

Origins of Khmer Communism

Ben Kiernan

Contents

Pre-1940	4
Nationalist Currents in the 1940s	6
Moves Towards Unity: The Revolutionary Advances of 1950-54	12
Disintegration and Dissension, 1954—63	22
Forward to Democratic Kampuchea	26
The Success and Failure of Khmer Nationalism	30

On 3 April 1979, the new pro-Vietnamese Government in Kampuchea renamed Phnom Penh's Avenue General de Gaulle after a Buddhist monk called Achar Hem Chieu, who died in a French prison in 1943. Other main streets were named after former anti-French monks who, unlike Chieu, became communist leaders in the 1950s and the 1960s: Achar Mean (Son Ngoc Minh), Tou Samouth (Achar Sok), and Keo Moni (Achar Mao), whose name now belongs to the Boulevard which had borne that of another Asian communist leader called Mao. The names of nineteenth century anti-French rebels such as Pou Kombo and Si Votha were also given to some of Phnom Penh's avenues.

This symbolic change was an attempt by the remnants (and the successors) of the early communist movement, now ruling Kampuchea, to declare their links with the anti colonial tradition out of which Khmer communism was born. The period (1963-79) of the Pol Pot group's leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), when anticolonial figures were ignored or despised as "Vietnamese puppets" and nearly all veteran communists were among the hundreds of thousands executed, was thus seen as a break from this tradition which needed to be corrected. Although the early communists such as Son Ngoc Minh never won unchallenged leadership of the 1945-54 Kampuchean anti-French movement, they did play an important role in securing independence for the country. This role is worth studying, if only to see how their descendants, the Heng Samrin/Pen Sovan regime, now seek to cast themselves in terms of Khmer patriotism.

Pre-1940

The first communists active in Kampuchea were apparently not Khmers but Chinese, escapees from the repression following the Canton Commune, who arrived by way of Saigon in the late 1920s. This was followed in 1930 by the establishment of a cell of Ho Chi Minh's Indochina Communist Party (ICP), in Kampuchea's Chup rubber plantations. Although Khmer workers apparently took part in ensuing local struggles, the party cell consisted only of ethnic Vietnamese workers. In 1929, a member of the French intelligence services had written:

In fact the Cambodians, in spite of the proximity of the Vietnamese and Chinese, have not yet learnt to organise meetings to hatch conspiracies. They only know how to gather together on pagoda feast-days and for funeral ceremonies, which are not very suitable for intrigues (Archives d'Outre-Mer, France. Cambodge, 7F 15 C (7), Surete report 1928-29).

The first Khmer known to have become involved in communist activities was a 24-year-old coolie at the Phnom Penh electricity works named Ben Kraham. Also involved were two other young Khmers from a Phnom Penh monastery and two young Vietnamese from the prestigious College Sisowath, as well as Kraham's Vietnamese wife with whom he lived in Phnom Penh's Catholic village. On 31 July 1930, these six distributed a "significant" number of Vietnamese-language leaflets in Phnom Penh; the leaflets advanced among other causes the struggle of the proletariat against imperialism. They also hung three red banners "with Soviet emblems" from trees, bearing slogans, also in Vietnamese, calling on the population to establish "a worker's government". Kraham, along with two of the others, was arrested and sentenced to 18 months' jail. He and his wife said in court that they had been given some of the leaflets by a guardian at the electricity works and others by a travelling hairdresser, confessions which do not seem to support their simultaneous claim that they thought they were distributing cinema programmes (ibid., 7F 15, "Direction de la surete", Rapport annuel 1930-31, pp. 9-12).

Conscious or not, Kraham's communist connections were rare enough for a Khmer at that time: revolutionary activity in Kampuchea was restricted almost exclusively to the ethnic Vietnamese community, from rubber plantation workers to officials and skilled workers. The vast majority of the Khmer remained rural, and whatever anti-French activity they engaged in was disparate. The colonial official who wrote this in 1934 was undoubtedly right:

On January 14, the anniversary of the deaths of Liebknecht, Rosa Luxembour and Lenin, there were no demonstrations or leaflets distributed in Cambodia.¹

But, there were signs of change, including increasing nationalist sentiment among Khmer Buddhist monks. In 1932, a 28-year-old ethnic Khmer from Vietnam, working as a fisherman on Kampuchea's Great Lake, joined the Indochina Communist Party. Under the name of Thach Choeun, he was reported by French intelligence to have carried out a "political mission" in Kampuchea until 1936. The next year he became a Buddhist monk in Takeo province, and then in 1939 he left the monastery to become chief of the ICP for Svay Rieng province. According to the intelligence service, Choeun later adopted the name Son Ngoc Minh and became the chairman of Kampuchea's first communist party. (Ibid., 7F 29 (2). *Note sur [organisation politique et administrative Viet-Minh au Cambodge]*. Direction des services de securite du H.C. en Indochine, decembre 1952, p. 23 [hereafter cited as *Note*].) However, both Khmer and Vietnamese communist sources are extremely unwilling to believe that Son Ngoc Minh was an active communist in the 1930s, so it appears that the two were in fact different people. Khmer and Vietnamese sources agree that there may have been one or two Khmer members of the ICP even as early as 1930-31, and there are reports that "The Internationale" was translated into Khmer at that time.² But all this is quite hazy, possibly because Khmer communists such as Choeun who were active in the 1930s were so few and isolated that "they did not bequeath a heritage to those of the 1940s and after such as Son Ngoc Minh.

In the same year as Ho Chi Minh had founded the ICP (1930), a French scholar, Suzanne Kerpeles, established the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. The Institute quickly became a focus for the as yet rather mild nationalist sentiment that was developing in the Khmer religious community, in part because of French attempts to control and reform Buddhism. Two members of the Institute in the 1930s were Son Ngoc Thanh and Achar Sok, later known as Tou Samouth;³ both were to take leading roles in nationalist activities. After independence in 1954 these two in fact became the leaders of the underground movements in Kampuchea, Son Ngoc Thanh as head of the rightist Khmer Serei in alliance with the U.S., and Tou Samouth as secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea in alliance with the Vietnamese communists.

¹ Ibid., 7F 14(1), "Notes mensuelles," janvier 1954. I am grateful to David P Chandler for bringing these three references to my attention.

² Author's interview with Nguyen Thanh Son (Ho Chi Minh City. 28 October 1980).

³ Author's interview with Chea Soth, who lived and worked with Samouth from 1949 to 1951 (Phnom Penh. 22 October 1980).

