1980s with his more recent articles reveals little change in his perspective. Even in 2024, decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the profound transformation of all three Indochinese nations, he still envisions their

[34] Editorial Board. "Yubiley Evgeniya Vasil'evicha Kobeleva." [Anniversary of Evgeny Vasilievich Kobelev]. *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. Vol. 7, no. 3, 2023, pp. 109–111.

[35] Kobelev, Evgeny. "*Kampuchea: Ot Tragedii k Vozrozhdeniyu*." [Kampuchea: From Tragedy to Rebirth]. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979.

future within a voluntary association, with Vietnam taking the lead, echoing the spirit of the revolutionary struggle led by the ICP in the 1930s and 1940s.[36]

In the late 1970s to early 1980s, Evgeny Kobelev, convinced that Vietnam's leadership in the region served the collective interests of both the USSR and the peoples of Indochina, actively promoted this agenda within the upper echelons of the Soviet apparatus. The geopolitical context of the time, marked by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which led to a new escalation in the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet split, created a favorable environment for Kobelev to emphasize the importance of a hardline approach in Indochina and strengthen support for Vietnam, which was resisting both the Khmer Rouge and China.

From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, the Soviets viewed China as an unpredictable adversary, often perceiving it as a greater threat than the United States, whose leadership was seen as more pragmatic. Unlike US Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter, who were ready for mutual compromise during *Détente*, Beijing intensified border conflicts and employed highly provocative rhetoric against the Soviet Union in the 1960s.[37] These tensions escalated in 1969 with the Damansky Island incident, a violent clash between Soviet and Chinese forces over a disputed area on the Ussuri River. This confrontation resulted in hundreds of casualties and brought the world's two largest socialist states close to direct war. Once the situation calmed down, the Soviet leadership became convinced that in order to avoid such provocations in the future, it needed to strengthen its alliances in the Far East to counter Chinese influence and deter potential aggression from Beijing.

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[36] Kobelev, Evgeny. "*Osobennosti V'yetnamo-Kambodzhiyskikh otnosheniy v istoricheskoy retrospective.*" [The features of the Vietnam-Cambodia relations in the historical retrospective]. *Vostochnaya Aziya: fakty i analitika*, no. 2, 2024, pp. 94–103.

[37] Institut mirovoy ekonomiki i mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii AN SSSR. "*Mezhdunarodniy ezhegodnik: politika I ekonomika.*" [International Yearbook: Politics and Economics]. Moscow: Publishing House Politizdat, 1967, p. 15.

With a border exceeding 5,000 kilometers between China and the USSR, the Kremlin believed that if flanked to the north by the Soviet Union and Mongolia, and to the south by Vietnam and its satellites Cambodia and Laos, Beijing would not risk initiating any new border skirmishes against the USSR. There was a connection between Soviet and Vietnamese strategic national interests, with both powers imagining China as a threat, thus making the two willing to cooperate. For Moscow, Hanoi was a blessing in this geopolitical context: with its complex and longstanding history of troubled relations with China, it was viewed as a natural ally, prompting the Kremlin to commit billions in support of its military and economy, untying Vietnam's hands in Indochina. As the region remained a low priority for top Soviet policymakers until the mid-1980s, when foreign policy shifted toward normalization with China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the United States, senior CPSU officials did not see any importance in seeking an alternative to their reliance on Vietnam.

Lack of priority towards Southeast Asia in policy-making on the top level, combined with Viet-centrism within the Soviet foreign policy apparatus, constrained the USSR's ability to grasp Cambodia's unique dynamics, ultimately reinforcing Hanoi's vision of regional geopolitics. Academia played a central role in this process, as it operated more as a strategic think tank than a neutral field of regional expertise. By serving state interests, it became instrumental in promoting the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. Most Soviet specialists on Indochina were trained in a pro-Vietnamese environment, which led them to advocate for Vietnam's leading role in the region once they entered the Soviet foreign policy apparatus. Believing in the fraternal friendship between Moscow and Hanoi, Soviet ideologists and analysts, such as Evgeny Kobelev, were persuaded that the Vietnamese hardline approach against the Khmer Rouge aligned with both the Soviet outlook and the common good for Cambodia and Vietnam. The escalating tensions with China and the United States on the global stage in the late 1970s fostered a closer Soviet-Vietnamese alliance that set the stage for the Vietnamese occupation and subsequent development of the PRPK.

**The Pretext for Vietnamese Occupation**

Unlike Soviet leaders, who saw Southeast Asia as a peripheral concern, CPV officials prioritized building strong ties with their neighbors, recognizing Vietnam's strategic position in the region. After the Vietnam War, Hanoi sought normalization with its previous enemies, including ASEAN countries. However, this trajectory to diversify its foreign policy collapsed once Vietnam was drawn into a war against the Khmer Rouge and China (1978–1991), defending its northern border and occupying Cambodia.

Contrary to many claims that Hanoi sought to annex Cambodia, I argue that the whole military operation against Pol Pot was rather a reactive measure to protect Vietnam's own safety. In line with this strategy, Vietnam supported various anti-Pol Pot Cambodian communist groups in forming a party to govern Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge. Rather than colonizing the country, Hanoi aimed to establish a cooperative government, support its hold on power, and prepare it for eventual independent rule. This approach aimed to prevent the resurgence of the nationalist Khmer Rouge or any other anti-Vietnamese force in Phnom Penh.

In 1975, once Saigon fell into communist arms, there was no sign of an upcoming conflict with the Khmer Rouge, which had been Hanoi's closest ally during the conflict. Moreover, unified Vietnam was optimistic about normalizing relations with ASEAN, emphasizing the importance of trade and investments to restore the nation after a long war with the United States.[38] The hope for peace after decades of struggle against French colonialism and US interventionism quickly faded as relations between Vietnam and DK deteriorated in 1977, sparking a border conflict known as the Third Indochina War. This conflict not only influenced Benedict Anderson's writing of *Imagined Communities* but also emerged as a significant regional and global security issue.[39]

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[38] Vu, *The Third Indochina War*, p. 10.

[39] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* New York, NY: Verso, 1983.

Facing serious economic problems and experiencing an internal political crisis after the Cambodian Great Leap Forward resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe, the Khmer Rouge leadership decided to weaponize anti-Vietnamese sentiment—the feeling that so many Cambodians had historically shared.[40] Driven by this radical agenda, Pol Pot promised to fulfill an illusory dream to return ancient Khmer lands in the Mekong Delta. To achieve this, the Khmer Rouge battalions attacked Vietnamese settlements along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. Military provocations met fierce resistance from the Vietnamese army, which, in response, launched a major offensive in late 1977, advancing up to 30 kilometers into Cambodian territory but then withdrawing. This response was supposed to demonstrate Vietnam's power and ability to defend itself as well as willingness to negotiate with DK authorities. This call was ignored in Phnom Penh.

Realizing that Pol Pot was not inclined towards a diplomatic solution, in the spring of 1978, the PAVN command started to develop a military operation to oust the Khmer Rouge. However, Hanoi was not yet prepared to fully eliminate the Khmer Rouge forces, as it had not established strong ties with the local anti-Pol Pot resistance, whose cadres were needed to govern liberated Cambodia. Additionally, Vietnam lacked international support and faced not only DK but also China, Pol Pot's strongest ally, which complicated efforts to carry out a smooth military operation against the regime in Phnom Penh.

Navigating complex geopolitics, Hanoi's leadership firmly believed that the Khmer Rouge was not acting independently but rather serving as Beijing's proxy, which distorted its perception of the situation on the ground.[41] Today, we have convincing evidence that in this conflict, China was rather a dove than a hawk: political scientist Andrew Mertha conducted many interviews and

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[40] Galway, Matthew. *The Emergence of Global Maoism: China's Red Evangelism and the Cambodian Communist Movement, 1949–1979*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. pp. 184–185.

[41] Vu, *The Third Indochina War*, p. 215.

did archival research in China and Cambodia, demonstrating that Beijing tried to deescalate tensions between Phnom Penh and Hanoi in the late 1970s rather than favored aggression.[42] However, at that time, CPV leaders not only misjudged China's intentions but also assumed that the United States was supporting China and the Khmer Rouge in their efforts to undermine Vietnam.[43] Feeling encircled and isolated, Hanoi was forced to rely on its only ally, the Soviet Union, to push forward the military operation to remove Pol Pot from power and end ongoing border provocations.

Two months before the Vietnamese invasion started, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and the SRV was signed in Moscow. According to its Article 5,

> The parties will make every effort to protect international peace and the security of peoples … [USSR and Vietnam] will support the aspirations of the peoples of Southeast Asia for peace, independence, and cooperation.[44]

The last passage revealed that Vietnamese and Soviet interests went beyond two socialist states. While not explicitly mentioned, it was clear that the Khmer Rouge was the force disturbing peace by attacking Vietnam's borders, thereby undermining the purported "aspirations of the peoples of Southeast Asia." Quite possibly, the USSR leadership was also convinced that the Khmer Rouge was a pawn in a game played by China and the United States in the region, which fit the CPSU ideologists' perception of local anti-Soviet powers lacking agency in global Cold War dynamics. By supporting the Vietnamese military operation to remove Pol Pot, the Kremlin aimed to ensure Vietnam's security and protect it from larger escalations. Moscow was prepared

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[42] Mertha, Andrew. *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.

[43] Vu, *The Third Indochina War*, p. 21.

[44] "*Dogovor o druzhbe i sotrudnichestve mezhdu Soyuzom Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik i Socialisticheskoy Respublikoy Vietnam*." [Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam]. Moscow, 3 Nov. 1978.

to provide military aid and diplomatic shield, playing a key role in hastening the execution of the PAVN military campaign against DK.

Securing Soviet support and having accumulated troops and resources, Vietnam initiated a major military operation against the Khmer Rouge. Within two weeks, Pol Pot was ousted from power in Phnom Penh, and the pro-Vietnamese PRK was established. As historian David Chandler observes,

> On Christmas Day 1978, Vietnamese forces numbering over one hundred thousand attacked DK on several fronts. Because DK forces were crowded into the eastern and southwestern zones, Vietnamese attacks in the northeast encountered little resistance, and by the end of the year, several major roads to Phnom Penh were in Vietnamese hands … The city, by then containing perhaps fifty thousand bureaucrats, soldiers, and factory workers, was abandoned on January 7, 1979. Up to the last, DK officials had confidently claimed victory. Pol Pot, like the U.S. ambassador in 1975, escaped at the last moment in a jeep; other high officials and foreign diplomats left by train. They were followed later, on foot, by the half-starved, poorly equipped remnants of their armed forces.[45]

The PAVN operation was a military success, giving Vietnam control over almost all of Cambodia in a couple of weeks. However, Hanoi did not plan to erase Cambodian statehood and annex its territories, as Khmer nationalist discourse usually imagines. Instead, its primary goal was to establish a pro-Vietnamese government, ensuring the safety of its borders. To accomplish this, CPV strategists sought to emphasize the legitimacy of the new Cambodian authorities and frame the invasion as an internal conflict.

In line with this strategy, the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS) was established in the days leading up to the invasion. Officially proclaimed on Cambodian soil and comprised largely of PRPK officials, the KUFNS was presented to the public as a big-tent left-wing coalition committed to overthrowing the Khmer Rouge and saving Cambodia from genocide. According to Hanoi's narrative, this organization started a revolution against Pol Pot,

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[45] Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, p. 274.

liberated the country, and established the PRK. Vietnamese officials first denied their involvement: Vietnam's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Hà Văn Lâu, claimed the fighting in Cambodia was done by rebel forces.[46] This step was part of Vietnam's broader strategy to present the intervention as a liberation effort led by Cambodians rather than a foreign-imposed regime change.

Nonetheless, for many others, the KUFNS's public image as an independent body was not convincing. Once the invasion happened, both the United States and China accused Vietnam of violating international law and DK's sovereignty.[47] To back the Khmer Rouge, China launched an attack on Vietnam, sparking an intense, almost month-long conflict that left tens of thousands dead. Moreover, this forced Hanoi to fight on two fronts, defending its northern border while also battling Pol Pot's troops along the Thai-Cambodian border, where he was accumulating resources for guerrilla warfare.

Although Pol Pot was ousted from Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge did not surrender. Its troops regrouped in Thailand and aligned with Prince Norodom Sihanouk and the anti-communist and right-wing Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), thus establishing an eclectic alliance known as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).[48] This group secured support from the United States, China, ASEAN, and held Cambodia's seat in the United Nations (UN). This force could have easily wiped out the fragile PRK power structures without the Vietnamese support. Understanding this, Hanoi could not withdraw its troops, as doing so

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[46] Nguyen-Vo, Thu-Huong. *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1992, p. 126.

[47] Kamm, Henry. "Cambodia Says It Repels Attack; Takeo, on Road to Phnom Penh, Reported Taken." *The New York Times*, 4 Jan. 1979.

[48] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 139.

would jeopardize its national security by leaving the newly established PRK vulnerable to this anti-Vietnamese alliance and result in new attacks on the SRV territory.

In this tough geopolitical context, CPV leadership decided to deploy over 150,000 troops in the country to keep the PRK government afloat, starting what became known as the Vietnamese occupation (1979–1989). This was not the first instance of Vietnamese rule over Cambodia: from 1834 to 1841, the country was incorporated into Tây Thành province under Emperor Minh Mạng. Stories of forced assimilation and oppression from that period became embedded in Cambodian folklore and collective memory, fueling skepticism toward the Vietnamese, even as they had, at that moment, de facto saved Cambodians from famine, forced labor, and genocide.

The mistrust ran deep on both sides. As represented in Vietnamese literature of the 1980s, PAVN soldiers saw their campaign in Cambodia through two intertwined perspectives: as a humanitarian mission to aid a fraternal nation and as a civilizing effort in an exotic, mysterious, and deadly land—referred to as "Cao Miên," an Orientalist term for Cambodia in Vietnamese nationalist discourse.[49] In the PRK era, skepticism towards each other beset both Vietnamese and Cambodians, manifesting from everyday encounters between peasants and soldiers in villages throughout the country to negotiations between PRPK leaders and high-ranking CPV officials in Phnom Penh and Hanoi. Despite the challenges, they were trying to overcome cultural differences and troubled history, remaining united in their opposition to the Khmer Rouge.

Rather than pursuing colonization, Vietnam chose to support local anti-Pol Pot groups, helping to establish the PRPK as the foundation of the new regime in Phnom Penh while providing military aid and political patronage. Although Vietnam played a significant role in shaping the PRPK's structure, its objective was not to establish a tool to annex Cambodia but to support the

[49] Vu, Hoang Minh. "Between Propaganda and Cao-Mienism: The Cambodian Decade in Vietnamese Literature." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2020, pp. 49–76.

aligned force that could eventually govern Cambodia independently. However, in 1979, both the Vietnamese army and CPV advisors remained deeply involved in PRK affairs, unable to abandon the PRPK leadership, which faced ongoing threats from the Khmer Rouge and required substantial support in rebuilding the country after the genocide.

