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# Cambodia's Modern History: Travelers' Cliff Notes

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This short e-book covers the era of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970's, Cambodia's occupation by Vietnam in the 1980's, and events post-Paris Peace Agreement



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# Not All Is As It Seems

“Our government is run by a foreign power,” says Mr. Moal, our tuk-tuk driver, in response to my question about Cambodia’s type of governance. That was not the response I was anticipating, so he had my attention. I slurped another thick rice noodle from my bowl of soup. “What do you mean by foreign power?” I asked.

“Vietnam controls everything in Cambodia...politics, business.”

I wasn’t following. “Why would Vietnam control Cambodia?” We had been in Vietnam for over a month; we were visiting Siem Reap, Cambodia, as a side-trip. The sudden mention of Vietnam confused me.

Mr. Moal was a sharp, lean, 36 year old with better-than-average self-studied English. We learned his story as he elaborated on his initial statements. He had come to Siem Reap from a rural farming village to find work. He was not able to finish high school due to the war that raged across the countryside since the 1970’s, which had shut down the schools and any promise of a stable economy. “I think you believe it was a civil war in Cambodia, but it is more complicated than that,” he said.

## Cambodia Aids Viet Minh; U.S. Bombs Villages

He told us that during the Vietnamese-American war, Cambodian head of state Prince Norodom Sihanouk allowed North Vietnamese troops to train in Cambodia with the hope that, if North Vietnam won the war, they would return the Mekong Delta region to Cambodia. I [later learned](#) that, actually, Sihanouk was more of an opportunist. He had more confidence in North Vietnam -- with Chinese support -- winning the Vietnamese-American war. *“Our interests are best served by dealing with the camp that one day will dominate the whole of Asia – and coming to terms before its victory – in order to obtain the best terms possible.”*

In 1970, Lon Nol -- a pro-American, anti-North Vietnamese leader -- replaced Sihanouk as Cambodia's leader in a bloodless military coup. Lon Nol began sending troops into the rural regions to drive out the Viet Minh.

The Viet Minh, however, remained entrenched in the region; it needed to move equipment and troops through Cambodia to fight the Americans in South Vietnam. To protect their troops and military installations in Cambodia, the Viet Minh skirmished with Cambodian army forces and also began training and funding communist-affiliated rebel groups, including the Khmer Rouge. The United States lent support to Lon Nol's anti-Communist government with bombing raids, materials and financial aid meant to cut off the Viet Minh's supply route...oh, and to "stop the spread of Communism into Cambodia".

The Americans often missed their strategic bombing targets, resulting in as many as 50,000-300,000 civilian deaths, frequently wiping out entire villages. This angered the Cambodians and many joined the Khmer Rouge to fight back. The civil war in Cambodia was not just a skirmish between rebels and government forces; Vietnamese and American interests fanned its flames.

In 1973, the United States ended its bombing raids in Cambodia; when it pulled out of Vietnam, Lon Nol's government was left to fend for itself. The government collapsed in April 1975.

## Pol Pot's Reign of Terror

The events in the 1970's that led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge were a cat's cradle, tangled mess of radical ideology, international political flubs, side switching, starvation, torture and genocide. There is an excellent, mind-boggling write-up on the rise of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime [here](#) and [here](#).

During its brutal [reign of terror](#), the Khmer Rouge purged the country of its "lazy elite", killing an entire generation of intellectuals, teachers, skilled professionals, and doctors. They aimed to "wipe society clean", returning the country to an agrarian farming utopia. Over a quarter of Cambodia's population -- 2 million peaceful Cambodians -- were tortured, killed and left to rot in the country's "killing fields".

# Vietnam Overthrows the Khmer Rouge

[Who stopped the Khmer Rouge?](#) Vietnam. While inflicting genocide on its own people, Pol Pot's terrorist soldiers also invaded Vietnam several times; shooting and killing thousands of villagers living near the border. In 1978, Vietnam had had enough of Cambodia's cross-border raids and they invaded Cambodia. In January 1979, they overthrew the Khmer Rouge and installed their own Vietnam-friendly leadership under the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) party. Hun Sen, who had defected from the Khmer Rouge to Vietnam in 1977, was chosen as Prime Minister. He remains in power today. For the next decade, Cambodia was essentially run as a Vietnamese colony, with ongoing rebellion and armed conflict in the countryside throughout the 1980's.

Occupation of Cambodia was costly to Vietnam (and to the Soviet Union, which was financially supporting Vietnam's occupation). When the Cold War began to thaw, Vietnam sought to disengage from Cambodia. It began withdrawing troops in 1988.

## 1991 Paris Peace Agreement

Over the years, a confusing trifecta of groups opposing Hun Sen and the PRK – including a mutated version of the Khmer Rouge led by Sihanouk and a couple of groups formerly affiliated with Lon Nol -- loosely organized themselves into a political party named Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). With warring factions continuing to spar throughout the country, Hun Sen entered peace talks with the CGDK. In 1991, the two parties, along with Vietnam, signed the Paris Peace Agreement and the country, renamed the State of Cambodia, prepared for a democratic election of its new leader.

## Is Hun Sen a Vietnamese Puppet?

On May 28, 1993, Hun Sen was defeated in a popular vote but refused to acknowledge the results. Furthermore, it was believed that Vietnamese troops remained in the country, ready to support a secession. A two-party ruling system

was set up to prevent the country from fracturing, with Hun Sen sharing power with leaders from “the opposite party” (as Mr. Moal called the CNRP political party led by Sihanouk’s son). It gets pretty confusing throughout the 1990’s, but the essence of it is that Cambodia has yet to achieve an honest, unrigged election. Hun Sen remains in power, still seen by many as Vietnam’s puppet.

According to Mr. Moal, anyone with power in Cambodia has backing from Vietnam. Vietnam elites broker deals that exploit Cambodia’s natural resources. As an example, Mr. Moal said an alarming percentage of Cambodia’s forest vegetation has been cut and shipped to China, with Vietnam making a fat profit as intermediary. He said the Vietnam-controlled government has a chokehold on all entrepreneurship and innovation, often cutting deals with Vietnamese and foreign companies that benefit the power elite at the expense of the Cambodian workers.

This provided context to what I had read in online travel guides about ticket revenue at Angkor Wat. In 1999, the Cambodian government had leased the rights to collect ticket revenue to Sokimex, a conglomerate owned by a Cambodian-born Vietnamese businessman named Sok Kong. Of the \$59 million USD in gross revenue collected by Sokimex in 2014, the company retained 15% of ticket sale revenue. By reported accounts, the company ended its contract in 2016 and the Cambodian government henceforth manages ticket revenue.

In their defense, the government claims that it partnered with Sokimex after the Paris Peace Agreement because the IMF and World Bank did not want the Cambodian government involved in doing business at that time and encouraged a private partnership.

## Hope In The Opposite Party

The “opposite party” CNRP – despite its inability to replace Hun Sen through a fair election -- continues to fight on behalf of Cambodian workers and foment public fury over existing government policies. Occasionally, the “Vietnam-controlled” government acquiesces to the opposite party’s demands to prevent a revolution. So, change is happening for the younger generation, but at a snail’s pace.

Mr. Moal concluded his explanation on an optimistic note. He said that the opposite party has been able to increase access to education and increase workers' wages. He believes his two children will have better opportunities than he has had.

For his sake and the sake of the entire population, which has been through so much horror, I hope he is right and that Cambodia excels on the world stage someday.