Nationalist Currents in the 1940s

With the outbreak of World War Two, Japanese troops arrived in *Kampuchea* in 1940. The Vichy French were still legally in control, but the Japanese were preparing their moves and made secret contact with Son Ngoc Thanh. In July 1942, the French arrested two monks, Achar Hem Chieu and Achar Nuon Duong, for preaching anti-French sermons to Khmer soldiers. The resulting demonstration of over 1,000 monks and lay people, which the Japanese encouraged but had hoped to manipulate to their own benefit, got out of hand in the face of French intransigence and repression, and a street battle ensued. A number of monks, fearing imprisonment and, as one later put it, “convinced that the peaceful road to independence had failed”, fled into the countryside. One of them was Achar Mean, a professor of Pali language from Phnom Penh’s Unnalom monastery; he apparently spent the next two years in Yeay Tep monastery, in Kampong Chhnang province,¹ and established clandestine contact with the ICP in nearby Thailand. Like a number of the other monks who took part in the 1942 demonstration, he was later to join the communist movement, when he would adopt the name Son Ngoc Minh. Meanwhile, with the help of the Japanese, Son Ngoc Thanh had also escaped, and was given asylum in Tokyo for the next three years. In 1941, the Japanese had backed Thai occupation of Battambang and Siemreap provinces of *Kampuchea*; the Khmer anti-French movement now received sponsorship in Bangkok, and a Khmer Issarak (“Independent Khmers”) Committee, led by Poc Khun, was established there. The first *Kampuchean* resistance organizations, set up in Battambang in 1944, were apparently the work of this Issarak Committee and of the ICP and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). A young practitioner of traditional medicine (described by French intelligence as a “quack”) named Sieu Heng was one of those who took up the cause in 1944. (Archives d’Outre-Mer, France. Cambodge, 7F 29 (7). *Etude sur les mouvements re belles au Cambodge, 1942-52* [hereafter cited as *£iude*]).²

On 9 March 1945, the Japanese interned the entire Vichy French administration in Indochina. They brought Son Ngoc Thanh back to *Kampuchea* and installed him as Foreign Minister in Phnom Penh. Then, on 9 August, with an Allied victory looming, seven young Khmer officials stormed into King Sihanouk’s palace in an attempt to force his abdication and impose an independent government before the return of the French. The coup resulted in the installation as Prime Minister of Son Ngoc Thanh,

¹ Chandara Mohapatey, “A Khmer Issarak Leader’s Story” (Typescript, 1976 translation by Timothy Camev of Chandara’s autobiographical sketch), p.5.

² In 1970 Sieu Hong told U.S. State Department officer. Andrew Annppus. that he had “begun working with the resistance in 1944” Authors interview with Antippus (March 1980).

who then arrested the seven agitators. According to French intelligence, Son Ngoc Minh took part in this “insurrectional movement” (which did have the backing of large numbers of students and monks in Phnom Penh), “at the side of Son Ngoc Thanh” {*Note*, p. 23).

In February 1945, U.S. warplanes had bombed Japanese-held Phnom Penh and damaged Unnalom monastery. Tou Samouth, then a professor of Pali at the monastery, took fright and fled into the countryside (Author’s interview with Chea So th). He made his way to Vietnam and began working with the ICP, which was leading the August revolution that swept the country following the Japanese capitulation. Samouth was soon joined by Son Ngoc Minh.

In early September the leaders of the ICP’s Viet Minh Front in southern Vietnam contacted Son Ngoc Thanh, in an attempt to coordinate resistance to the returning French. According to one of them, Nguyen Thanh Son, the Kampuchean Prime Minister accepted the proposal and sent a delegation for talks with the Viet Minh (Author’s interview with Thanh Son). But the delegation “committed an error” and demanded, as a precondition for cooperation, the return to Kampuchea of two Mekong Delta provinces, Soc Trang and Travin, inhabited mostly by ethnic Khmers but under Vietnamese administration for well over 100 years. Negotiations broke down and the French had little trouble in reestablishing their authority in both countries, and in arresting Son Ngoc Thanh. It was not the last time that the issue of these provinces, known to Khmers as Kampuchea Krom (“lower Kampuchea”), was to divide Vietnamese from Kampucheans to the profit of outside powers.

In the wake of the French return, Son Ngoc Thanh’s Economy Minister Pach Chhoeun managed to escape to Vietnam, accompanied by the Khmer chief of Kompong Cham province and seven Khmer district chiefs. Others who followed them into the ranks of the Viet Minh included recent escapees from jail like Hem Savang, one of the seven men who carried out the 9 August palace coup and who had escaped in December 1945 (*Etude*). With the help of the Viet Minh, Pach Chhoeun set up a Khmer Independence Committee which was active for a short time along the border. Although it enlisted the support of many monks in the distribution of its propaganda, and recruited several hundred youths into its armed forces,³⁴ this Committee collapsed after only four months when its leaders surrendered to the French or were captured by them in Vietnam’s U Minh forest. Some of the Committee’s followers then joined the Viet Minh forces, and others joined the Bangkok-based Khmer Issarak Committee after making their way to western Kampuchea or Thailand. There they met up with Mey Pho, a former palace clerk involved in the August coup, who had also escaped from jail in December.

Son Ngoc Minh, Tou Samouth and Mey Pho were to work more closely and successfully with the Vietnamese communists than Pach Chhoeun had. Minh and Samouth

³ Authors interview with Thanh Son.

⁴ Authors interview with Nguven Xuan Hoang (Hanoi. 4 November 1980)

recruited supporters among the ethnic Khmer in Vietnam on the basis of Khmer- Vietnamese solidarity against the French, and travelled to Thailand to buy arms with funds provided for them by the Viet Minh. They made contact with Mey Pho and others in the Issarak Committee in Bangkok, and recruited supporters in Thai-held Battambang and Siemreap. It was in Thailand, under the auspices of the overseas branch of the ICP, that Son Ngoc Minh joined that party, in October 1946. Tou Samouth followed suit at the end of 1946, in Kampuchea. (Mey Pho joined in 1949, in the Dangrek mountains on the northern Kampuchea-Thai border.)' But before that, in June 1946, a mixed Khmer-Vietnamese resistance command had been set up in Battambang; its political commissar was Neth Laing Say (*Etude*), who with Mey Pho and the five other youths had staged the palace coup of August 1945. In August 1946, a mixed Khmer-Vietnamese force led by former French colonial army sergeant Dap Chuon, Son Ngoc Minh, and a woman of aristocratic background called Me Muon, briefly seized the town of Siemreap.

This spectacular success heralded increased Vietnamese and leftist influence in the Thai-based Issarak Committee. In late 1945 the Committee of twelve members had contained only one member sympathetic to the Vietnamese communists — Mey Pho. But this Committee had fallen apart through internal dissension and another was created in early 1947. This also quickly collapsed, partly because it and its subcommittees were headed by Thai officials and military officers trying to use the Issarak movement to recover Battambang and Siemreap provinces, which had been handed back to France a year before. In May 1947, two of the fourteen Issarak Committee members, Mey Phorin and Ros Yoeun, were shot by the Thai for insubordination to the Committee's Thai leaders (*ibid.*).