**One Day, Two Narratives**

This fusion of salvation and occupation arguably makes January 7, 1979, the most contradictory day in modern Cambodian history. On one hand, Phnom Penh was liberated, and the country was freed from the genocidal Khmer Rouge. On the other, it fell under the control of a force historically portrayed as an enemy for many Cambodians. For current CPP leaders, January 7 has become a central myth in their official discourse, nationwide celebrated as Victory over the Genocide Day every year. Hun Sen and others strive to position it as one of the most significant holidays in contemporary Cambodia. Erasing PAVN's key role in the military operation, CPP leaders claim to be in the vanguard of the Cambodian people who overthrew Pol Pot and saved the country from genocide, mirroring the stance articulated by the KUFNS and Vietnamese officials back in 1978. In his speech addressing the masses on January 7, 2024, Hun Sen again labeled this day the "Cambodian people's second birthday."[50] For CPP senior officials, many of whom came to power in 1979 and whose careers have spanned over four decades since then, this day represents the moment they assert their legitimacy as defenders against the Khmer Rouge.

On the other side of the Pacific, in the United States, where the largest Cambodian diaspora resides, another perspective dominates the public discourse that is free from contemporary Cambodia's authoritarian setting. For many overseas Cambodians, January 7 is strongly associated

[50] Hun Sen, *Sontoroktha Samdech akkomhasena,* p. 3.

with the current government, its corruption, crackdown on freedom, and rather divides people than unites. As Sam Rainsy, Cambodia's most prominent opposition figure now living in exile, writes:

> CPP leaders are not heroes as they pretend to be. They were installed in power by a foreign invading army.[51]

A more in-depth analysis of that nationalist narrative indicates that CPP leaders are viewed as mere puppets of Hanoi and traitors who acted to facilitate the Vietnamese occupation. Furthermore, some scholars and activists even argue that the "liberation" was no more favorable than the Khmer Rouge's takeover of Phnom Penh in 1975.[52] What is important is that this narrative first emerged among overseas communities, particularly those who had fled the country before the Vietnamese army ousted Pol Pot and, as a result, did not experience the regime's downfall and their own salvation. Those who stayed in Cambodia welcomed the PAVN troops, though realizing it was an occupation.[53] Nadezhda Bektimirova, one of the Soviet specialists who traveled to the PRK in the late 1970s and among the first to study the catastrophic impact of the Khmer Rouge era, recounted to me that she witnessed a deeply traumatized society trapped in apathy, with its greatest fear being Pol Pot's return. The people she met were willing to accept the status quo and Vietnamese presence, as the alternative seemed far worse.[54] However, things have changed since then. In today's Cambodia, this anti-Vietnamese viewpoint is popular among the youth, for many of whom the Khmer Rouge is a thing of the past, unlike the anti-Vietnamese

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[51] "Letter to the Editor: January 7 Criticism a Historical Reminder, Not Personal Attack." *The Cambodia Daily*, 12 Jan. 2017. https://english.cambodiadaily.com/news/january-7-criticism-historical-reminder-not-personal-attack-123505/. Accessed 5 Mar. 2025.

[52] *Tossana "Tivea 7 Mokrea" samreap polorodtha Khmer.*

[53] Kiernan, Ben, and Boua, Chanthou. *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981*. London, UK: Zed Press, 1982. p. 375. Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 400.

[54] Bektimirova, Nadezhda. "History of the People's Republic of Kampuchea." Class lecture, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Apr. 20, 2021.

sentiment that is still an integral part of Khmer nationalist discourse.[55] As a result, Vietnam's role in the early years of the PRPK remains one of the most contentious issues in Cambodian society, caught between contradicting official and nationalist narratives on the removal of Pol Pot from power, the formation of the CPP, and the establishment of Soviet model of socialism in the country.

Challenging the Khmer nationalist perspective, which views the PRPK's formation as a tool for Vietnam to assert control and advance the annexation of Cambodian territory, this chapter argues that Vietnamese officials were motivated primarily by national security concerns rather than by a desire to colonize Cambodia. Institutionalizing Cambodian left-wing forces into the PRPK was not a long-term strategy but rather a reactive measure, the last straw in their broader policy to protect Vietnam from the Khmer Rouge attacks. As late as the spring of 1978, Hanoi recognized that achieving this objective was impossible without a forced regime change in Phnom Penh, which in turn could not be accomplished without relying on Soviet diplomatic and military support.

In the late 1970s, the Soviet Union became the main financial aid provider to both Vietnam and Cambodia, supplying weapons, machinery, food, and other resources and goods. This economic dependence led many Cold War-era academics to perceive the USSR as a global superpower with the necessary leverage to impose its vision on Indochina, which used Hanoi as a strategic stronghold in Southeast Asia. Although this viewpoint was challenged by a new generation of historians, their research did not focus on the three-way dynamics between the Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Vietnam during the early years of the PRK. Still, scholars Ian Biard, Sok Udom Deth, and others suggest the possibility of Moscow being a mediator in the Vietnam-

[55] In the early 2000s, nearly 60% of survey respondents indicated that the Khmer Rouge did not influence their present lives, see Linton, Suzannah. *Reconciliation in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2004, p. 124.

Cambodia relations in 1979–1981. My research demonstrates that the PRPK formation was shaped by a strong and close Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, and the two had no significant disagreements on policy toward Cambodia. Soviet leaders showed little interest in mediating between Hanoi and Phnom Penh, instead relying on Vietnam to shape the formation of the PRPK. With limited expertise in Khmer Studies and a general perception of Indochina as a low-priority region in foreign policy, Soviet leaders largely deferred to Vietnam's control over Cambodia and Laos. Meanwhile, officials responsible for the Indochinese vector of Soviet foreign policy, such as Evgeny Kobelev, actively endorsed this perspective.

This approach was rooted in their broader view of Southeast Asian geopolitics, seen through the lens of their fraternal friendship with Vietnam. In contrast to PRPK leaders, who were political unknowns in Moscow, CPV officials were trusted and long-standing allies, deserving of their role as Cambodia's "big brother" due to their greater, as it was seen in Moscow, revolutionary merits: founding the communist movement in Indochina, defeating both the French and the Americans in war, and successfully conducting the military campaign against the Khmer Rouge. On the other hand, after the outbreak of the Third Indochina War, Hanoi found itself isolated from other regional powers, prompting it to strengthen its alliance with the USSR.

This complex geopolitical context, shaped by the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet split, set the stage for the PRPK formation. The Party was embedded in the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, relying on the Vietnamese invasion for its rise to power, and became dependent on both Vietnam's patronage and Soviet financial aid. Consequently, it found itself in opposition not only to the Khmer Rouge but also to the United States, China, and ASEAN. Understanding this background is crucial for the institutional history of the CPP, as it highlights the geopolitical circumstances surrounding its formation and opens a broader discussion of the Vietnamese influence over its structures, cadres, and bureaucracy.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Vietnam's decision to support the PRPK was a reactive measure to stop the Khmer Rouge's attacks and did not stem from a strategy to colonize Cambodia. It was not until 1978, roughly six months before the invasion, that Vietnam began training a pro-Vietnamese government in preparation for the regime change—an effort that came too late to allow for the "grooming" of loyal subordinates or the establishment of controllable top-down party hierarchies. Instead, Hanoi unified the existing anti-Pol Pot Cambodian left-wing forces into a single party, all of whom had, in various ways, been independently resisting the Khmer Rouge since the mid-1970s.

# Chapter II. From Peripheral Resistance to Core Authority

## Decentralized Resistance

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh and achieved a final victory over the US-backed Lon Nol regime, ending the full-scale civil war in Cambodia. Residents greeted the resistance fighters entering the city, but locals were yet to know that soon they would experience one of the worst genocides in human history. After the capital was seized, Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, carried out widespread purges of Cambodians and enforced radical utopian policies—such as mass city evacuations, ethnic cleansing, forced labor, and collectivization—which led to mass killings and deaths of approximately 1,7 million people.[56] The year 1975, referred to as Year Zero (*chhnam soun*) by the Khmer Rouge, marked not the start of these policies but the culmination of the hardline measures gradually implemented by Pol Pot in areas under his control.

As a reaction to Pol Pot's radical actions, multiple independent groups within the Cambodian communist movement tried to challenge his leadership since the early 1970s. These factions emerged at different times and in various regions and had no direct connection to each other, leading to a fragmented resistance. Ethnic minorities, targeted by the Khmer Rouge's nationalist ideology aimed at creating a homogeneous and purely Khmer Cambodia, played a pivotal role in this decentralized struggle. However, it was not until late 1978, when the PAVN command initiated a military operation against the Khmer Rouge in response to Pol Pot's persistent border provocations, that the anti-Pol Pot coalition was institutionalized into a unified movement, with the PRPK at its core.

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[56] Kiernan, *The Demography of Genocide in Southeast Asia*, pp. 585–597.

In December of 1978, in the Snoul district in Kratié province in Cambodia, anti-Pol Pot Cambodian left-wing forces officially proclaimed the KUFNS. Acting under the Vietnamese protection, this organization declared to oust the Khmer Rouge and save the country from genocide. The KUNFS was a shadow over the vanguard party, the then-secret PRPK, which had been re-established in Vietnam from scattered groups of anti-Khmer Rouge Cambodian communists earlier. Challenging the common perception that the PRPK was an eclectic organization created by the Vietnamese communists in 1978–1979 that imposed its rule from Phnom Penh, I argue that the Party relied on its continuity with the decentralized anti-Pol Pot resistance that had organically emerged within the Cambodian communist movement since the mid-1970s. The Party was formed by three groups linked to the centers of this resistance—Thais from Koh Kong, ethnic minorities from the northeast, and former Eastern Zone cadres—as well as Cambodian communists exiled in Hanoi. These four factions were rooted in interpersonal and ethnic ties within their ranks and utilized support from various regions across Cambodia. As a result, the PRPK's formation was shaped by the legacy of anti-Pol Pot resistance, four distinct groups in its upper ranks, and stronger support in certain peripheries than in Phnom Penh.

Communist-controlled areas in Cambodia had a significant legacy of decentralized development. Following the intensification of civil war in the late 1960s, the Khmer Rouge leadership divided Cambodia's territory into two special regions and seven zones (*phoumipheak*). These administrative units included the Northern, Northeastern, Northwestern, Central, Eastern, Western, and Southwestern zones.[57] While special regions were under the direct control of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)'s Center, led by Pol Pot, each zone operated with a certain degree of autonomy, with its internal developments shaped by local cadres. Consequently, conditions on the ground varied across these areas.

[57] Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982,* p. 66.

The Eastern Zone had always been the most autonomous among these units. Led by revolutionary So Phim, who had worked closely with the Vietnamese communists since the 1946–1954 war against French colonialism, this area was the most orthodox in ideology and the most effective in guerilla warfare.[58] After DK was proclaimed in 1976, the Eastern Zone leadership leaned towards Marxism-Leninism rather than radical Maoism. The former emphasized a gradual development towards socialism through industrialization and the establishment of a proletarian state, while the latter, particularly in Pol Pot's interpretation, advocated for a sudden and radical leap to communism. This difference was reflected in Pol Pot's focus on the immediate agrarian revolution and the total abolition of classes, contrasting with the more gradual, state-controlled approach envisioned in Marxism-Leninism. Under their interpretation of the revolution, the Eastern Zone commanders did not implement hardline collectivization and avoided massive purges. As historian Michael Vickery concludes, before 1978,

> The entire East had been a relatively good zone, both for base peasants and new people. It had many good agricultural districts, and the administration was in the hands of disciplined communists with long revolutionary experience.[59]

This relative prosperity was achieved by sabotaging the Center's orders, which made Pol Pot suspect Eastern Zone cadres to be disloyal to him. Some commanders from the area felt this tension, so they decided to flee. Among those was Hun Sen, who escaped with four of his trusted subordinates to Vietnam in 1977.[60] As a heartland of Cambodian communism, located next to the Vietnamese border and boasting significant and well-equipped troops, the Eastern Zone posed too much of a challenge for Pol Pot to launch a frontal attack, so instead he chose to persecute local cadres and build-up political pressure gradually.

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[58] Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, p. 14.

[59] Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982*, p. 136.

[60] Mehta, *Strongman,* p. 33.

Having weakened the Eastern Zone's leadership by the spring of 1978, Pol Pot ordered a conventional suppression campaign against its cadres, personnel, and local population, who were labeled as "Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds."[61] Since the Vietnamese were historically portrayed as the primary enemies in Khmer nationalist discourse, this characterization positioned people in these regions as adversaries of other Cambodians. This provocative rhetoric fueled the massive purge in the eastern territories, leading to the deaths of approximately 250,000 people and intentionally eliminating around 17% of the area's total population in just six months.[62] In this context, the communist cadres of the region were compelled either to engage in combat or to flee. In the vanguard of armed resistance were division commander Heng Samrin and party secretary Chea Sim, who retreated to the jungle with their troops.[63] Liberated areas emerged in Kampong Cham and Kratié provinces, where the resistance leaders sought to establish the Salvation Front. Still, their numbers were inferior to the Khmer Rouge. Being almost caught by Pol Pot's forces, Heng Samrin contacted Hanoi and was evacuated by the Vietnamese army, whereas Chea Sim fled on his own.[64] Zone's leader, So Phim, was encircled by the Khmer Rouge and committed suicide.[65] Eventually, Pol Pot's massive purge had thus granted him control over much of the Eastern Zone.

Though the rebel forces in the Eastern Zone were defeated, they managed to evacuate their troops and bring thousands of civilians with them to take refuge in Vietnam. Among the survivors originating from that area, Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and their comrades came to be associated with relatively safe pre-1978 life and heroic struggle against Pol Pot.

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[61] Kiernan, *Cambodia: The Eastern Zone Massacres*, p. 11.

[62] Kiernan, *Massacres in the Eastern Zone of Cambodia*, 1999.

[63] Heng Samrin. "*Heng Saamrin: Boros robos prachachon.*" [Heng Samrin: A Man of the People]. Phnom Penh: General Secretariat, National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2011, p. 31.

[64] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 33.

[65] Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, p. 400.

Unlike the Eastern Zone, the remote and underpopulated Western Zone did not have the infrastructure to counterbalance Pol Pot's influence. As a result, even before the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh, its leadership split, leading Region 11 command to start an armed struggle against the CPK Center along the coastal area in the province of Koh Kong. Being historically divided between Cambodia and Thailand, this region had a large ethnic minority known as Tai Koh Kong, a group that descended from Siamese settlers.[66] Escaping purges, many of them fled to Thailand, while those who remained became targets of Pol Pot's nationalist policies, which allowed almost no room for non-Khmer citizens in DK.[67]

In 1974, guerrilla forces, mostly composed of ethnic Thais and Tai Koh Kong, led by Say Phouthang, were the first to rise in rebellion against Pol Pot in Koh Kong province, with the bulk of the resistance occurring in the archipelagos along the Gulf of Thailand. Phouthang began his revolutionary career in the late 1940s as a soldier within the left-wing faction of the Khmer Issarak movement, a Cambodian pro-independence group waging an armed struggle against French colonialism. Say Phouthang's ethnic origin and background as a Khmer Issarak veteran trained in North Vietnam aroused suspicion among the Khmer Rouge leadership. Sensing that he was likely to be targeted in an impending purge, he decided to act first. With his comrades Tea Banh and Rong Keysan, he moved his troops to the jungle and launched resistance activities along the Thai-Cambodian border, either by attacking the Khmer Rouge forces or hiding in Thailand.[68] Say Phouthang tried to contact the Vietnamese communists and create a large anti-Pol Pot coalition many times, but his calls were ignored until the late 1970s when the PAVN command started to plan its own military campaign against DK. Though outnumbered, Say Phouthang and his

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[66] Hem, Samphos, Hongsuwan, Pathom, and Salee, Banyatti. "Language Use and Ethnic Identity of Tai Koh Kong in Cambodia." *NeuroQuantology*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2022, pp. 6468–6477.

[67] Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, p. 26.

[68] Thaijongrak, Nathaporn. "Say Phouthang: Memories and Reflections of the Representative of Contemporary Thai-Cambodian Relations." *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Apr. 2023, pp. 74–78.

comrades did not surrender, damaging the Khmer Rouge forces and thus establishing their reputation as Pol Pot's sworn enemies along Koh Kong's coastal area.

Another resistance group arose among Indigenous peoples in the Northern and Northeastern Zones. Unaligned with the anti-Vietnamese sentiment that dominated the Khmer Rouge's nationalist ideology, ethnic minority leader Soy Keo refused to follow Pol Pot's orders targeting Vietnamese communists.[69] In a show of solidarity with their comrade, other local leaders, such as Bou Thong and Bun Mi, also refused to obey. Brao, Tampuon, and some other peoples who lived in this area could not challenge the Khmer Rouge in direct warfare. They were outnumbered and ill-equipped. In this situation, Soy Keo, Bou Thong, and Bun Mi decided to abandon the land yet save their people. They evacuated many villages and gathered thousands of peasants to arrange an exodus to Vietnam.[70] In the mid-1970s, they settled in an upland area of Gia Lai-Kontum province and spent a couple of years there before they were recruited into the PRPK ranks.

Northern and Northeastern Zones consisted of the historically sparsely populated provinces of Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, and Preah Vihear. Thousands of locals fled the area, causing a large portion of the population to leave. Upon their return after the Khmer Rouge was overthrown, they recalled being saved from Pol Pot's genocide by the PRPK leaders.

After purges in the Pol Pot-controlled areas started in the early 1970s, some Vietnam-trained communists decided to take refuge in Hanoi. Khmer Issarak veterans Pen Sovan, Ros Samay, Khang Sarin, Chan Sy, and some others fled to Vietnam. They had no troops under their command, lacked a well-established public image within Cambodia, and never engaged in direct combat against the Khmer Rouge. Nonetheless, their main asset was connections to chief

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[69] Baird, *Rise of the Brao*, pp. 73–74.

[70] Ibid., p. 76.

Vietnamese advisor Lê Đức Thọ and other senior CPV officials responsible for coordinating the anti-Pol Pot coalition in the late 1970s. Their revolutionary past, fluency in Vietnamese, and good reputation among the Vietnamese communists facilitated their promotion to the high PRPK ranks, with Pen Sovan taking the position of Secretary-General and Chan Sy being his deputy.

Throughout the 1970s, various Cambodian communist groups actively engaged in the resistance against the Khmer Rouge, preventing Pol Pot from ever barring the whole Cambodian territory or claiming to represent the entire communist movement. This opposition arose spontaneously and had no leader or one clear-cut chain of command. Some cadres fled to Vietnam once they felt danger, but others started a struggle that was decentralized into multiple pockets of resistance. In Koh Kong, the Eastern Zone, and the northeastern regions, local anti-Khmer Rouge communists exercised charismatic authority, cultivating a heroic public image as adversaries of Pol Pot.[71] While their reputation had not yet been well-established at the national level, some of them had gained a certain degree of popularity in their respective regions.

After attempts at organizing independent resistance, most anti-Pol Pot communist groups recognized their inability to prevail in direct combat, prompting many to flee to Vietnam. With relations between Hanoi and DK deteriorating in 1977, Vietnam became their tactic ally in the struggle against Pol Pot. Nonetheless, they asserted their agency as adversaries of the Khmer Rouge long before their alliance with Hanoi was formed, beginning their resistance in the mid-1970s when CPV officials still believed in maintaining a constructive relationship with the DK authorities and ignored calls to form an anti-Pol Pot coalition.

It was not until 1978, when the PAVN command recognized that Pol Pot was unwilling to pursue a diplomatic resolution, that they formulated a military strategy to topple the Khmer Rouge,

[71] Here and after, the concepts of charismatic and rational-legal authority are borrowed from Max Weber's tripartite classification of authority. See Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology.* Edited by Guenther Roth and Ckus Wittich. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978.

whereas CPV strategists developed a plan to unify various resistance groups into the anti-Pol Pot coalition. Given their familiarity with Cambodian communists based in Hanoi, CPV officials appointed them to lead early party-building efforts. In September and October this year, Lê Đức Thọ met Pen Sovan twice to discuss their plans to oust Pol Pot and assured him:

> Once Cambodia can govern itself, Vietnam will withdraw from the country to make sure Cambodians decide their destiny on their own.[72]

Soon afterward, a secret meeting of the future Salvation Front was held from November 15 to 25, 1978. During that time, the Cambodian revolutionaries embraced the Front's program to rebuild Cambodia and established the organization's official name.[73] The leadership of the KUFNS was finally nominated on November 30 after the first Congress of its Central Committee was held. Thus, on November 30, 1978, a couple of days before the Snoul congress, the actual creation of the KUFNS happened in Vietnam.

On 25 December 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale military operation against the Khmer Rouge and soon removed Pol Pot from power in Phnom Penh. Though presenting the KUFNS as the vanguard of the resistance, its military role was secondary to PAVN, as it had less than 20,000 troops and could not challenge the Khmer Rouge.[74] In reality, some 150,000 PAVN troops cut through Cambodia in just two weeks, pushing the Khmer Rouge brigades to the Cambodian-Thai border.[75]

The Salvation Front leaders sought to present themselves as Cambodian patriots who rebelled against Pol Pot, emphasizing that they were not directly tied to the Vietnamese. They

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[72] Pen Sovan. "*Pen Sovann chiveak prorvort sangkheb ning bobpahet jeat meatophom Kampuchea.*" [Autobiography of Pen Sovan and the Fundamental Reason of Cambodia]. Seattle, WA: Khmer Vision Publishing Company, 2002, p. 146.

[73] Ibid., pp. 147–148.

[74] Mehta, *Strongman*, p. 61.

[75] Vu, *The Third Indochina War*, p. 104.

introduced the 11-point program of the KUFNS, which included overthrowing the genocidal regime, restoring families and markets, arranging new elections, rebuilding the national army, and establishing relations with other countries.[76] Heng Samrin was elected as the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Front, and his partner Chea Sim was elected as his deputy. In total, there were 14 members, which included fellow defectors and former Khmer Issarak veterans, as well as three civilians and a Buddhist monk.[77]

Had Vietnam not militarily supported Pol Pot's opponents within the Cambodian communist movement, the PRPK leaders would have never come to power. However, years before Hanoi recognized Pol Pot as its enemy, the communist resistance against the Khmer Rouge arose independently in various areas and took different forms. The existing scholarship downplays the importance of this resistance, which was overshadowed by the Vietnamese invasion and the following occupation. However, while Vietnam's role was crucial in providing military support, its involvement in Cambodian party-building was secondary to that of the Cambodians, focusing primarily on unifying the existing anti-Pol Pot factions into a single party.

**Institutionalized Tie(s)**

By adopting the Soviet model in the PRK development, the Cambodian revolutionaries and their Vietnamese advisors positioned the Party at the forefront of the State, leading to the institutionalization of the various factions of the anti-Pol Pot coalition into a single organization, the PRPK.

The early factionalism within the PRPK reflects the Party's formation, making it a crucial research question in the institutional history of the CPP. Michael Vickery, Evan Gottesman, and

[76] Heng Samrin, *Boros robos prachachon,* p. 44.

[77] Ibid., p. 42.

many other scholars classify the PRPK's top ranks in the late 1970s to mid-1980s into two putative factions: one comprised those who had been active in the independence struggle of 1946–1954 and then went to Vietnam until the war of 1970–1975. The other was made up of communists who had remained in Cambodia and participated in the DK administration before going into dissidence.[78] The first faction is known as "Khmer Hanoi," or "Hanoi veterans," and the second as the "Khmer Rouge defectors." Dmitry Mosyakov distinguishes these two groups with special ideological characteristics. According to him, the first one was more dogmatic and Marxist-oriented, while the second was more pragmatic.[79] I suggest that such an outline does not fully convey the complexity of the intraparty relationships. As scholar Ian Baird points out,

> [many academics] failed to recognize that a key group of leaders in the new government were ethnic minority Khmer Rouge dissidents from the northeast.[80]

Building on his idea, I argue that the PRPK institutionalized the existing anti-Pol Pot resistance by consolidating four distinct factions—rooted in personal, ethnic, and friendship ties—under a unified organizational framework. These personal connections, forged through the shared resistance against Pol Pot, created the backbone of the one-party state and played a major role in the PRPK's foundational design.

Existing scholarship misses this important factor, relying on broad categories such as "Khmer Hanoi" and the "Khmer Rouge defectors." However, as this chapter will show, these umbrella terms fail to capture the extent of fragmentation within the early PRPK, making such mapping problematic.

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[78] See Vickery, Michael. "The Cambodian People's Party: Where Has It Come From, Where Is It Going?" *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1994, pp. 102–117. Also see Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 45–48.

[79] Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi,* p. 410.

[80] Baird, *Rise of the Brao*, p. 148.

"Khmer Hanoi," an umbrella term for Khmer Issarak veterans who had gone to Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Accords that ended the First Indochina War, never existed as a cohesive faction. The people who may be grouped that way—Pen Sovan, Ros Samay, Chea Soth, Keo Chanda, Bou Thong, Say Phouthang, Math Ly, and many others—had few actual things in common. Once the veterans reached the country along the Hồ Chí Minh trail, their destinies were very different: some chose military careers, others civil service, with some heading to the North to work and others to the South to fight. As a result, the movement split into many separate groups or even individuals.

Pen Sovan, Ros Samay, and Bou Thong served in the regular PAVN forces, but their life trajectories were different. For instance, right after the 1954 Geneva Accords, Pen Sovan moved to the North to study politics and economics and stayed in Vĩnh Phúc province.[81] Ros Samay left for the South, where he studied the Vietnamese language before going to a military school in Nam Định province.[82] Bou Thong studied military in Nghệ An.[83] As there was no special unit for Cambodians in PAVN, they fought against the US side by side with the Vietnamese communists, advancing from soldiers to officers. They were deployed in different areas and had distinct duties. As a result, most Cambodian communists serving in PAVN were regular soldiers and officers scattered across the battlefield. They often had stronger ties to their Vietnamese comrades than to one another.

Some Khmer Issarak veterans chose civil service. Keo Chanda was trained as a PAVN officer but became a speaker on the radio in Hanoi, Chea Soth was an editor of the Vietnamese

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[81] IIR/00301/Oral History Interview – Pen Sovann, former Khmer communist educated in Hanoi and Leader of the Khmer Sustaining Party, 2001, Manuscript/Mixed Material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster_159045/.

[82] IIR007200/Oral History Interview – Mr. Ros Samay, Secretary of State, Cambodian Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, 2001, Manuscript/Mixed Material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster_158671/.

[83] Baird, *Rise of the Brao*, p. 29.

News Agency (VNA).[84] Say Phouthang studied Marxism-Leninism. There were as many paths as there were people.

Often portrayed as exiles with no ties to Cambodia yet connected to each other, Khmer Issarak veterans were not only scattered but also did not reside continuously in Vietnam. Bou Thong and other ethnic minority leaders Bun Mi and Soy Keo often crossed the borders of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in the 1960s–1970s, creating resistance forces among Brao, Tampuon, Kreung, and other Indigenous peoples. They left Cambodia only after their conflict with the Khmer Rouge leadership in the mid-1970s to live in remote areas in Vietnam close to the Lao and Cambodian borders.[85] Once General Lon Nol carried out a coup in 1970, Ros Samay, Pen Sovan, Say Phouthang, and many others traveled back to Cambodia to arrange opposition to the newly established pro-US Khmer Republic (1970–1975) and spent a couple of years there, once again scattered all across the country. As a result, some of the revolutionaries in the so-called "Khmer Hanoi" faction first met each other face-to-face in 1978–1979 and hardly could arrange a consistent faction.

As I have been suggesting, a deeper analysis of the journeys of Pen Sovan, Ros Samay, Chea Soth, Keo Chanda, Bou Thong, and Say Phouthang reveals that their exodus to North Vietnam in 1954 provides a tenuous basis for unifying them into a single faction, making the so-called "Khmer Hanoi" framing problematic.

The group that one might call Hanoi-based communists (or simply the Hanoi group) inside the PRPK, however, existed, though it was different from the broad "Khmer Hanoi" discussed above. It was a group of Cambodian communists who fled to Hanoi in the mid-1970s following the purges in the Khmer Rouge. Among those were Ros Samay, Khang Sarin, Keo Chanda, Chea

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[84] Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 392.

[85] Baird, *Rise of the Brao*, pp. 63–93.

Soth, Chan Sy, and Pen Sovan. The latter wrote a couple of pages in his memoirs reflecting on his sentiments on April 17, 1975: Phnom Penh was finally liberated, yet he could not witness it with his own eyes.[86] It is highly likely that other Cambodian communists in Hanoi shared the same feeling. As enemies of Pol Pot, they were alienated from both the Vietnamese communists, who celebrated his victory in 1975 and still believed in fraternal friendship with him, and the CPK leadership, who viewed Vietnam-trained cadres as traitors. This role fostered a connection between exiled Cambodians.