Despite such political difficulties, the anti-French military struggle was hotting up. Colonel Yves Gras, a French military officer, later reported Issarak losses of 500 killed and 136 arms captured in the month of May 1947 alone, and a number of surrenders; but he also noted that the Khmer Issarak movement in the northwest had not been defeated: "It had even developed, thanks to its support from Siam and from the Viet Minh, to the point of creating a serious problem in Cambodia." In Battambang, Siemreap, and the Dangrek mountains, he estimated that there were in all about 1,200 armed Issaraks, who "benefit from Viet Minh reinforcements of about the same numbers" (Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine*, Paris: Pion, 1979).

On 1 February 1948, the Issarak movement formed a Khmer People's Liberation Committee (KPLC; in Khmer, Kana Cheat Mouktak Keahak Mocchim Nokor Khmer), at a clandestine congress held in Battambang.* Although the KPLC and its armed forces were headed by Dap Chuon, who was a traditional warlord rather than a leftwing nationalist, five of the committee's eleven members were close allies of the Vietnamese communists and four of them were soon to join the communist party. A sixth committee member was the KPLC's "political commissar", Mao Sarouth, who had also taken part in the August 1945 palace coup. The first manifesto of the KPLC stated:

French imperialism is on the wane. It will meet its death at the hands of the fraternal combat by the three peoples, Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian. An Indochinese Front for Independence is therefore an immediate necessity.

The Khmer people must follow the path traced by democratic and anti-colonial human-kind. . . .

Dap Chuon and Ho Chi Minh exchanged congratulatory telegrams. Dap Chuon's own army consisted of 800 men, and other Issarak groups such as one force of 400 led by Keo Tak and a former bamboo seller called Leav Keo Moni, and another of 100 led by Sieu Heng, had joined the KPLC, making it a formidable problem for the French in Kampuchea's northwest (*Etude*).

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, Son Ngoc Minh had just returned from a trip to Thailand where with Viet Minh funds he had purchased enough supplies to equip a largely Khmer company of 100 fighters at Bay Nui on the Vietnamese border near Takeo. (Author's interview with Thanh Son.) At the end of 1947 he established the Liberation Committee of Southeast Kampuchea. Another former Khmer monk, Keo Moni (not to be confused with Leav Keo Moni), joined the ICP in 1947 and began recruiting a Khmer armed force in the eastern province of Prey Veng. Around the same time, a Khmer law student in Bangkok named Long Reth joined the CPT. He was later to transfer to the ICP and, under the name of Nuon Chea, eventually become deputy secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea.⁵

By late 1948, the Khmer resistance had divided the country into four Military Zones: the Southeast, headed by Keo Moni; the Northeast, under Son Sichan (later killed in action); the Southwest under Son Ngoc Minh; and the Northwest under Dap Chuon as head of the KPLC. Apart from Dap Chuon, all were members of the ICP and had established regional Liberation Committees closely linked to it. (Son Ngoc Minh's group also had a northwestern organization, apparently led by Sieu Heng.) The KPLC did not or did not yet have such links, but a 1952 French intelligence report nevertheless lamented that "the Khmer Issarak leaders, who had just shaken off Thai tutelage, were inclined to accept that of the Viet Minh instead" (*Etude*).

One of the earliest Viet Minh documents captured in Kampuchea by the French provides an insight into both the motivation and the style of Vietnamese communist operations there. Dated 30 April 1949, the statutes of the League for National Salvation of the Vietnamese Residents in Cambodia point out that Khmer and Vietnamese revolutionary organizations

must live side by side to help one another, to exchange initiatives and lessons drawn from experience, to help the two peoples to understand one another, to realise in deeds Khmer-Vietnamese friendship, to conclude on

⁵ Author's interview with Xuan Hoang (Hanoi. 4 November 1980) and with Pham Van Ba (Ho Chi Minh City. 28 October 1980). Nuon Chea's CPT background is also confirmed by other sources.

the basis of equality an alliance between the two peoples in the struggle against the reactionary French colonialists, invaders of Cambodia and of Vietnam.

The same document goes on to show how revolutionary power should be allocated in Kampuchea.

- Following the agreement of 16/1/48 of the [revolutionary] Government of the Southeast of Cambodia
- Following the agreement of 23/4/49 of the representative of the Government of the Southwest, Mr. Meas Svam [Meas Vong]
 - a. In the localities inhabited entirely by Vietnamese, the latter may take part in the Government of their localities.
 - b. In the localities populated by Cambodians and Vietnamese where the Cambodian element forms the majority of the population the Vietnamese may occupy auxiliary posts in the Government of their localities to aid the Cambodian authorities and conciliate the interests of the Vietnamese with those of the Cambodians.
 - c. The internal administration is entirely the province of the Cambodian government and is assured by the Cambodians. (Note, annexe 1.)

In early 1949, the KPLC became the Khmer National Liberation Committee, or KNLC (in Khmer, Kana Kamathikar Khmer Sang Cheat), and was reported by French intelligence to have “rid itself of the elements considered too pro-Viet Minh”. But in January 1949 the new KNLC committee was elected, headed by Dap Chuon with six other members, three of whom were close allies of the Viet Minh: Mey Pho, Leav Keo Moni, and Me Muon took charge of the KNLC’s Information, Economy and Treasury Departments, respectively. Further, Dap Chuon’s authoritarian style was rapidly alienating many of the KNLC’s other leaders and members, and from February 1949 Dap Chuon himself secretly began putting out feelers to the French to arrange an accommodation. In further elections in July 1949, Dap Chuon was replaced as KNLC leader. Poc Khun, who had founded the first Issarak Committee in Bangkok, took his place. Little is known of Poc Khun’s relations, if any, with the Vietnamese, although in 1952 French intelligence twice described him as “pro-Viet Minh”. But he was also described as attempting to persuade the Issaraks of the northwest to join forces with Son Ngoc Thanh, who was released from confinement in France in 1951 and took to the bush, whereupon Keo Tak left the KNLC and joined up with him. What Poc Khun seems to have been trying to do throughout this period was simply to unite *all* the various trends of the Issarak movement, including those sponsored by the Viet Minh. But the attempt, like other similar ones, failed. Leav Keo Moni “hesitated” to join Son Ngoc Thanh. Dap Chuon surrendered to the French in September 1949 with 300 armed men,

and was immediately named Commander-in-Chief of the “Franco-Khmer Corps” by the colonial authorities. On 19 April 1950, Leav Keo Moni was elected president of the KNLC, in place of Poc Khun (*Etude*).