Like the "Khmer Hanoi," the "Khmer Rouge defectors" are also a very broad category. If one wants to see a faction within the PRPK, one should look at a specific stratum of Eastern Zone cadres who fled to Vietnam escaping purges: Hun Sen, Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and some others. The Trio had known each other for years—they established an indirect contact through their forces—but they first met all together in Sông Bé province in southern Vietnam in November 1978 along with some other anti-Pol Pot factions.[87] Eastern Zone cadres raised reasonable suspicion among others. For the Vietnamese, Hun Sen, Heng Samrin, and Chea Sim were the former Khmer Rouge commanders who might have participated in border clashes against Vietnam. For other Cambodian communists, they might have engaged in the Khmer Rouge purges against their brothers-in-arms. Consequently, Eastern Zone cadres were condemned to stick together: their participation in the DK's administrative apparatus and the associated distrust bound them into cooperation.

Math Ly, a Cambodian revolutionary of Cham background, does not fit the "Khmer Rouge defectors-Khmer Hanoi" binary at all. He joined the Khmer Issarak movement in 1948, traveled to North Vietnam with his father in 1954, and spent 16 years there. In the 1970s, he returned to Cambodia and, after 1975, became a commander in the Eastern Zone. He fled to Vietnam in mid-

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[86] Pen Sovan, *Pen Sovann chiveak prorvort sangkheb*, pp. 133–141.

[87] Mehta, *Strongman*, p. 38.

1978 when the Khmer Rouge began a massive purge in the eastern regions of Cambodia and joined a movement to oust Pol Pot.[88] His experience in the Eastern Zone shaped his position within other factions, as he was also a target of the common distrust towards those who participated in the DK's administrative apparatus. As a result, he aligned with Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen.

Rather than categorizing factions by the revolutionaries' broad biographies or education experience, which offer limited insight, I propose an alternative framework: the boundaries of these groups were defined by the ethnic ties, personal connections, and shared backgrounds established among Cambodian communists prior to the PRPK's inception.

From the beginning, the Vietnam-backed anti-Pol Pot coalition was fragmented, comprising diverse forces united in their opposition to the Khmer Rouge. Among its top ranks, there were four powerful factions:

> 1) Pen Sovan, Ros Samay, Chea Soth, Khang Sarin, and Chan Sy developed personal connections following their exile to Hanoi in the mid-1970s;
>
> 2) Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and Math Ly were acquainted with each other through their shared experience as Eastern Zone cadres who fled to Vietnam to escape purges;
>
> 3) Bou Thong, Soy Keo, and Bun Mi were ethnic minority leaders from northeastern Cambodia who went to Vietnam in the mid-1970s and lived in an upland area of Gia Lai-Kontum province;
>
> 4) Say Phouthang, Rong Keysan, and Tea Banh were ethnic Thais who were the first to rebel against Pol Pot in 1974 and then spent the DK years fighting along the Thai-Cambodian border.

The latter group met the other three only after Pol Pot was ousted: Say Phouthang was busy coordinating the resistance in Koh Kong, so he contacted the Vietnamese and the Salvation Front remotely. He sent his comrade Tea Banh to Hồ Chí Minh City to present the plan to unite PAVN

[88] Roeun, Van. "CPP Colleagues, King Mourn Death of Math Ly." *The Cambodia Daily*, 8 Mar. 2004.

and Koh Kong's forces in the southwest.[89] The Vietnamese reserved Say Phouthang's place in the PRPK Politburo, so he got elected being absent.

Each faction had representation in the Politburo, the PRPK's most powerful body. Established in 1979, the Politburo included Pen Sovan, Heng Samrin, Say Phouthang, Chea Sim, Bou Thong, Hun Sen, Chea Soth, and Chan Sy.[90] Initially, the revolutionaries did not have strong connections with all other resistance members, but they did have close ties within four factions.

The CPP was formed as a tiny revolutionary alliance, shaped by the cooperation of four key factions: Cambodian communists exiled in Hanoi, the defected Eastern Zone commanders, Thais from Koh Kong, and ethnic minorities from the northeast. Neither ideology nor training background made the revolutionaries within these respective groups willing to cooperate. Instead, their personal, ethnic, and friendship ties laid the foundation for the Party's factional dynamics.

**Rising Peripheries**

Apart from interpersonal connections in the high ranks, the PRPK formation was closely tied to multiple peripheral regions, where the Party's positions were stronger than in other areas. These peripheries evolved into the CPP's strongholds since the Party's officials laid the groundwork for strong organizational networks in these regions since their resistance against Pol Pot.

The first opposition to the Khmer Rouge within the Cambodian communist movement emerged among ethnic minorities on the periphery: in Koh Kong and northeastern territories. Among Khmer-majority regions, pockets of resistance arose in the Eastern Zone following the sufferings brought by Pol Pot to this area in a massive purge in 1978. In these regions, the PRPK

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[89] Tea Banh. "*Chon del trauv ke banh.*" [The One Who Was Shot]. Phnom Penh: Avalon, 2018.

[90] Vickery, Michael. *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics, and Society.* Marxist Regimes Series, Cardiff: Frances Pinter (Publishers), 1986, p. 74.

was not perceived as an alien force of political unknowns imposed by the Vietnamese but rather as a movement linked to local heroes–those who had long ago risked opposing the Khmer Rouge to prevent the genocide. Furthermore, this organic support enabled the PRPK to recruit cadres, establish a strong administration apparatus, and develop stable hierarchies. Through a fusion of charismatic and rational-legal authority, the CPP turned Koh Kong, the northeast, and former Eastern Zone territories into its key strongholds. This strong presence in these regions was evident both before the Party leaders came to power following the Vietnamese invasion in 1979 and throughout the PRK era, as well as during the competitive political landscape of the 1990s–2010s.

Despite having a connection to the endogenous and decentralized anti-Pol Pot resistance, the PRPK's development in the scholarship is often portrayed as being closely tied to Vietnamese involvement. Michael Vickery, Evan Gottesman, and Dmitry Mosyakov describe the Party as an organization that followed a linear progression: groomed by the Vietnamese communists, installed to power by a foreign invading army, and imposed from Phnom Penh.[91]

Ian Biard was the first to expose flaws in this perspective. In his book *The Rise of the Brao,* he demonstrated that ethnic minorities from Cambodia's northeast played a crucial role in the resistance against Pol Pot and Cambodia's development in the 1980s, making the provinces of Ratanakiri, Mondolkiri, Preah Vihear, and Stung Treng CPP's strongholds.[92] His insight inspired me to analyze the pre-1979 pockets of resistance against Pol Pot and the areas with strong CPP positions in the 1990s–2010s. Building on Baird's notion of the agency of local groups, I suggest linking the Party's formation to its unilinear development in the northeastern territories, former Eastern Zone, and Koh Kong before multiple groups were incorporated into the PRPK. Thus, Cambodian revolutionaries who resisted the Khmer Rouge set up their own networks and

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[91] See Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982*; Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*; and Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi.*

[92] See Baird, *Rise of the Brao.*

structures in various peripheries that became the foundation for the PRPK once the Party was formalized. After the institutionalization of the Party in 1978–1981, this regional support played a key role in strengthening the CPP's position at the national level, challenging the perspective of the Party being an installed entity strong in the center and weak in the periphery.

These areas were home to many ethnic minorities who suffered from the Khmer Rouge's nationalist ideology, leading them to initiate the resistance. The first communist cadre to start an armed struggle against Pol Pot was Thai Say Phouthang in 1974. In Koh Kong, he established a revolutionary infrastructure along the coastline, backed by networks of his subordinates in the archipelagos of the Gulf of Thailand. Following the Vietnamese invasion and the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, Say Phouthang shared his charismatic authority with the government he aligned with.

Sparsely populated areas in the northeast, in the provinces of Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, Mondulkiri, and Preah Vihear, were inhabited by Indigenous peoples, who initially supported the Khmer Rouge but were soon disillusioned with its nationalist ideology. Ian Biard demonstrates that the PRPK positions in this region had initially been strong since the late 1970s, considering the Party's fierce opposition to Pol Pot.[93] Thousands of locals fled to Vietnam following the conflict with the Khmer Rouge leadership in the mid-1970s, only to return after 1979, led by Bou Thong and Bun Mi. These leaders' popularity played a significant role in enhancing the Party's public image and reputation in the area.

The Eastern Zone, consisting of the current-day provinces of Tbong Khmum, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, and parts of Kratié and Kampong Cham, was autonomous during most DK years. The PRPK cadres Heng Samrin, Hun Sen, Math Ly, and Chea Sim managed to rebuild the Party

[93] Ibid., p. 269.

apparatus in the region after 1979, relying on their loyal cadres and experience as DK administrators in the area.

During the 1980s, the Party leaders maintained strong footholds in these three peripheries, offering locals relative support and economic development despite the ongoing civil war. In contrast, other regions were more heavily impacted by the conflict, making it difficult for the PRPK to establish a robust administration apparatus and secure public support. In other areas, civilians continued to endure the ongoing Khmer Rouge raids and, as a result, lacked confidence that the PRPK could offer them security. Some lived in the territories under Pol Pot's control, with his propaganda portraying the PRPK as Vietnamese puppets, an accusation deeply disdained in Khmer nationalist imagination. For these individuals, the 1980s represented a harrowing period with little improvement in their life circumstances compared to the DK years.

Despite Hanoi's protection and military involvement, the PRK era was marked by instability and unrest, rendering this chapter of Cambodian history traumatic and difficult for the majority of the country's population. During the 1980s, the PRK authorities, supported by PAVN, fought against the CGDK, which was primarily composed of the Khmer Rouge forces. Following the Vietnamese withdrawal and cuts in Soviet aid in 1989, the PRPK faced its opponent directly, compelling it to pursue a political compromise. After prolonged negotiations, the Party officials reached a deal with the CGDK to initiate a democratic transition aimed at terminating the civil war.

In 1991, an international peace agreement was signed in Paris that ended the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict and marked Cambodia's transition to democracy. The document stated that the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established to oversee the country's governance until national elections.[94] In line with the spirit of the times, the PRPK

[94] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, p. 287.

changed its name to the CPP but preserved its structure, administration apparatus, and existing hierarchies. External observers largely overlooked this important preservation since it was overshadowed by the Party's break with Marxist-Leninist ideology and other significant changes in Cambodia itself, such as the adoption of a monarchy and the introduction of a free-market economy during the democratic transition in the 1990s.

The 1993 United Nations-backed General Election was expected to become pivotal in shaping Cambodia's future, as the winning party would have the privilege of forming the post-war government and rebuilding the nation after years of turmoil. According to its final count, the CPP lost the popular vote to the royalist party FUNCINPEC and was supposed to assume the role of opposition. However, CPP officials were unwilling to relinquish power and instead leveraged their strongholds to pressure their opponents. Mirroring the peripheral areas that initially supported the Party, Koh Kong, Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, Mondulkiri, Preah Vihear, Prey Veng, and Svay Rieng voted for the CPP over FUNCINPEC.[95] Kampong Cham and Kratié also demonstrated decent public support, though the Party did not secure the majority of the votes there. Soon after the elections, these provinces—apart from geographically isolated Koh Kong and Preah Vihear—were incorporated into what became known as the Samdech Euv Autonomous Zone, a separatist entity whose leadership linked to the CPP refused to accept the election results, risking sparking a new civil war. Though Hun Sen did not indicate his own specific support for the secession threat, the move was clearly designed to put pressure on the United Nations and FUNCINPEC.[96] The latter's leader, Norodom Rannaridh, feared potential conflict and agreed to a political compromise that soon became his party's political suicide. As David Chandler observes,

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[95] The CPP received the following percentages of votes in these provinces: 51% in Koh Kong, 70% in Mondulkiri, 77% in Ratanakiri, 61.5% in Stung Treng, 68% in Preah Vihear, 49% in Prey Veng, and 57% in Svay Rieng, prevailing over FUNCINPEC by a significant margin. See Nohlen, Dieter, Florian Grotz, and Christof Hartmann. *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook. Vol. II: South East Asia, East Asia, and the South Pacific.* Oxford, 2001; online ed., Oxford Academic, 1 Nov. 2003. Accessed 25 Nov. 2024, p. 71.

[96] Biard, *Rise of the Brao*, p. 269.

> By the end of 1993, a fragile compromise was reached whereby FUNCINPEC and the CPP formed a coalition government with two prime ministers, Prince Rannaridh and Hun Sen. Cabinet posts were divided among the parties represented in the assembly. Day-to-day political power in the form of provincial governorships, defense, the national police, and the entire civil service remained under CPP control. The royalist party soon lost its voice in decision-making as well as its freedom of maneuver.[97]

The move to put pressure on FUNCINPEC with a secession threat determined Cambodian politics in the 1990s. By incorporating provinces historically tied to the CPP into the Samdech Euv Autonomous Zone, the Party's leaders managed to blackmail Norodom Rannaridh, who agreed to share power in an unequal situation. FUNCINPEC's top ranks were largely composed of Cambodian immigrants who had just returned to the country following the democratic transition, so they had yet to establish a strong apparatus, especially in remote areas. In this context, Norodom Ranariddh, who chose compromise over escalation in response to the CPP's threats, forfeited the opportunity to form a FUNCINPEC-majority government and become the sole leader of Cambodia, thereby losing the biggest advantage he had gained from winning the popular vote in 1993. The CPP-lean peripheries played a major role in this maneuver against Hun Sen's opponent, shaping the Party's position in the 1990s.

The legacy of these areas continues to influence politics in Cambodia in the 21st century. In the early 2010s, Cambodia saw a surge in opposition activities driven by the aftermath of an economic crisis and a growing wave of anti-Vietnamese sentiment. The CNRP, a new nationalist and opposition party formed in 2012, capitalized on these trends. The CNRP became the CPP's biggest rival in the 2013 General Election, receiving 44,46% of the vote and gaining 55 seats in the National Assembly.[98] The CPP experienced its greatest seat loss in its history of competitive

[97] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, pp. 288–289.

[98] Fuller, Thomas. "Cambodian Opposition Rejects Election Results." *The New York Times*, 29 Jul. 2013.

politics, losing 22 seats. The threat to the CPP's hold on power grew more tangible following mass protests in Phnom Penh and significant opposition presence in the Parliament.

To counterbalance the election results, Hun Sen asked King Norodom Sihamoni to issue a Royal Decree establishing Tbong Khmum as a new province by splitting Kampong Cham into two, mirroring the CPP and the CNRP positions. The new province was made up of six districts and a city that all lay east of the Mekong River in Kampong Cham and included the only five districts in which the CPP won majorities in the province during the election. All of Kampong Cham's remaining 12 districts were won by the CNRP.[99] The rationale for this division was to create a new CPP-majority province and gain seats in the National Assembly in a very close election, where the nationalist opposition managed to receive almost half of the votes.

What makes Tbong Khmum CPP-leaning is its Cham Muslim community, which gives the province the highest share of Muslims in the country, at 11,8%.[100] The ethnic Cham voted for the CPP because its alternative, the CNRP, centered its political campaign around an exclusive nationalist discourse that prioritized the interests of ethnic Khmer citizens.[101] Ethnic minorities in Cambodia, including the Cham people, were often marginalized in the Khmer nationalist imagination, which contributed to their strong loyalty to the CPP. This connection between the Party and ethnic minorities, rooted in the late 1970s, was employed by Hun Sen during the major challenge to his rule in the 1990s–2010s.

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[99] Bopha, Phorn. "Government Creates New CPP-Majority Province." *The Cambodia Daily*, 10 Jan. 2013.

[100] National Institute of Statistics. *General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019 – Final Results.* Ministry of Planning, 2021, p. 24.

[101] For the position of ethnic minorities in the Khmer nationalist imagination, see Edwards, Penny. "Imaging the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse Before and During the UNTAC Period," in: Heder, Steven; Ledgerwood, Judy (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia. A Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-Keeping.* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 50–72.

Representing the anti-Pol Pot resistance rooted in factional dynamics and a strong presence in multiple Cambodian peripheries, CPP leaders managed to hold power to this day. However, brought to power by PAVN in 1979, they initially appeared to the public as mere puppets of Hanoi, lacking talents and independent agency. Yet, these people and their families still constitute Cambodia's ruling elite, defeating all their political opponents in the 1990s–2010s competitive politics. Indeed, Heng Samrin, Say Phouthang, Bou Thong, and many others were neither Sorbonne-educated intellectuals nor of noble lineage. Nevertheless, they were not complete political unknowns or outsiders entirely dependent on Hanoi, as they first appeared to the public. PRPK leaders asserted their agency as Pol Pot's enemies by belonging to resistance that emerged in multiple peripheral areas before the Vietnamese communists identified the Khmer Rouge as their enemy.

The PRPK is often characterized as an organization that followed a unilinear progression: groomed in Vietnam, installed by an invading force, and dictated from Phnom Penh according to the Vietnamese guidelines up until the late 1980s. This representation constructs an image of an artificial and weak entity tied to Hanoi. To move beyond this unilinear perspective, my account traces the Party's links to the decentralized anti-Pol Pot resistance that emerged in the mid-1970s within the Cambodian communist movement, years before the Vietnamese recognized the Khmer Rouge as their adversary. The PRPK was established, absorbing networks and structures that preceded its institutionalization and were rooted in these peripheries. These areas were linked to anti-Pol Pot resistance—Koh Kong, the northeast, and the former Eastern Zone territories—that emerged within the Cambodian Communist movement before the Vietnamese invasion, enhancing the PRPK's popularity in respective regions. This legacy enabled the Party's cadres to strengthen their administrative framework in these peripheries and provide local communities with a credible alternative to the Khmer Rouge throughout the 1980s. Utilizing their strong positions in these regions, CPP's top-rank figures exerted pressure on their political opponents during the 1993 United Nations-backed Election and the 2013 General Election, the two greatest challenges to the

CPP's dominance in politics. As one can see, the PRPK had never been an externally created entity imposed from Phnom Penh over the rest of Cambodian territory. Instead, its apparatus was more robust on some peripheries in the east, west, and northeast, where it was formed in the wake of the endogenous resistance that dated back to the mid-1970s.

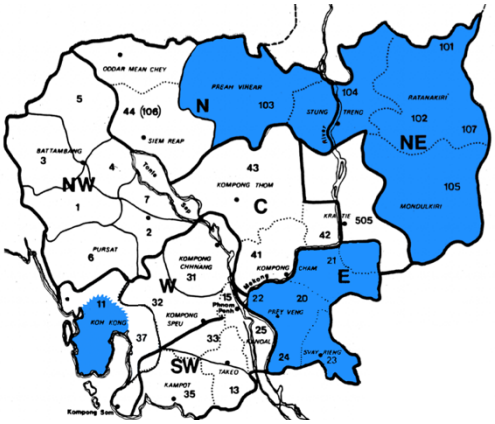


*Figure 2.* Pre-1979 pockets of anti-Pol Pot resistance: Koh Kong, Eastern Zone, northeastern upland areas.

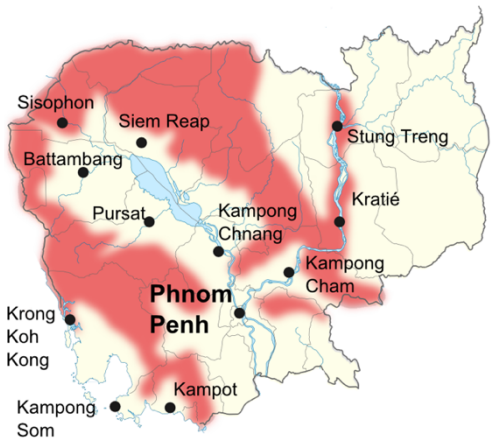


*Figure 3.* Activity of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the mid-1980s.

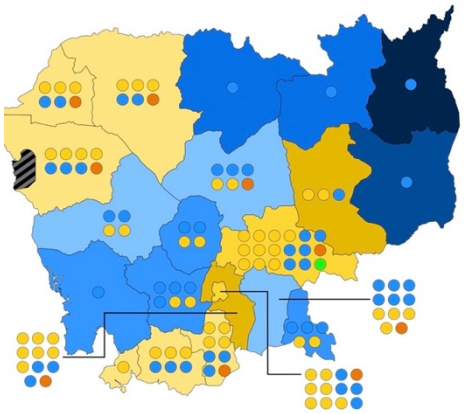

*Figure 4.* The results of the 1993 UN elections are represented with the CPP in blue, FUNCINPEC in yellow, the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party in orange, and MOULINAKA in green. The Khmer Rouge-controlled areas are shaded black.

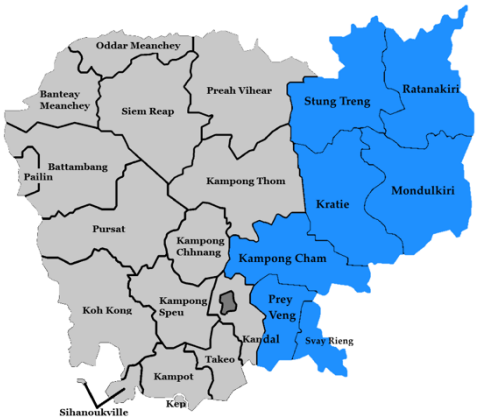


*Figure 5.* The provinces incorporated into the Samdech Euv Autonomous Zone are highlighted in blue.

This resistance was institutionalized into a single party, the PRPK. From its creation, the factions that shaped the Party were not the broad categories of "Khmer Hanoi" and the "Khmer Rouge defectors," as some scholars suggest, but rather four distinct groups defined by ethnicity

and personal connections. Among those were Cambodian communists exiled in Hanoi, the defected Eastern Zone cadres, Thais from the Koh Kong area, and ethnic minorities from the northeast. I demonstrate that three factors—CPP leaders' connection to the endogenous anti-Pol Pot resistance, interpersonal ties among its leaders, and the support of various peripheral regions across Cambodia—played a major role in the way the Party was formed.

After Pol Pot was ousted, the next priority for PRPK leaders and their Vietnamese advisors was to construct the Party apparatus, establish a functioning bureaucracy, address famine and other social problems, rebuilding the country devastated by the Khmer Rouge regime. In this process, the new Cambodian leadership decided not to proclaim a new party but instead claim continuity with the original KPRP, established in 1951.

# Chapter III. Building the Party, Building the State

## Arising from the Shadows

After two years of operating in secrecy, PRPK leaders chose to make their organization public. In 1981, rather than declaring a new party, they claimed continuity with the original KPRP, linking Cambodian communists who had fought against French colonialism in the 1950s with the post-Khmer Rouge leadership. The congresses arranged under Pol Pot's leadership were delegitimized, thereby designating the 1979 "Congress to Rebuild the Party" as the Third Congress.[102] The PRPK arose from the shadows, and since that moment, it has never left the Cambodian public sphere, gradually turning into a mass body that perpetrated the whole society.

Today, the CPP's official narrative remains unchanged, with the Party's anniversary still celebrated on June 28, commemorating the day the KPRP was founded in 1951. As CPP spokesman Sok Eysan says,

> This is the tradition of the Cambodian People's Party. Every year on June 28 the CPP celebrates its birthday to ensure that party members and Cambodians everywhere remember our history.[103]

In the CPP's official discourse, the PRPK and the KPRP are considered the same organization, with the Party's formation traced back to the early 1950s. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the link between the PRPK and the original KPRP was weak, rather making them two distinct parties. Only a few PRPK leaders, including Say Phouthang and Pen Sovan, had been members of the original party, while the majority had no prior affiliation with it. Meanwhile, its structures and apparatus in Cambodia had been fundamentally reshaped under Pol Pot, who purged cadres he considered to be pro-Vietnamese and disloyal to him. Once he was ousted, most

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[102] Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982,* p. 259.

[103] Sotheary, Som. "CPP to celebrate 73rd anniversary". *Khmer Times*. 21 Jun. 2024.

Khmer Rouge officials and soldiers followed him to continue their fight along the Thai-Cambodian border, leaving the CPK administrative apparatus collapsed. As a result, PRPK leaders were building the party structures from the ground up, besides Koh Kong, the northeast, and the former Eastern Zone, where they had some presence before they came to power in Phnom Penh in 1979, as discussed above.

Challenging the official CPP's narrative about its creation, I argue that the PRPK was de facto re-established by incorporating anti-Pol Pot Cambodian revolutionaries and had almost no connection to the original KPRP, whose apparatus was absorbed by the Khmer Rouge. Building the Party in 1979–1981, PRPK leaders set the organization's core political trajectories: expanding it into a large-scale organization, enforcing Leninist discipline, and balancing power within its upper ranks. During this process, PRPK leaders had a degree of autonomy in decision-making from CPV advisors, who were primarily focused on the PRK's defense and foreign policy. This allowed room for Cambodian-led initiatives, enabling PRPK officials to influence the Party's bureaucratic structure and ideological agenda. Navigating this setting, some PRPK cadres, especially Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin, formed internal factional alliances and tactically leveraged the Vietnamese as arbiters of their internal disputes. This chapter focuses on the history of building the PRPK bureaucracy after the liberation of Phnom Penh, which encountered numerous challenges, the first one being the necessity to keep the Party secret after the new leadership assumed power.

The decision not to announce the Party right away stemmed from multiple factors. First, it was part of a broader Vietnamese strategy to present the invasion as a local rebellion to the international community, thereby denying PAVN involvement. To achieve this, the KUFNS was proclaimed, acting as a shadow over the PRPK. In theory, the Salvation Front functioned as a public authority uniting all forces opposed to Pol Pot, rather than as a Communist party obviously linked to Hanoi. In practice, it was an open secret that Vietnam was behind the 1979 military campaign against DK, making this narrative unconvincing to the international community.

Nonetheless, this narrative became the foundation of the myth surrounding Phnom Penh's 1979 liberation, which remained central to both Cambodian and Vietnamese official discourses. Second, many old-style communists like Pen Sovan and Say Phouthang preferred to run a small, secret organization instead of transforming it into a mass body. Third, among the PRPK leadership and CPV advisors, there were concerns about the troubling legacy of the Communist party concept following the Khmer Rouge atrocities. Announcing the Party in this context would have undermined their strategy, which aimed to highlight a clear break from Pol Pot's rule and depict the new regime as a fresh beginning. All these factors contributed to the KUFNS being a decent compromise in this situation, acting as a shadow over the then-secret PRPK.

After Phnom Penh was liberated, the existing duality between the public authority and the secret Party continued to shape the political scene. On January 8, 1979, Heng Samrin was appointed the President of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Council (KPRC), the provisional government to rule the country before adopting a new Constitution. One of the first moves of the KPRC was to declare the founding of the PRK on January 15, 1979.[104] The KPRC became a de facto successor of the KUFNS as a public authority, whereas the latter turned into a nominal body, but it was not dissolved. In this political context, though the PRPK had yet to be officially announced, actual decision-making was taking place within its upper ranks.

Operating in secrecy, PRPK leaders at first believed they could take over the existing CPK cells and networks, establishing the foundation for a vanguard party. In January 1979, the PRPK announced the "Congress to Rebuild the Party," which was supposed to become the triumph of the new leadership that would break away from Pol Pot the main part of the Khmer Rouge movement.[105] The idea was to place responsibility for the DK's crimes personally on Pol Pot and

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[104] Heng Samrin, *Boros robos prachachon*, p. 54.

[105] Hun Sen. "*Dop chhnam ney domner Kampuchea*" [10 years of Cambodia's development]. Phnom Penh, 1988, p. 409.

his inner circle, marginalizing the Khmer Rouge leadership. However, once the Vietnamese army marched all over Cambodia, it turned out that the Khmer Rouge officials were not willing to accept a new status quo and break from the CPK Center. No major CPK functionaries sided with the new regime, and most of its cadres remained loyal to Pol Pot, joining his guerrilla warfare against Vietnam and a new government in Phnom Penh.

This unexpected twist complicated the recruitment strategy and resulted in disorganization on the local level. Certain areas, such as Koh Kong, the former Eastern Zone, and the northeast, were exceptions. However, the overall state of the country after the liberation was chaotic, with no established networks of PRPK representatives on the ground.[106] An analysis of the PRPK's internal documentation from January 1979 to May 1981 reveals that the situation remained so uncertain that the Party leaders were unable to settle on a definitive name for their organization, referring to it alternatively as "the Communist Party of Kampuchea," "the Kampuchean People's Party," or simply "the Party."[107]

Pen Sovan, Say Phouthang, and some other old-style revolutionaries used this situation to their advantage as a new argument to keep the Party secret. They were interested in running a small organization of loyal subordinates, ideally, the ones they knew and had close ties with. On the other hand, Chea Sim and Hun Sen advocated for the extension of the Party, transforming it into a mass organization with well-known recognition. Soon, the Vietnamese advisors interfered in this dispute, pressuring Pen Sovan to make the PRPK public, aiming to achieve the position the

[106] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 55.

[107] Vickery, Michael. *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics, and Society*. Marxist Regimes Series, Cardiff: Frances Pinter (Publishers), 1986. pp. 63–65.

CPV had in Vietnam.[108] The pragmatic approach of the former Eastern Zone commanders aligned with Hanoi's vision for the PRPK's role as a mass Leninist party in the one-party state.