In 1951, the Viet Minh claimed that by early 1946 the resistance in Kampuchea had been divided into two sections:

The one was led by military men, intellectuals and merchants, and relied only on armed forces and soon capitulated to the enemy or became bandits. The other included patriotic elements and cadres faithful to the resistance and, confident in the people’s strength, they were determined to carry on the struggle (FBIS, 27 April 1951. CCC 4 Voice of Nam Bo).

This statement is technically correct; military man Dap Chuon and intellectual Pach Chhoeun were unwilling or unable to work with the revolutionaries and did “capitulate” to the French. Others who were fighting on, like Path Chhay, were little more than bandits. But there were still others, and they were not close allies of the Viet Minh, who were just as “determined to carry on the struggle” and did contribute to the anti-French cause. Son Ngoc Thanh’s movement, and the split between Keo Tak and Leav Keo Moni, illustrated a serious problem for Son Ngoc Minh and the Vietnamese: they were able to win the loyalty of many Khmer nationalists but could not capture unchallenged leadership of the independence movement the way the Viet Minh had done in their own country. In many Khmer villages, they encountered traditional reluctance to work with Vietnamese (even though, in just as many, they did not). Apart from a number of Viet Minh-instigated student demonstrations and success with the urban Vietnamese community, their efforts among Khmers in Phnom Penh bore very little fruit. The Viet Minh Committee for Phnom Penh complained, in a document captured by the French and dated 11 September 1951:

Contrary to what they promised us, the monks have not yet presented any Cambodian candidates. We have addressed a letter to R.L., a progressive element in the city, but we have received no reply. ... Of our plan to create the Issarak movement (in Phnom Penh), we were able to achieve only one aspect: propaganda (Note, pp. 16-17).

This was to prove a telling failure. The Khmer revolutionary movement in the Kampuchean capital was so negligible, even by 1954, that it was open to a relatively easy takeover by a small outside group.

Moves Towards Unity: The Revolutionary Advances of 1950-54

In the countryside, however, the communists were making some important gains. On 17 April 1950, some 200 delegates, 105 of whom were allegedly Buddhist monks, assembled for the “First National Congress of the Khmer Resistance”, which seems to have been held in southwest Kampuchea. (This gathering was preceded by a preliminary meeting between Ho Chi Minh’s representative Le Duc Tho, various Viet Minh leaders from south Vietnam, commander of the Viet Minh troops in Kampuchea Nguyen Thanh Son, and Son Ngoc Minh, as well as other Khmer communists.) The Congress decided to establish the Unified Issarak Front, based on Son Ngoc Minh’s ICP-dominated Liberation Committees.

Both the Unified Issarak Front and a proto-government, the Provisional People’s Liberation Central Committee, were headed by Son Ngoc Minh. The latter had three vice-presidents: Chan Samay, who had studied in France and was deputy chief of the Liberation Committee of the Southwest, under Minh; Sieu Heng, who in 1948 had been a KPLC Committee member and was now chief of both the Issarak Front and the Liberation Committee in the northwest; and Tou Samouth, deputy chief of the Liberation Committee of the Southeast. All were already ICP members. The country was redivided into three rather than four Military Zones: the East, the Southwest, and the Northwest, headed by Keo Moni, Son Ngoc Minh, and Sieu Heng. Sieu Heng was at that point en route for training in North Vietnam, where his instructor Hoang Tung was later to describe him as “very active and intelligent, a very capable man, more capable than Son Ngoc Minh and Tou Samouth”. (Author’s interview with Hoang Tung [Hanoi, 31 October 1980].) After his return to Kampuchea in 1951, Heng was to rise meteorically in the communist party, only to betray it.

The Unified Issarak Front was headed by a National Central Executive Committee under Son Ngoc Minh and including Chan Samay, Sieu Heng, Tou Samouth, Chandara, Meas Vong, Meas Vannak, Chau Yin, Nhem Sun, Sa Phay, Ngin Hor, Keo Moni, Ach Saroeun, Satara, Keo Hem and Ney Sarann.¹

This event was a show of political strength, and from then on KNLC cooperation with the Son Ngoc Minh forces and the Vietnamese communists increased. In October

¹ Chandara, “A Khmer Issarak Leader’s Story.” and Robert Olivier. *Le protectorat francais au Cambodge*, these de doctoral du Seme cycle. University of Pans, 1969. p. 320c. Also author s interview with Tea Sabun (Phnom Penh, 23 August 1980).

1950, a KNLC delegation was sent to the communist-held zones of Vietnam to study the prospects of a closer alliance. The delegates were Me Muon, Mey Pho, and Hong Chhun, all supporters of such an alliance. (They were accompanied by Son Ngoc Minh, Ach Saroeun, and Sa Phay.) Not surprisingly, the three delegates returned in April 1951 favourably impressed. From that point, according to contemporary French intelligence, cooperation was “strengthened”. In the meantime, in February, Leav Keo Moni had been reelected leader of the KNLC “by a big majority” (*Etude*). Under his influence, and in particular that of Me Muon, the KNLC then joined the Unified Issarak Front.

Son Ngoc Minh and his followers had won an important political breakthrough, by incorporating the organization directly descended from the first Khmer Issarak Committee into a structure dominated by ICP members. 1952 French intelligence underlined the significance of this with its interesting description of Leav Keo Moni:

An ardent nationalist, he enjoys great popularity among the Khmer Issarak of the Northwest. Crafty and greedy, he is nevertheless renowned for his honesty and integrity.

And similarly, of Me Muon (who died in 1953):

Intelligent, very energetic, an experienced horse-rider, Mme. Muon enjoys great prestige in Siemreap and Battambang and/must be considered a dangerous rebel element (*ibid.*).

The stage was now set for the rapid expansion of the Issarak movement in close cooperation with the Vietnamese communists, as well as expansion of the Khmer communist movement which had become the backbone of the largest Issarak grouping, even though others remained aloof from it.

One reason for the strength of Son Ngoc Minh’s movement was the emphasis it had been placing on the training of Khmer cadres (as distinct from relying “only on armed forces”). Although by 1950 there were still only 40 Khmer members of the ICP in Kampuchea, and four Khmers in the CPT,² hundreds of others had already been trained in party schools. In March 1951, it was announced that the fifth intake of Issarak trainees had entered the “Achar Hem Chieu Political School” in the southwest of Kampuchea.³ Krot Theam, a Khmer refugee now living in Australia, was a member of the first intake of young Issaraks at a revolutionary training centre in the forest

² *Summary of Annotated Party History* (translated captured Khmer communist document), by the “Eastern Region Military Political Service” (1973), hereafter cited as Summary.