On May 19, 1981, the Party was officially introduced to the Cambodian people. The local press in Phnom Penh announced the PRPK's existence in a formal report without generating any sensational headlines.[109] In that message, the organization was named the PRPK, officially breaking with the Pol Pot-led CPK in the hope of dissociating itself from the atrocities that happened during DK years and claiming continuity with Khmer Issarak revolutionaries of the 1950s. Since then, the Party leaders have commemorated the anniversary of their organization on the date of the KPRP's founding, considering the KPRP and the PRPK the same party.

However, the official CPP narrative that traces the Party's creation back to 1951 is problematic. As one can see, the complexities of the political conjuncture, first and foremost the collapse of the CPK networks and the internal conflicts in the Party's ranks, made it difficult to see actual continuity with the KPRP. Only a few PRPK leaders had ever been members of the original party, while its structures in Cambodia were dramatically transformed under Pol Pot's rule. As a result, the main task of the new leadership was to build cells and networks once again, aiming to transform the PRPK into a mass body.

**Factionalism and Discipline**

Starting as a small organization of 200 people, where members were closely acquainted or at least familiar with one another, the PRPK aimed to evolve into a large-scale entity. By adopting the

[108] According to the Soviet and then Russian ambassador to Cambodia in 1990–1994, Yu. N. Myakotnikh. See Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 413.

[109] "*Khronika sobytiy v Narodnoy Respublike Kampuchiya za mai 1981 g.*" [Chronicle of events in the People's Republic of Kampuchea for May 1981.] *Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.* Collection 569, Inventory 27, File 7. USSR Embassy in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, Phnom Penh, 1981. p. 29.

Soviet model of two distinct but interconnected bureaucracies—the Party and the State—the Cambodian revolutionaries and their Vietnamese advisors set the groundwork for the new regime. The PRPK, functioning as a vanguard party, was positioned at the core of this structure, in line with Marxist-Leninist theory. Consequently, the two essential characteristics of a vanguard party, massiveness and Leninist discipline, were fundamental to the formation of the PRPK.

The concept of a vanguard party first appeared in Lenin's *What is to be Done?* as a disciplined and centralized group of professionals that would lead the workers into a revolution.[110] Lenin's successors, Joseph Stalin, and subsequent Soviet leaders, transformed this elite organization into a massive apparatus that permeated all layers of Soviet society. Created in the USSR, this design soon evolved into a blueprint for a ruling party in communist regimes worldwide and became a role model for the PRPK.

In the PRK, as in other socialist states, the government's legitimacy relied on the Party's mass membership and extensive bureaucracy, which functioned as the primary mechanisms for exercising rational-legal authority.[111] To maintain unity in a mass organization, party discipline or the "correct line" functioned as a legally established, impersonal system that members must adhere to according to the internal hierarchy. As political scientist Kenneth Jowitt points out,

> The importance of the notion of the correct line in Leninism is that it is not a typical Party program. Instead, it parallels the organizational character of the Party, itself an amalgam of modern and charismatic elements. The "correct line" is simultaneously an analytic and empirical statement of the stages of national and international development, a set of policy guides, and an authoritatively compelling and exclusive ideological-political statement that must be adopted and adhered to.[112]

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[110] Lenin, Vladimir. "*Chto delat'? Nabolevshiye voprosy nashego dvizheniya.*" [What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement]. Moscow: OGIZ, State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1945, p. 107.

[111] Jowitt, Kenneth. *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction.* 1st ed., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992.

[112] Ibid., p. 10.

The "correct line" provided a foundation for external unity in otherwise internally fragmented Leninist parties. According to this principle, the decisions were made through internal discussion within the party's top ranks, but once a verdict was reached, all members were forced to support and implement it without dissent following the existing hierarchy. This made the organization's public image solid and its inner decision-making process private from outsiders' eyes. The PRPK was no exception.

PRPK leaders readily adopted Leninist party discipline, but expanding into a large organization proved more challenging. The first step was made in 1981 when the Party was officially announced to the Cambodian people, and its position as the dominant political force in the country was embedded in the PRK Constitution. According to its Article 4,

> The People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea is the force that takes direct leadership of all revolutionary work in the country.[113]

Once the Party was declared, the next step was to turn this organization into a mass body. In this task, the PRPK leadership faced numerous obstacles in the early 1980s, the main one being the personnel shortage. As Hun Sen acknowledged in his memoirs:

> An important feature of our country: we had to build our Party and State from top to bottom, relying on a very small administrative apparatus of around 200 Party members.[114]

In post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, there were not many people qualified or willing to engage in party-building. Mistrust ran deep on both sides: the PRPK leadership feared enemy infiltration within its ranks amidst the ongoing conflict, while the public, still haunted by recent

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[113] "*Rodthathommonounh nei Satharonaroth Prachameanit Kampuchea.*" [The Constitution of the People's Republic of Kampuchea]. Phnom Penh, 1981, Article 4.

[114] Hun Sen, *Dop chhnam*, p. 413.

memories of the Khmer Rouge, remembered the purges that had taken place within the Pol Pot-led CPK. Grooming new cadres was set as the Party's main priority to become a mass organization.

Feeling encircled by enemies amidst civil war, PRPK leaders and their Vietnamese advisors prioritized loyalty over other characteristics in their party-building strategy. Once they realized that CPK members did not join the movement following the "Congress to rebuild the Party" that happened during the Vietnamese invasion, PRPK officials stopped any recruitment of Pol Pot-affiliated figures. According to the PRPK directives,

> Secret agents and spies of all kinds, leaders in the apparatus of the [former] state authority at all levels from commune leaders up to military officers from the Sihanouk, Lon Nol, Pol Pot-Ieng Sary periods were excluded, and only ones who rebelled before January 7 were welcome.[115]

Such strict rules narrowed the expansion strategy, but the PRPK's membership of just 200 people was not enough to govern a new country, so the process of active recruiting started. One of the requirements to join the PRPK was a detailed personal biography (*pravat roup*) of all the activities and whereabouts one had had since childhood. Most Cambodians left whole sections blank, as they knew what happened to people who told the truth to the previous regime, the Khmer Rouge, following the same inquiries.[116] Both the Party and the Nation were yet to build trust towards each other. As a result, among the accepted members were many close affiliates of the Party members of that time. Ung Phan, a cadre responsible for building the PRK's bureaucracy in its early years, reported:

> The selection of people to enter the ministries [is made] without the clear understanding of their personal histories and is instead based only on requests of persons that they come work.[117]

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[115] Ibid., p. 49.

[116] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 52.

[117] Ibid.

Nepotism amidst civil war and total uncertainty was a logical solution: current PRPK officials vouched for those they recommended and took personal responsibility for them. Personal connections once again shaped the political landscape. In this setting, one's position was guaranteed by one's patron, who had already had a well-established reputation within the PRPK. The most successful in building patron-client networks was Chea Sim, who managed to recruit numerous Eastern Zone cadres and create his own power base in the Prey Veng and Svay Rieng provinces. The four factions expanded by bringing in those whom current members trusted most: relatives and friends. These people had become the backbone of the regime.

Joining the Party was a ticket to the PRK's ruling elite, and one needed to go through a hard process to be accepted, especially if one was not affiliated with other PRPK members. Say Phouthang, in his article "Devotion to the Chosen Path," emphasized:

> They [PRPK members] must fully live up to their purpose, be true representatives of the revolutionary vanguard, who have accepted, deeply assimilated, and can creatively apply the foundations of Marxism-Leninism. It is clear that it takes time to train personnel of this level.[118]

The PRPK had a multi-stage selection system, starting from the groups of activists attending ideology education. After completing studies and passing exams, activists became candidates for the Party membership. Only after a probation period—6 months for workers and 10 months for peasants and others—they achieved full membership.[119] There were many obstacles to joining the ranks for even qualified cadres. For instance, one could not become a member unless one's superior did it first. Hun Sen later acknowledged that the Party made a mistake in creating

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[118] Say Phouthang. "*Vernost' izbrannomu puti.*" [Devotion to the Chosen Path]. *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1985, pp. 24–29, p. 28.

[119] Ibid.

too many formal procedures to join its ranks in the early 1980s.[120] This problem was soon addressed by lifting most of these barriers in the mid-1980s, thereby making the PRPK more inclusive. However, even by the end of 1981, the Party's ranks had grown to approximately 900 registered members—an increase of nearly five times in less than two years—achieved through the building of patron-client networks.[121] These networks were so influential that they have become the foundation for Cambodia's ruling elite to this day.

Now, most Cambodian business, corporate, public service, police, and military elites are CPP members, having been incorporated into its ranks through patron-client networks and coercive measures, such as restricting career prospects for nonpartisans. Integrating ordinary citizens into the organization is also a part of this party-building strategy that prioritizes enhancing the already vast scale of the CPP. As a result, the Party now boasts a membership of 7 million people, with its Central Committee of 1,312 officials, more than six times the size of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s equivalent body.[122] The trajectory toward this direction was established during the PRPK's formative years when the Party was publicly announced, and its organizational framework was designed to follow the vanguard party model.

The core of this model, Leninist discipline, helped the CPP historically present itself as a unified force against its enemies. However, this unity has often been a public image, as fragmentation has beset the organization since its inception as an alliance of different anti-Pol Pot groups. During the PRPK's formative years, a significant debate unfolded within its leadership and with Vietnamese advisors, and these internal factional dynamics played a key role in shaping the structure and design of the CPP.

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[120] Hun Sen, *Dop chhnam,* p. 419.

[121] Ibid., p. 413.

[122] Chhengpor, Aun. "Cambodian PM Hun Manet's Rise to the Top of the CPP Leadership." *The Diplomat*, 10 Jan. 2024.

**The Rise and Fall of Pen Sovan**

If there was one person who was the most powerful in the PRPK in 1979–1981, it was its Secretary-General, Pen Sovan. Former Khmer Issarak veteran who studied in Vietnam and served in the regular PAVN forces, he was an intellectual who was the most qualified to lead the Party in the first years after the liberation of Phnom Penh. He spoke fluent Vietnamese and developed direct ties to Lê Đức Thọ and other senior CPV officials during his long-lasting exile in Hanoi.

Though he owed his career to his connections in Vietnam, he proved to be one of the most disloyal Cambodian administrators who challenged many of Hanoi's directives. Moreover, he alienated other PRPK leaders, whom he did not see as his equals, refusing to share authority within the Party and the State. In his two years in Phnom Penh, he made more enemies than friends.

Pen Sovan's tenure as the PRPK Secretary-General soon ended: on December 2, 1981, he was arrested and sent to Vietnam, where he spent seven years in prison and three under house arrest. This event is often portrayed simply as a Vietnamese-led move to imprison a disloyal cadre, with Lê Đức Thọ being the key figure behind Sovan's arrest. However, as this section will show, his detention was not solely the result of Vietnamese intervention but rather a consequence of multiple factors, including internal party conflict.

The Rise and Fall of Pen Sovan is more than just an intriguing story. Beyond that, it unpacks the internal dynamics within the PRPK leadership and the role of Vietnamese mediation that the existing scholarship failed to capture. Drawing upon a binary of the "Khmer Rouge defectors" and "Khmer Hanoi," Michael Vickery, Evan Gottesman, Dmitry Mosyakov, and many other scholars portray the PRPK bureaucracy in 1979–1981 as dominated by Hanoi veterans and personally Pen Sovan. As opposed to this framing, I argue that the "Khmer Hanoi," as it is portrayed in the scholarship, did not exist as a cohesive faction. Instead, a smaller and less powerful Hanoi group, with Pen Sovan and his subordinates, competed with other factions that were actively vying for a more balanced distribution of authority within the Party and the State.

Seeking to achieve this power equilibrium, other PRPK leaders orchestrated a plot against Pen Sovan in cooperation with Lê Đức Thọ, asserting their agency rather than simply adhering to Hanoi's directives in the setting often described as tightly controlled by the Vietnamese.

The extent to which the Vietnamese advisors controlled the PRPK bureaucracy is debated. Some scholars of the older generation often considered PRPK leaders to lack independent agency at all. For example, historian Stephen Heder characterized them as the Vietnamese puppets "of embarrassingly low quality."[123] Recent scholarship presents a more nuanced picture of Vietnamese influence. Evan Gottesman highlights that the Vietnamese prioritized controlling the PRK's defense and foreign policy, placing less emphasis on their involvement in party-building and economic matters.[124] My reconstruction of the PRPK's formative years suggests that the Vietnamese lacked the specialists and resources to meticulously control day-to-day PRPK business. Instead, they influenced officials' promotions in the upper ranks or principal documents like the Party's program and key processes such as Party congresses. Though the control was serious, it left PRPK leaders room to act on their own. One of the earliest challenges to the Vietnamese vision of Cambodia emerged in the debate on ideology.

Embedded into a Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, the PRPK followed Marxism-Leninism and internationalism. The PRPK program was adopted in 1979 and served as the Party's primary document, approved and revised by the Vietnamese advisors. It closely mirrored the CPV program, with some edits to address Cambodian specifics. According to the document,

> The PRPK is the organized vanguard and the highest form of organization of the Kampuchean working class. It unites the most conscious, courageous, and

[123] Heder, Stephen R. *Kampuchean Occupation and Resistance.* Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1980, p. 9.

[124] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 137–168.

> selfless representatives of the workers, peasantry, and revolutionary intelligentsia who voluntarily joined its ranks.[125]

The tasks of the Party were more specific. For instance, the PRPK program emphasized the eradication of the political views of the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sari clique" as one of its main goals, especially the Khmer Rouge's radical nationalism. To achieve this, according to the document, the Party declared its commitment to Indochinese solidarity among the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao peoples.

*Figure 2.* Peace and Cambodian-Vietnamese friendship poster.
*Source:* Kampuchea, the newspaper of the KUFNS, 1979.

However, in contrast to the Vietnamese and Soviet narratives that promoted Indochinese solidarity through the lens of the CPV being the dominant revolutionary force in Indochina, Cambodian communists had their own understanding of their role in the Indochinese revolution.

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[125] Quyen, To. "*Narodno-Revolyutsionnaya Partiya Kampuchii – avangard kampuchiyskogo Naroda*." [The Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party is the vanguard of the Kampuchean people]. The CPSU and the World Communist Movement. *Questions of the history of the CPSU*, no. 10, 1984, p. 72.

For example, Ros Samay drafted the PRK Constitution, which prioritized Cambodian interests by highlighting the role of the PRPK and avoiding any mention of the CPV in the Cambodian revolution in the preamble. This vision angered the Vietnamese advisors, who considered such a portrayal contradicting Indochinese solidarity and a sign of rising Khmer nationalism.[126] As a result, the Vietnamese forced him to rewrite the main PRK document, emphasizing the role of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao peoples in a common revolutionary cause in Indochina.

Navigating a controlled setting, PRPK leaders could promote their understanding of the PRPK ideology only in less foundational texts. Thus, the Cambodian interpretation of Indochinese solidarity was reflected in PRPK's official historiography through a few books and official speeches, which, unlike the official party program or the Constitution, were not strictly revised by the Vietnamese advisors. The PRPK's official historiography advanced the line of Indochinese solidarity in its own fashion, trying to present the PRPK not as a "little brother" of the CPV but as an equal entity deserving respect and recognition.[127] Indeed, PRPK leaders supported further strengthening cooperation with the CPV and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), but only as an alliance of equals. Moreover, they also emphasized the revolutionary merits of not only ethnic Khmer communists but also minorities targeted by Pol Pot: the Thai, Cham, and Indigenous peoples from the northeast. Given that several key groups within the PRPK leadership were not ethnic Khmer, this internationalist stance was not merely rhetorical but actively aligned with internationalist praxis. Furthermore, this position was far more consistent than that of the

[126] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 108–110.

[127] Frings, Viviane K. "Rewriting Cambodian History to 'Adapt' It to a New Political Context: The Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party's Historiography (1979–1991)." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, pp. 807–846, p. 846.

Vietnamese, who advocated internationalism in theory but, in practice, seriously persecuted many ethnic minorities in the SRV.[128]

During the Vietnamese occupation, this approach to highlight the agency of Cambodian communists in historiography was one of the few ways to act independently within permissible boundaries, illustrating that PRPK leaders sought to resist Hanoi's ideological dominance rather than simply following the imposed directives, challenging the perspective of them being Vietnamese puppets.

Another argument put forward by proponents of the notion of key Vietnamese influence over the PRPK bureaucracy is the promotion of cadres with connections to Vietnam, who were believed to be more loyal to Hanoi. Mainstream scholarship, based on the binary between "Khmer Hanoi" and the "Khmer Rouge defectors" within the PRPK, declares the prevalence of the former group in the PRK bureaucracy. As Evan Gottesman points out:

> The state apparatus, the KPRC, dominated by Hanoi veterans, reflected the influence of Pen Sovan as well as Hanoi's desire to work with predictable Vietnam-trained administrators.[129]

However, rather than being predictable and pro-Vietnamese in their policies, Vietnam-trained administrators had become a headache for their Hanoi advisors. For example, in the first years of the PRK, Hanoi group cadre Ros Samay was an independent thinker who was more permissive of Western humanitarian organizations than the rest of the Party's leadership, which angered CPV advisors.[130] On the other hand, Khmer Rouge defector Heng Samrin was dogmatic in his adherence to old-style communism long after other communist regimes, including Vietnam,

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[128] "Vietnam." *Minority Rights Group International*, Minority Rights Group, https://minorityrights.org/country/vietnam/. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.

[129] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 50.

[130] Ibid., xxiv.

had softened their approach. He consistently relied on CPV advisors and trusted Hanoi so much that he surrounded himself with Vietnamese experts, including his personal bodyguards and doctors.[131] Unlike Heng Samrin, Pen Sovan, often described as the leading "Khmer Hanoi" cadre, proved to be one of the most disloyal Cambodian administrators to the Vietnamese advisors once he gained influence over the PRK statecraft. He imposed taxes on Vietnamese planes in Cambodian airports, tried to diversify the PRK's trade relations, and restricted Vietnamese immigration.[132] It was Pol Pot who first grouped communists who spent much time in Vietnam into one category of being loyal to Hanoi, emphasizing the importance of their training, which alone could serve as a basis for purges in the Khmer Rouge ranks. In reality, neither their political views, connections to each other, nor their willingness to follow Hanoi's directives were shaped by their time in Vietnam.

Evan Gottesman and others prioritized examining state bureaucracy in the PRK, however, to understand the true distribution of power within the country, one should first examine the party bureaucracy since the PRK followed a Soviet model where the Party apparatus largely shaped the state. In this context, the KPRC was a rubber-stamping body that signed the documents developed in the PRPK upper ranks and approved by Vietnamese advisors.[133] The Council of Ministers, active since the new Constitution was adopted in June 1981, followed the decisions made in the Central Committee and Politburo, as in other Marxist-Leninist regimes. To see a larger picture of the PRK's internal affairs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it is essential to first examine the configuration within the Party Politburo, the PRK's most powerful body.

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[131] Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 418.

[132] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge,* pp. 121–122; 124–129.

[133] Khuon Sudari, editor-in-chief of Pracheachun, the official newspaper of the PRPK, stated this to Dmitry Mosyakov during the 26th Congress of the CPSU in Moscow on February 22, 1986. See Mosyakov, *Istotiya Kambodzhi*, p. 403.

Once one changes one's lens from the "Khmer Hanoi-Khmer Rouge defectors" binary opposition, one will see a more complex relationship inside the PRPK Politburo. Among its members were

> Pen Sovan (1st), Heng Samrin (2nd), Say Phouthang (3rd), Chea Sim (4th), Bou Thong (5th), Hun Sen (6th), Chea Soth (7th), and Chan Sy (8th).[134]

The sequence of functionaries holds significant importance, as it directly reflects an individual's standing within the Party hierarchy. There, Pen Sovan, Chea Soth, and Chan Sy represented the Hanoi group, whereas Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and Heng Samrin were part of the Eastern Zone faction. While many scholars associate Bou Thong and Say Phouthang with "Khmer Hanoi," it is important to note, as previously discussed, that these revolutionaries were not inclined to support Pen Sovan and operated as independent actors. They were positioned outside both factions, relying on their own networks and pursuing their own interests.

Depending on the situation, they aligned with a faction whose agenda was closer to their outlook. During the debate on party-building, Say Phouthang supported Pen Sovan's vision of the Party as a tiny and secret organization, but he disagreed with most of his other policies, including the anti-Vietnamese immigration laws. Although Pen Sovan and his fellow Hanoi communists were the strongest faction, their position was far from being dominant, prompting them to listen not only to the Vietnamese advisors but also to other figures within the Party.

However, the Hanoi group's cadres, especially Pen Sovan and Ros Samay, were intellectuals who considered themselves higher than others and only equal to top Vietnamese advisors. Mature, well-trained, and fluent in multiple languages, they had all the credentials to

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[134] Vickery, *Kampuchea: Politics, Economics, and Society,* p. 74.

think that way. However, the power relationship in the PRK was not in their favor: they developed an arrogant and independent attitude and thus turned other PRPK leaders against themselves.

The disagreements between different factions within the PRPK continued to take shape during the Fourth Congress of the PRPK that took place on May 26–29, 1981. In total, 162 delegates from all 18 provinces attended this major event, representing the PRPK's total membership of around 900 people.[135] Chea Sim gave an opening speech in which he addressed the official PRPK history, declaring that this event was the first time the Party came out openly.[136] Unlike the 1979 Third Congress, which was characterized as unifying and conflict-free by its participants, the Fourth Congress showed the existing tensions of the Hanoi group vis-à-vis Eastern Zone cadres.

In his speech during the Congress, Pen Sovan heavily criticized the entire Khmer Rouge movement, including the defectors who abandoned its ranks during the DK years. First, he downplayed the role of the Eastern Zone's armed struggle, equating its significance with his own exile in Hanoi. According to him, it was two different but equally important forms of resistance. Second, he said that those who stayed in DK during Pol Pot's rule were, in one way or another, involved in crimes against the Cambodian people.[137] This message was a direct attack on the Eastern Zone cadres, who fled DK only in 1977–1978. Ngoun Nhel, Phnom Penh Party Secretary in 1984–1988, attended this Congress and told Dmitry Mosyakov that he felt tightness in the air and anticipated Heng Samrin and Chea Sim's arrest.[138] However, this vocal criticism was not reflected in the Congress' final communiqué. Pen Sovan's speeches were compiled into an 84-page French translation, yet Evan Gottesman found little interest in the document, describing the

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[135] To, *Narodno-Revolyutsionnaya,* p. 74.

[136] Vickery, *The Cambodian People's Party*, p. 103.

[137] Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 414.

[138] Ibid.

piece as offering a little suspense.[139] This strategy of keeping disagreements private to demonstrate external unity was rooted in Leninist discipline. Nonetheless, through oral history collections and Soviet sources, we have evidence that the Fourth Congress deepened the existing contradictions between the Hanoi group and the former Eastern Zone cadres.

Another area where these tensions emerged was the approach to economic policy. Hanoi group cadres Pen Sovan, Keo Chanda, and Chea Soth had orthodox views, pushing increased collectivization and cooperation in the agrarian sector. This standpoint not only resulted in a rise in refugees from the PRK but also created tensions with more pragmatic Hun Sen and CPV advisors, who preferred a less hardline approach.[140] In many ways, the Hanoi group failed to convince Vietnam that its views and policies would bring political stability, economic development, and strong governance to the PRK.

Not only did the Hanoi group's ideas not correspond with the reality on the ground, but they also had no extensive networks of subordinates anywhere but Phnom Penh's administration, as they lost touch with Cambodia during their long-lasting exile in Vietnam. Their roles within the military, the most crucial branch of authority during the civil war, were notably vague. Pen Sovan's portfolio as the Minister of Defense held more symbolic than practical significance. While it enhanced his reputation and facilitated connections in Moscow and Hanoi, he lacked real control over the PRK armed forces, which were directly managed by the PAVN command.[141] This contrasted with former Eastern Zone cadres, who had also been guerrilla commanders during the anti-Pol Pot resistance and led thousands of troops. During the formative years of the PRK, Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and Heng Samrin maintained strong ties to their units, functioning both as PRPK leaders and heads of military groups. As a result, the former Eastern Zone cadres had strong

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[139] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 117.

[140] Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, pp. 411–412.

[141] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 142.

connections to their brothers-in-arms from the DK's years and a support base in the east, unlike the Hanoi group, which operated in isolation.

In theory, the Hanoi group may look like a natural ally to Vietnam, considering their experience of serving in regular PAVN forces, training, and exile in the country. Nonetheless, in practice, they remained skeptical of many Vietnamese initiatives. For instance, Pen Sovan developed many laws and procedures that targeted Vietnamese interests, the main one being his vendetta to stop Vietnamese immigrants from settling in Cambodia. This perspective contradicted Lê Đức Thọ's vision for the future of Indochina as a territory with no strong border control. He believed that the citizens of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia should have social mobility to work and live in all three countries as one space.

Pen Sovan and others had reasonable concerns: for them, the uncontrolled settlement of the Vietnamese immigrants reminded the loss of the Mekong Delta to Vietnam in the 17th–19th centuries, which also first started as a peaceful process. As early as late 1979, most Hanoi group cadres and some people from other factions actively supported his policies to stop the Vietnamese settlement. The Minister of Interior, Khang Sarin, and the chief of Phnom Penh police, Khoem Pon, both close to Pen Sovan, were responsible for implementing and developing anti-immigration laws.[142] In January 1981, the Politburo, under Pen Sovan's leadership, adopted a circular that stated that

> All PRK central and provincial ministries and departments are not allowed to employ foreigners as personnel, and foreigners are strictly prohibited from accepting Kampuchean citizenship.[143]

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[142] Ibid., pp. 126–127.

[143] "*Tsirkulyar Postoyannogo komiteta Kompartii Kampuchii (perevod s kkhmerskogo) 1 maya 1981*" [Circular of the Standing Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (translated from Khmer) May 1, 1981]. *Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.* Collection 569, Inventory 27, File 14. USSR Embassy in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, Phnom Penh, 1981, p. 337.

Soviet diplomats, in their report to Moscow, wrote that this document

> Targeted persons of Chinese and Vietnamese nationality who are not Kampuchean citizens.[144]

According to Pen Sovan's memoirs, in late November 1981, he intended to implement further laws restricting Vietnamese immigration to the PRK, but he did not secure the needed support within the Politburo.[145] Rather than being a predictable and reliable administrator, he emerged as a troublemaker for Hanoi, leading policies that challenged Vietnam's interests since 1979. This made CPV advisors willing to change the PRPK leadership.

In December 1981, Pen Sovan and Ros Samay were imprisoned and then sent to Vietnam.[146] Soviet officials first learned about this when diplomat Igor Ognetov met Lê Đức Thọ at Hanoi airport. Lê Đức Thọ was returning from Phnom Penh, where he had attended the PRPK Plenum that voted to change the Secretary-General. Lê Đức Thọ told Igor Ognetov:

> Pen Sovan is a young and inexperienced cadre, who still has to study to be the head of the state. Heng Samrin is a more knowledgeable leader who has a great attitude towards Vietnam and the USSR.[147]

The fact that Soviet officials learned about Pen Sovan's dismissal only after it had occurred, in a perfunctory manner, highlights the weak ties between Moscow and the PRPK leadership. In fact, Heng Samrin, who succeeded Pen Sovan, was only a bit older and significantly less educated, making Lê Đức Thọ's remarks to Igor Ognetov entirely disconnected from the facts. As Hanoi kept its policy in the PRK private, the real reason for Pen Sovan's arrest had never been reported

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[144] Ibid., p. 336.

[145] Pen Sovan, *Pen Sovann chiveak prorvort sangkheb,* p. 203.

[146] Amnesty International. *Amnesty International Report 1982*. London, 1982, p. 206.

[147] Dmitry Mosyakov's conversation with Igor Ognetov in Moscow on March 19, 2008. See Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 417.

to Moscow. Even the most well-connected and educated Russian Khmer Studies specialists, including Dmitry Mosyakov, continue to speculate about the underlying reasons. According to him, various factors may have contributed to Pen Sovan's downfall, but

> A more convincing explanation is that the Vietnamese communists grew disillusioned with Pen Sovan, not because he was an overly radical Marxist eager to eliminate private trade, but because they saw him as a Khmer nationalist who actively opposed the consolidation of Vietnamese control in Cambodia.[148]

Given the delicate nature of overseeing the PRPK formation, Lê Đức Thọ chose to keep his influence over its officials confidential, even from his closest allies in Moscow. Since the real reasons for Pen Sovan's arrest are still unknown, there are various hypotheses as to why he was detained. Today, most historians agree that his fall happened because he irritated CPV advisors, most notably Lê Đức Thọ.[149]

However, as I have demonstrated above, Pen Sovan and his affiliates were able to make numerous decisions—issuing dozens of orders, circulars, and agreements from 1979 to 1981—that directly contradicted the CPV's interests, and such actions could not have gone unnoticed for so long. If the cause was merely the conflict with the Vietnamese, why did they wait so long to act?