³ Foreign Broadcasting Information Service (FB IS), 26 March 1951, FFF 3. Voice of Nam Bo, 20 March 1951. A conference organized in June 1952 by Son Ngoc Minh and Nguven Thanh Son decided to establish, in each of Kampuchea’s four Military Zones, a political-military school “led by the Vietnamese but teaching in the Cambodian language. The Vietnamese cadres, put at the disposition of the Issarak groups, must know the Khmer language which will be the sole language used in the ranks of the Cambodian resistance” *Note*, p. 21; quotation from a communist document.

of Kampuchea's northwest, in 1949. Theam says 2,700 people lived and worked in this clandestine "fortress", which was run by a Khmer political commissar and several Khmer instructors, who often brought in Vietnamese teachers to give specific lessons. Subjects studied included social deportment, agriculture, military tactics, and politics, taught from a mimeographed Khmer-language textbook over an inch thick. (Author's interviews with Krot Theam [Melbourne, 2 and 30 December 1976].)

Men Chhan, who in 1979 became Minister of Agriculture in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, recalls attending ICP study sessions in the forest in the east of the country, near Memot, in 1947-48. There were 500 students altogether; in groups of 50, he says. The documents they studied were written in Khmer by Tou Samouth. It appears that although Samouth did not command any of the regional Liberation Committees, he was at least as important in the ICP as Son Ngoc Minh and perhaps even the key figure in the sense that it was he who was laying the foundations' of Khmer communism.

In early 1951 the ICP Second Congress had resolved to dissolve itself into three national communist parties for Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea. By late 1951, the newly formed Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), according to a document captured by the French and labelled "to be burnt'after reading", had 1,000 Khmer members (*Note*, annexe 3, chapter 6). According to Men Chhan, there were about 300 in Kampuchea's Eastern Zone alone. (Author's interview with Men Chhan [Phnom Penh, 25 September 1980].) Some KPRP members were ethnic Khmers from Vietnam, like Son Ngoc Minh, Chan Samay and Meas Vong, but Vietnamese inhabitants of Kampuchea were recruited not into the KPRP but into the newly formed Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP). The Khmer party was led by a provisional central committee (called "the party formation and propagation committee", pending the KPRP's first congress) established on 30 September 1951. This committee of 15 was headed by Son Ngoc Minh and included Tou Samouth (deputy), Sieu Heng, Chan Samay, and N. T. Nhung (Author's interview with Xuan Hoang). Of the others, some were apparently ethnic Vietnamese; the rest may have included such former Khmer ICP members as Mey Pho, Chea Soth, So Phim, Prasith, Ney Sarann, Hong Chhun, Men Chhan, Non Suon, Keo Moni, Moul Sambath, Keo Meas and Nong Sralao. Leav Keo Moni joined the KPRP in 1952. So did Sos Man, a leader of the Cham Muslim minority in Kampuchea (*ibid.*).

Over the ensuing months and years, the party was progressively built up from the base, with ethnic Vietnamese withdrawing from the lower levels first as Khmer cadres and recruits took over the old ICP cells (and established new ones) in villages, then subdistricts, and finally at the district, province, zone and national levels. At the highest levels, for example the central administration, existing mixed Khmer-Vietnamese

cells remained in place until 1954, and were called “ICP cells”, even though the ICP had been officially abolished in 1950.⁴

It was possibly for this reason, plus the fact that the KPRP had not yet held its inaugurating first congress, that a captured Viet Minh document dated June 1952 states that the KPRP “is not the vanguard party of the working class, but the vanguard party of the nation gathering together all the patriotic and progressive elements of the Khmer population”.⁵ This formulation, indicating that the Vietnamese party still saw the Marxist-Leninist status of its Kampuchean counterpart as relatively low, also stems from the Vietnamese communist view that the working class was smaller and the proletarian movement less developed in Kampuchea than in Vietnam. (Kampuchea was still an overwhelmingly peasant society.)

The process of construction from the base upwards also applied to the resistance army. The recruiting of all-Khmer guerrilla and troop units began at the level of militia (for example, subdistrict forces) and was gradually implemented at the district, province, and, by 1954, Zone levels. There seems to have been no attempt before 1954 to create a national-level regular army, probably because it was not feasible to do so.

Before discussing the size of the Khmer Issarak forces fighting alongside the Viet Minh, it is important to reiterate that there were many Issaraks who did not cooperate with the Viet Minh, or who did so temporarily or sporadically and were largely hostile to them. The biggest of these groups were commanded by Prince Chantaraingsey (1,000 men, including militia) and bandit leader Puth Chhay (1,200 men), both of whom were based in the Kompong Speu area and rallied to the French in 1953. Other bands still active in 1952 were those of Savang Vong (400 men) and Oum (200), and the 500-strong force of Keo Tak and Son Ngoc Thanh (*Etude*).

None of these five groups were part of the Unified Issarak Front (UIF), none possessed a nationwide organizational structure, and they often fought amongst themselves as well as with the UIF and the Viet Minh. But like the UIF and the Viet Minh, they played an important role in weakening the colonialists’ grip on Kampuchea. One Frenchman, Robert Olivier, who was serving in Kampuchea at the time, later wrote:

Despite the indisputable presence, in the heart of the Issarak movements, of big country bandits, despite the ferocious exactions of certain bands, despite or because of the terror that they sowed, the propaganda of the Issaraks and the Viet Minh found numerous echoes in a public opinion that yearned for independence and was in any case completely hostile to the French attempt to organise an Indochina Federation. (Olivier, *Le protectorat francais au Cambodge*, p. 302.)

⁴ Authors interview with Pham Van Ba. Ba told me he was a member of the same “ICP cell” as Pol Pot. m 1953-54.

⁵ Translation of a captured document dated 24 June 1952, described as “Official Telegram No. 749-S.D.C.S.” This document is available in the Wason-Echols Collection in Olin Library, Cornell University, USA.

Apart from the KNLC forces of 300-350 troops led by Leav Keo Moni, it is difficult to estimate the size of the Unified Issarak Front army before the period of growth began in 1951. The UIF was backed by 3,000 Viet Minh troops in Kampuchea, and they were facing, at first, two battailions (1,000-1,200 men) of the French Expeditionary Corps and a large number of Khmers in the colonial army (Author's interview with Thanh Son). But then, according to an Indian historian:

The (Phnom Penh) Government's military budget, besides the U.S. aid obtained through France, rose from 75 to 200 million piastres between 1950 and 1951. The expenditure on the National Police and 'auto-defence' exceeded 40 million piastres.⁶

By about 1952 the French Expeditionary Corps in Kampuchea had been increased to approximately seven battailions (4,000 troops) (Author's interview with Thanh Son). This commitment, however small, was one that France could hardly afford with so many of its soldiers tied down in Vietnam, where the colonialists were in much deeper trouble.

While the French were able to penetrate the noncommunist Issarak forces and those of the KNLC, and compile fairly exact figures on their respective strengths, their intelligence on what they called the "Khmer Issarak/Viet Minh", that is, Son Ngoc Minh's Liberation Committees, was much poorer and dependent on captured documents rather than on information supplied to them by agents. According to a 1952 report:

The Viet Minh has been led to establish units of widely varying numbers, composition, and missions which are difficult to catalogue ... Within these units, the proportion of Khmer and Vietnamese elements, for psychological and political reasons, is never indicated, and it is difficult to obtain even an approximate idea of them ...

However, the tendency is towards constant but discreet increases in the percentage of Khmer fighters. In early May 1951, the Viet Minh and Khmer Issarak/Viet Minh forces in Cambodia could be roughly estimated at

Fighting units	3,000
Various branches	1,200
Militia	800

The militia, consisting of local guerrillas, were almost exclusively Khmer.

⁶ V.M. Red di. *A History of the Cambodian Independence Movement, 1863-1955* (Sn Venkacesvara. Tirupau. 1973), p 188. ‘

The last figure must be seriously increased because since that time numerous militia units have been established in “strategic” districts and sub-districts. Some of these units are armed secretly, in the case of localities near the zones where our troops operate (Etude).

The tendency of French sources to underestimate the numbers of Khmers fighting alongside the Viet Minh in Kampuchea is illustrated by the case of Mobile Unit 140, a mixed Khmer-Vietnamese unit in the northwest. The intelligence report from mid-1952 describes this unit as a “company”, and gives its strength as “500 men, of whom 200 are fighters”; only twenty of the two hundred were “Khmer Issarak/Viet Minh”, the rest being Vietnamese, according to the report. However, Krot Theam, who was a member of Unit 140 from 1950-52, describes it as a 2,000-strong “brigade” (probably an exaggeration), only 300-400 of whom were Vietnamese. He says the “brigade”, named after Achar Chum, a colleague of Hem Chieu, was commanded by a Khmer named Chey Samreth. The second-in-command was a Vietnamese. (Author’s interviews with Theam.)

The discrepancy seems to arise from the fact that, according to Theam, by 1951 the Vietnamese and Kampuchean soldiers began to form into separate units. Theam’s unit was active in Battambang, whereas the “company” 140 described by the French was located in Kompong Chhnang province. The French do not seem to have known that this company, which may well have been largely Vietnamese, was only one part of a larger, Khmer-dominated force active in Kampuchea’s northwest.

Chandara, a member of the National Central Executive Committee of the Unified Issarak Front who defected to the colonial authorities in November 1952, later wrote of four “battalions” of ethnic Khmers from Vietnam (two of them led by Meas Vong and Meas Vannak) totalling 2,036 “fully-armed men”, and another 3,600 armed Khmers organized into seven more battalions (Chandara, “A Khmer Issarak Leader’s Story”). Although Chandara was probably vastly exaggerating the strength of these Khmer forces (which he claimed he commanded), it is revealing that only one of the eleven numbered “battalions” was known to French intelligence in mid-1952. It was described as a platoon, perhaps correctly.

In the late 1940s, the strategy of Son Ngoc Minh and his Viet Minh supporters had been to establish “mobile units” of mixed Khmer-Vietnamese forces, generally with one company operating in a sector of one or two provinces. This was most successful at first in the Eastern Zone bordering Vietnam, where there were four mobile units by 1950, led by Son Ngoc Minh’s lieutenants: Sa Phay, So Vanna (later known as So Phim), and Nong Sralao commanded forces called Si Votha I (800 troops in 1952, operating in northern Prey Veng and eastern Kompong Cham), Achar Hem Chieu (about 60 troops in 1952, in Svay Rieng province), and Ang Phim (100 men in Kandal province in 1952); a fourth, Mobile Unit 127, was called Pou Kombo. These units, like that called Achar Chum (Mobile Unit 140 in the northwest), were named after Khmer anti-French heroes. Another Khmer Issarak band led by Ngin Hor, a close associate of Son Ngoc Minh, had

been operating in Kandal since at least March 1949. Its strength was unknown. The French estimated that the Pou Kombo unit numbered 200 troops in 1952; Chim Chin, who was a member of this unit, told me in 1980 that it was composed of equal numbers of Khmers and Vietnamese, “but the leader was a Khmer”. There was a Sivotha II unit of similar size to that of Si Votha I, but operating on the other side of the Mekong. It is said to have been composed of Vietnamese, while Si Votha I was a Khmer force. French intelligence reported in 1952 that another mobile unit of Khmers was under formation in Prey Veng.

In the Southwest Zone was Mobile Unit 160 composed of about 100 men, “Vietnamese” according to the French. In the same zone in 1952, the intelligence report noted the formation of Mobile Unit 180 of about 100 troops, made up of ten sections “formed with Khmer fighters” (*Etude*).

There was also a Khmer force in the northeast (Kratie and Stung Treng provinces) led by Nhem Sun, one in Koh Kong led by Prasith, and two others led by Chau Yin and Meas Vannak near the Tonle Sap Lake, according to Chandara. These bands were of unknown strength. Also unknown was the percentage of Khmers in a force recruited by a Vietnamese called Tai in Kompong Thom in 1951, and in the twenty-seven mixed Khmer-Vietnamese platoons (total strength, over 800) located all over Kampuchea and known to French intelligence in 1952. But discounting these, it seems likely that there were about 1,400 main force Khmer troops belonging to the United Issarak Front in 1952. To this needs to be added most of the reported 800 members of local militia forces (including district forces) in May 1951, a figure which according to French intelligence had “seriously increased” within a year, in order to get a fuller picture of UIF military strength. Pham Van Ba, a former member of the command staff of the “Vietnamese Volunteer Army in Kampuchea” which was led by Nguyen Thanh Son, told me in an interview in 1980 that around 1952 there were about 3,000 Khmers enrolled in provincial and district-level forces, aside from guerrillas at the village and subdistrict levels. He said that in the district forces there were also Vietnamese, outnumbered two to one by the Khmers, and it would seem likely that the proportions were reversed in the case of the provincial forces. His figure of 3,000 does not seem to be inconsistent with the French and Khmer sources I have discussed.

From 1952 to 1954, UIF strength increased significantly, if one is to believe both Vietnamese sources (Nguyen Thanh Son and Pham Van Ba) and the 1952 French intelligence report noting the “constant but discreet increases in the percentage of Khmer fighters”.