Though Vietnam's involvement determined Pen Sovan's fate, his removal was not one-dimensional and also stemmed from internal party conflict, in which Lê Đức Thọ sided with Pen Sovan's opponents. Until recently, the exact circumstances of Pen Sovan's arrest were mentioned only in his memoirs and numerous interviews, which contradicted one another. Evan Gottesman acknowledges:

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[148] Ibid.

[149] See Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, The Last Days of Pen Sovan, pp. 129–131; Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 417.

> In an account provided by Sovan but difficult to confirm, Hun Sen accompanied the Vietnamese and read the charges.[150]

For more than two decades, this allegation had been ignored. Out of the blue, six years after Pen Sovan's death, on January 16, 2022, Hun Sen recorded a 1.5-hour-long voice message on Telegram and addressed online comments on the issue.[151] It is clear that it is not impromptu. There are many splices in the message, and Hun Sen himself is well-prepared and juggles various figures and facts.

The message indicates that tensions between Pen Sovan, his subordinates, and other factions within the PRPK had been steadily rising throughout 1981, reaching a peak in the fall. The conflict intensified due to Sovan's arrogant attitude, mistrust of many Party leaders, and a strong desire to exert control over other PRPK officials. He assigned police to search Chea Sim and Heng Samrin's houses, prevented former Eastern Zone cadres' promotions, and downplayed their role in the anti-Pol Pot resistance. The last straw was Pen Sovan's refusal to accept the proposal of other Politburo members to take the post of Head of the State Council, a nominal body without real power, instead of becoming the Prime Minister in June 1981.[152] This angered not only former Eastern Zone cadres but also other PRPK leaders. Say Phouthang, an intellectual who studied Marxism-Leninism in Vietnam and was the first to start an armed struggle against Pol Pot back in 1974, was particularly irritated by Pen Sovan's arrogant attitude and dictatorial ambitions. The communist from Koh Kong arguably had the highest revolutionary merits within the Party, and his reputation among most PRPK members was unshakable. And yet, Pen Sovan accumulated

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[150] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 130–131.

[151] EAC News. "*Samdech te cho banhcheak pi pravotte nei kar chabkhluon lok Pen Sovonn ning moronpheap robsa lok Chan Sai*." [Samdech Techo Confirms the History of the Arrest of Pen Sovan and the Death of Chan Sy]. *YouTube*, 16 Jan. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbHag3_YnWE. Accessed 19 Nov. 2024.

[152] Ibid., Timestamp 30:08–30:36.

such immense influence and refused to share it, so it left Say Phouthang and other PRPK key officials sidelined.

According to PRPK leaders, Pen Sovan consolidated too much power and ruined the balance in the State and Party hierarchy: he was the Secretary-General, Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense at the same time. His unwillingness to agree to a more balanced authority distribution was breaking the internal power equilibrium. Hun Sen, Say Phouthang, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin agreed to dismiss him, but first, they needed to secure Vietnam's support.

Fortunately for Pen Sovan's opponents, their vision aligned with Vietnamese interests in some respects. PRPK leaders sought to establish a more balanced system with an equitable distribution of positions within the Party and State hierarchy, while CPV advisors were irritated by Pen Sovan's voluntarism and anti-Vietnamese policies. There was a common ground to act collectively against Pen Sovan.

Hun Sen and Say Phouthang met top Vietnamese advisor Trần Xuân Bách and the SRV ambassador to the PRK Ngô Đình in late November 1981.[153] Though we do not know the exact content of their conversation, it was highly likely that they discussed the direction the PRK was heading, including Pen Sovan's ambitions. Soon after the meeting, they were the only Politburo members who openly opposed the new anti-Vietnamese immigration laws proposed by Pen Sovan in the next few days.[154] Such an open challenge to Pen Sovan's position had never occurred before, signaling that Hun Sen and Say Phouthang had the backing of the Vietnamese. Once they secured Vietnam's support, they waited for a good time to catch Pen Sovan off guard.

In late November 1981, Pen Sovan went on assignment to Battambang and Pursat provinces with his loyal subordinates, leaving Phnom Penh to his opponents' arms. Soon after he

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[153] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 130.

[154] Pen Sovan, *Pen Sovann chiveak prorvort sangkheb*, p. 203.

left, the PRPK Politburo held a meeting where he was dismissed. Upon Pen Sovan's return, he was arrested. According to Hun Sen, it was Say Phouthang who made this final decision.[155] With the support of the PAVN Special Forces, Hun Sen and Say Phouthang entered Phnom Penh's government quarter, arrested Pen Sovan, and showed him a Politburo decision signed by Heng Samrin, charging him with disunity and treason.[156] Ngoen Nhel remembered that the situation was so dangerous that he heard a shooting happened there.[157] Soon afterward, Pen Sovan was sent to Vietnam, where he faced imprisonment.

As one can see, the decision to remove Pen Sovan was not solely dictated by Hanoi but was influenced by multiple factors, with the primary catalyst being an internal party conflict over achieving a more balanced distribution of power within the PRK's state and party apparatus. This struggle ultimately prompted Lê Đức Thọ's intervention in support of Pen Sovan's opponents.

The principle of balanced power distribution among Cambodia's political elite has played a crucial role in shaping the CPP's design. In contemporary Cambodia, often described as a personalist regime under Hun Sen, even he still has to operate within certain principles. Hun Sen did not assume the presidency of the CPP until Chea Sim's passing in 2015, as the two had established a gentleman's agreement in 1991: Chea Sim would lead the Party, while Hun Sen would serve as the Prime Minister. [158] This arrangement remained in place for decades. Furthermore, since Pen Sovan's removal, the leadership of the Party has remained remarkably stable, with no significant purges after 1981.

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[155] EAC News, *Samdech te cho,* Timestamp 41:44–41:50.

[156] Pen Sovan, *Pen Sovann chiveak prorvort sangkheb*, pp. 215–216.

[157] Mosyakov, *Istoriya Kambodzhi*, p. 416.

[158] Gerin, Roseanne. "Hun Sen Elected President of Ruling Cambodian People's Party." *Radio Free Asia*, 22 Jun. 2015.

This conflict had remained secret for a long time, and its circumstances could not be fully understood without a comparative analysis of Pen Sovan's memoirs, Soviet sources, and Hun Sen's voice message. Since the PRPK was founded on the principles of a vanguard party rooted in Leninist discipline, its officials maintained a solid and unified external public image in an internally fragmented organization. Even its closest allies in Moscow were not aware of the exact circumstances of Pen Sovan's arrest, while official PRPK Congress documents presented no indication of existing tensions within the Party's leadership, demonstrating a unified public image.

However, the PRPK was never internally monolithic, as it was formed as a coalition of diverse interest groups, including Hanoi veterans, defected Eastern Zone commanders, Thais from Koh Kong, and ethnic minorities from the northeast. The unified public image was only a projection achieved by adherence to Leninist discipline, while in reality, each faction held distinct views on the regime's development, the government's priorities, and the economic policies it should adopt.

Existing scholarship fails to capture this complex internal party dynamic, focusing on the binary between "Khmer Hanoi" and the "Khmer Rouge defectors." Scholars Dmitry Mosyakov, Michael Vickery, and Evan Gottesman portray the PRPK's formative years as a period of internal competition between these two factions that was resolved after the Vietnamese chose to imprison Pen Sovan for being disloyal to Hanoi. In contrast to this perspective, I argue that the internal party competition had never been binary and involved four groups, such as the Eastern Zone cadres, Thais from Koh Kong, Hanoi veterans, and ethnic minorities from the northeast. Each faction held its own sources of leverage and power, with the Hanoi group being the most influential, though far from dominant. In this context, Pen Sovan's downfall was enabled by an alliance of various PRPK factions, which opposed his dictatorial ambitions and advocated for a more balanced distribution of authority within the Party and the State. The Vietnamese intervened to support Sovan's opponents, but they were not the primary initiators. The arrest of Pen Sovan, one of the

few original KPRP members in the PRPK ranks, further weakened the connection between the two organizations.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the CPP's official narrative linking the Party's formation to 1951 is controversial. Instead, I argue that the PRPK was a new organization rather than a continuation of the original KPRP, as the Party was de facto re-established by integrating Cambodian revolutionaries who had resisted Pol Pot during the DK's years. Once they gained power, they failed to incorporate the existing Pol Pot-led CPK, prompting them to build the PRPK apparatus across much of Cambodia's territory once again. Vietnam's focus on the PRK's defense and foreign policy allowed room for Cambodian initiatives in this process. Enjoying some autonomy from CPV advisors, PRPK leaders from 1979 to 1981 established fundamental political trajectories—forming a large-scale organization, enforcing strict Leninist discipline, and balancing power dynamics within the leadership—following internal debates and conflicts. In other words, these decisions largely shaped the CPP into the Party it is known today, addressing the question of its origins and the key features that defined its foundational structure, apparatus in Cambodia, and strategy to recruit cadres within its ranks.

# Conclusion

Brought to power by PAVN in 1979, PRPK leaders were initially perceived as mere puppets of Hanoi who lacked talent and autonomy in decision-making. Moreover, this externally driven ascent to power gave rise to various competing narratives about the Party's origins.

To emphasize their agency and link the post-Khmer Rouge leadership with the Cambodian revolutionaries who had fought against French colonialism in the 1950s, PRPK leaders claimed continuity with the original KPRP, founded in 1951. This myth became the foundation of the CPP's narrative, which continues to shape Cambodia's official discourse to this day. On the other hand, the Khmer nationalist perspective challenges this standpoint, portraying the CPP as an external creation of Vietnamese communists seeking to annex Cambodia through a proxy regime. The mainstream scholarship, as seen in the works of Michael Vickery, Evan Gottesman, and Dmitry Mosyakov, demonstrates a more nuanced picture. It highlights that the Party was created in 1978–1979, following a linear narrative: groomed in Vietnam, brought to power by the PAVN troops, and then directed from Phnom Penh.

My thesis offers a new scholarly perspective on the origins of the CPP. Addressing the research question of how the CPP was created, I contend that the Party's formation should be seen as a prolonged process shaped by the interplay of Cold War dynamics and Cambodian political conjuncture in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. In the foregoing chapters, I have demonstrated how the sequence of global and local events designed the CPP into the Party it is known today.

In Chapter I, my main argument is that the Vietnamese invasion that ultimately brought the PRPK to power was a reactive measure aimed at protecting Vietnam from the Khmer Rouge, and it was not a move of a broader strategy to annex Cambodia, as it is portrayed in Khmer nationalist discourse. In that regard, CPV advisors played a crucial role in establishing the PRPK, not as a proxy for colonizing Cambodia but rather as a group with the potential to become a strong and

independent government that would not pose a threat to Vietnam in the future. This plan would not have been feasible without the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, in which Hanoi opted to militarily overthrow Pol Pot and bring PRPK leaders to power, while Moscow provided diplomatic, military, and financial support for the operation. This coalition arose from the geopolitical context of the late 1970s, influenced by the Sino-Soviet split and the Cold War, and laid the groundwork for Cambodian anti-Pol Pot revolutionaries to form the PRPK. These circumstances significantly shaped the way the Party was designed: as part of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, the PRPK was bound to operate within the framework of Pax Sovietica, adopt Marxism-Leninism in its Soviet interpretation, and remain isolated from the United States, ASEAN, and China.

In Chapter II, I have shown that the PRPK was not created from scratch in 1978–1979 but rather was a continuation of an endogenous anti-Pol Pot resistance that started before Hanoi recognized the Khmer Rouge as its enemy. Since the mid-1970s, multiple groups within the Cambodian communist movement challenged the Khmer Rouge, establishing footholds in various territories of Cambodia, including the DK's Eastern Zone, the northeast, and Koh Kong. As a result, once brought to power in 1979, the PRPK authority was not directed from Phnom Penh but instead was stronger on some peripheries, mirroring the legacy of anti-Pol Pot resistance. When this resistance was institutionalized into a single party, the PRPK, this organization absorbed various interest groups, including Cambodian communists exiled in Hanoi, former Eastern Zone cadres, Indigenous leaders from the northeast, and Thais from Koh Kong. As a result, the Party emerged as an internally fragmented organization with complex inner dynamics, rather than an easily controlled group shaped to follow Vietnamese directives.

In Chapter III, challenging the CPP's official narrative about its connection to the old KPRP founded in 1951, I argue that the Party was not an original organization but rather a new entity created in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The key foundations of the PRPK were laid during this period, when it was brought to power in Phnom Penh, its officials began building its apparatus across much of Cambodia, and they established the core trajectories for its political development.

During this time, PRPK leaders asserted their agency in decision-making, bolstering their influence in Cambodia and opposing several Vietnamese initiatives. Navigating a complex multifactional dynamic within the PRPK upper ranks, former Eastern Zone cadres like Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin demonstrated a pragmatic approach to party-building, which formed the basis for the CPP's structure as a vanguard party. They promoted the implementation of essential structural principles, including transforming the Party from a tiny and secret revolutionary alliance into a mass organization, adherence to Leninist discipline, and a balance of authority within the PRPK leadership. In that process, the PRPK Secretary-General emerged as the main obstacle, holding a distinct vision for the Party's design and displaying an arrogant attitude toward both CPV advisors and other PRPK leaders. Pen Sovan's authoritarian ambitions to consolidate all power within the State and the Party made other factions unite against him. With Vietnam's support, they ousted Pen Sovan from power, laying the foundations for the Party's structure.

All these key factors made the creation of the CPP a process that took place from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. This period, which marks the origins of the CPP, is crucial for understanding Cambodia's contemporary elite, and yet the amount of research being done on this period is minimal compared to the Khmer Rouge. The revolutionaries who initially opposed Pol Pot and the Party they founded have been largely overlooked in scholarly discourse.

This thesis seeks to address this gap by providing important insights into the formation of the CPP, while also contributing to broader discussions on party nationalism and the Global Cold War. As demonstrated throughout the study, the CPP fused revolutionary legitimacy, Cold War alignments, and a distinctive form of nationalist discourse—one that prioritized unity among Cambodians of diverse backgrounds over exclusive Khmer nationalism or Vietnam-backed Indochinese solidarity—to construct its claim to rule. While the Party was brought to power by Vietnam with the support of the Soviet Union, it simultaneously cultivated a narrative of Cambodian independence and liberation from Pol Pot's genocide, seeking to assert its agency from

the outset. This dual positioning illustrates how postcolonial parties could navigate the tension between international dependency and the pursuit of sovereign authority. This study highlights these nuanced developments to contribute to broader debates on how legitimacy was shaped and instrumentalized by Cold War-era political organizations in the Global South, many of which were often perceived as proxies of more powerful actors. By situating Cambodia within a broader transnational context, the thesis underscores the significance of both geopolitical structures and localized historical dynamics in shaping processes of party- and state-building in the aftermath of decolonization and conflict.

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