Nguyen Thanh Son recalls three mobile units of one or two companies (100-200 troops) attached to the southeast, northeast and northwest zones, and one mobile unit of battalion strength (500-600 troops, led by a Khmer called Sem Khan), attached to the southwest. By 1954, he said, these forces, numbering about 1,000 soldiers, were entirely Khmer. According to Pham Van Ba, by 1954 the provincial and district forces were all Khmer and had their own command. (At zone level and above, the command was still mixed, he said.) Each district had a “section” of Khmer troops, or a platoon.

Thus district forces composed of Khmers numbered from 1,000 (to 3,000) in 1954. Further, according to Pham Van Ba, each of Kampuchea's fourteen provinces had a company of UIF troops, all Khmer, totalling 1,400 soldiers.

It therefore seems that, by the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference, the Khmer forces of Son Ngoc Minh's UIF totalled about 3,500 soldiers, plus an unknown number of subdistrict and village guerrilla units. However, the majority of these forces had been recruited only in the previous two years, and lacked experience.

The UIF administrative apparatus, according to French intelligence, was "found at the province, district, and sub-district levels" by 1952. At the province and district levels, it consisted of a president, vice-president, head of the office, treasurer and secretaries. At the subdistrict level the head of the office was not found (*Etude*). Discounting any presence at the village level, the UIF administration thus seems to have involved a staff of more than two hundred people in each province, or several thousand for the country.

Within these military and administrative structures grew the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party. By July 1954 the party had 1,862 members, according to Nguyen Xuan Hoang, the Vietnamese official most closely concerned with the Kampuchean revolutionaries in the ensuing years. This figure is likely to be fairly accurate. It does not seem inconsistent with that of 1,000 Khmers in the KPRP by 1952. Hoang, interviewed in 1980, told me that in 1954 the Khmer communists were working in 136 KPRP cells throughout Kampuchea. This would mean about ten cells per province, and an average of more than one (of about thirteen members) per district.

Below the party structure was the KPRP's Youth League headed by Chan Saman. Its membership is unknown. According to Pham Van Ba, it reached 20,000 by 1954; it was apparently the KPRP's Youth League that former UIF member Keo Chanda had in mind when he told me in 1980 that the party had "20,000 members". However, members of the Youth League, and the unknown but most likely larger number of people who joined the United Issarak Front (iii November 1950 the Kompong Chhnang-North Kompong Speu branch of the UIF published one thousand copies of the UIF Statutes)⁷ received much less political training than KPRP members, and even though inactive members were very few in number, many of them probably drifted away from the revolutionary movement after independence was attained in 1954. The same would seem to be true in the case of the Issarak Monks' Association.

It is difficult to estimate the amount of territory and the number of people under UIF administration by 1954. In April 1951, the Viet Minh radio station, Voice of Nam Bo, claimed that one-third of Kampuchea was under Issarak control, one-third under French control, and one-third "beginning to participate in the resistance". (FBIS, 27 April 1951, CCC 4, Voice of Nam Bo, 19 April 1951.) Nguyen Xuan Hoang says that in 1951, "59 out of 109 districts had been liberated". A 1972 Kampuchean communist document claimed that two-fifths of the country was under the control of the revolution

⁷ Note annexe 2.

in 1954.⁸ The French Kampuchea specialist Jean Delvert has written that by 1952, “certain regions were . . . more or less abandoned or under enemy control”, but gives no indication of how extensive these regions were (Jean Delvert, *Le Paysan cambodgien* [Paris: Mouton, 1960], p. 306, note 1).

UIF territorial advances were a worry to the French. Between 1950 and 1954, the colonial authorities rounded up 350,000 Khmer peasants from several key districts in Takeo, Kampot and Kompong Cham provinces, and resettled them along main roads. This attempt to remove them from the influence of the UIF and the Viet Minh involved a number of “excesses” and would seem to have been effective in slowing down revolutionary expansion in these areas (Delvert, pp. 207-10).

Many sources (including French intelligence) say that the UIF was a puppet organization directly run by the Vietnamese. One, Robert Olivier, has stated that of the twenty-one members of the three seven-person communist zone committees for Kampuchea’s Northwest, Southwest, and East, only two were Khmers (Olivier, p. 320j, note 34). However, according to Krot Theam, the four leading cadres responsible for the Northwest Zone were Khmer — Sieu Heng, Moul Sambath (military), Nuon Chea/Long Reth (economics) and Achar Bun Kasem (politics). In the East, according to former Issarak Chim Chin, the Zone Committee included Keo Moni (president), Tou Samouth (vice-president) and Ney Sarann (“member no. 1”). In the Southwest, president and vice-president were Son Ngoc Minh and Chan Samay respectively; members apparently included Prach Son, Prach Sun,⁹ and Prom Samith, a former monk who had known Son Ngoc Minh in Unnalom monastery in the early 1940s. In 1950 he left Peamreang monastery in Kandal province to join the Issarak forces and then the communist party. Although a complete list of the twenty-one names has yet to be compiled, Olivier does seem wrong about this, perhaps partly because he considered Sieu Heng a “Khmer from Cochinchina” (or Khmer Krom, therefore a citizen of Vietnam), whereas in fact Sieu Heng was born and raised in Battambang, of Khmer Krom parents. If we consider the Khmer Krom as Vietnamese, that still leaves eight or more of the committee members named above who were Kampuchean-born.

Whether the UIF leaders were “puppets” of the Viet Minh is another question. What is certain is that people from backgrounds as varied as those of Son Ngoc Minh, Mey Pho, and Leav Keo Moni represented important sections of the Khmer political spectrum,¹⁰ and that they agreed with the Vietnamese communists on the need for a coordinated struggle to achieve independence and revolution in both Kampuchea and Vietnam.

⁸ Ith Sann. “Nine months with the maquis.” in Timothy Carney, *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea*. Cornell University Southeast Asia Program (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. 1977).

⁹ FBIS. 25 September 1950, EEE, Voice of Nam Bo. 15 September 1950.

¹⁰ According to French intelligence, “some influential members of the Democratic party in Battambang developed relations with certain band leaders of Leav Keo Moni’s National Liberation Committee” Archives d’Outre-Mer. France. Cambodge 7F 29(4). *Etude sur revolution de la politique mteneure et les partis pohtiques khmers (1945-1 juillet 1951)*, p. 34.

King Norodom Sihanouk, as he then was, had recognized the success of the Viet Minh in winning Khmer allies when he said in July 1951: “These disruptive foreign elements, by pressure or lying propaganda, have managed to win to their cause a great number of our compatriots” (*Cambodge*, 26 July 1951, p. 1). The French intelligence report quoted above noted that while “a glance at the map shows that no Cambodian province remained unscathed” by the Viet Minh, the Vietnamese communist “‘invasion’ had never been confronted with any serious reaction by the Khmer and Vietnamese populations (in Kampuchea) in general” (*Etude*).

In 1952 the UIF established a “Government of National Resistance”, with Son Ngoc Minh as President and Chan Samay as Vice-President. Ministers included Tou Samouth (Interior), Keo Moni (Foreign Affairs), Chau Yin (Education), Sieu Heng (Defence), Leav Keo Moni (Ethnic Affairs), and Sos Man (Religion).

Disintegration and Dissension, 1954—63

At Geneva in July 1954, the UIF government's representatives, Keo Moni and Mey Pho, were not admitted to the Conference room. This was despite the efforts of the Viet Minh, and sprang from the fact that the Soviet Union and, in particular, China came to the Conference to make concessions to the Western bloc.¹

In the fighting that led up to the negotiations, according to Hoang Tung who was then the VWP representative in charge of training Khmer communists, Son Ngoc Minh and the VWP were planning to send "two divisions" of Viet Minh troops to Kampuchea, "to create a free zone" in Battambang and Siemreap under UIF control.

But this project was killed by a telegram from Zhou En-lai in Geneva, saying that such a move would sabotage the Conference.

(Hoang Tung added: We did not realize that the Chinese plans were merely to establish peace on their borders, a zone of security, and northern Indochina was enough for them.)

The Conference decided that the "Khmer Resistance Forces" (UIF), unlike the revolutionary movements in Vietnam and Laos, should not be given control of any of their national territory in which to regroup. They had to lay down their arms, and take part, under what would be (physically) very risky conditions, in national elections to be organized by the Sihanouk Government in 1955. Or they could secretly go to North Vietnam with the withdrawing Viet Minh forces.

Perhaps as many as 2,000 Khmer revolutionaries chose the latter alternative. One-third of these people were UIF military personnel, and around 500 were KPRP members, mostly those best known to the population in their area of activity and therefore most vulnerable to repression by the government. The regroupees therefore tended to be the most valuable of the local KPRP cadres. They also included Son Ngoc Minh, Sieu Heng, Mey Pho, Nuon Chea, So Phiin, Ney Sarann, Keo Moni, Leav Keo Moni, Sos Man, Hong Chhun, Nhem Sun, Chan Samay, 'and a youth called Pen Sevan. In 1959, Son Ngoc Thanh, who had by then aligned himself closely with the U.S., warned

¹ I have not yet consulted the important work by Francois Jovaux. *La Chme et le reglement du premier conflit d'Indochme* (Geneva 1954) (Sorbonne. Pans, 1979).

of “the Cambodian students, high school and normal school pupils, porters and dockers who have moved to North Vietnam to join up with the Khmer communist army”.² .

Over 1,000 KPRP members stayed behind in Kampuchea. Some, like Non Suon and Keo Meas, formed a legal party, the Pracheachon, to contest the coming elections. Others, like Tou Samouth, Prasith, Moul Sambath, Chau Yin and Nong Sralao remained underground, to be joined by Sieu Heng, Nuon Chea, So Phim and Ney Sarann when they returned from Hanoi after a few months.

It is difficult to know why these four came back home,³ but in 1970 Sieu Heng was to tell a U.S. State Department officer that he had decided the struggle was over, since independence had been achieved. From 1955, he went on, he began working secretly as an agent for Sihanouk’s then military chief Lon Nol (Author’s interview with Antippos). At that point, in the absence of Son Ngoc Minh, Sieu Heng was secretary of the KPRP’s “temporary central committee”;⁴ for some reason on his return he replaced Minh’s deputy, Tou Samouth, as acting party secretary.

The reasons for Sieu Heng’s betrayal remain unclear also, but, along with the departure of the KPRP’s most effective leaders and cadres, it was to decimate the Kampuchean communist movement.

In the meantime, a number of Khmer students in France had returned home and joined the UIF. Ten of them had by 1951 become members of the French Communist Party, the most important of these being Ieng Sary, Rath Samuoeun and Saloth Sar; and another twenty or so apparently including Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, Yun Soeun, Hem Phan, Sok Thuok (later known as Vom Veth), and a teacher called Moong, had joined the PCF by 1953 (Author’s interview with Xuan Hoang).

In August 1953, Saloth Sar and Yun Soeun arrived at the UIF and Viet Minh headquarters on the border of Kompong Cham and the Vietnamese province of Tay Ninh. Chea Soth was there to meet them, and recalls that Saloth Sar

said he came to take part in the struggle and learn from us, but in fact he came to see if there really were Khmers carrying out the revolution or not. He said that everything should be done on the basis of self-reliance, independence and mastery. The Khmers should do everything on their own.

The two former students remained in the revolutionary headquarters, Saloth Sar joining an “ICP cell” consisting of ten Khmers and ten Vietnamese, in the administrative office of the National Central Executive Committee. He was instructed on how “to work with the masses at the base, to build up the Issarak committees at the village

² “Manifeste du mouvement khmer aerei.” in *Document et cents se rapportant au “Khmer Serei”*, copy in the Wason collection. Olin Library, Cornell University.

³ It is possible that Son Ngoc Minh (a member of the five-person “temporary central committee” of the KPRP formed after the Geneva Conference *inside the country*) and others had originally planned to come back from Hanoi after a short time, in secret.

⁴ *Summary* and author’s interview with Xuan Hoang.

level, member by member”, according to Pham Van Ba. He and Yun Soeun were soon joined by other returned students from France.

When the First Indochina War ended less than a year later, Yun Soeun, Rath Samuoeun and Hem Phan withdrew to Hanoi. Saloth Sar and twenty of their fellow students were smuggled back into Phnom Penh by Pham Van Ba, in his capacity as liaison officer in the Joint Committee for the Implementation of the Geneva Accords. Saloth Sar entered the capital disguised as Ba’s “aide-de-camp”, and was replaced by a Vietnamese officer for the Viet Minh leader’s return trip. The returned students, especially after Ieng Sary’s arrival from France in 1956, soon began to dominate the Phnom Penh committee of the KPRP, whose leader Keo Meas was to flee to Hanoi in 1958 to avoid arrest by the Sihanouk regime.

Besides the Phnom Penh committee, there were seventeen KPRP provincial committees in 1954 (ibid.), and a temporary Central Committee consisting of Sieu Heng, Tou Samouth, Son Ngoc Minh (absent), So Phim and N. T. Nhung. Sieu Heng was made responsible for rural areas, and Tou Samouth the cities.

In the September 1955 general elections in Kampuchea, Prince Sihanouk’s ruling Sangkum Party won every seat. This was partly because of his role in negotiating independence for the country after 1952 and because he had managed to herd the various squabbling conservative parties into the Sangkum, and partly because of his government’s intimidation of voters and harassment of the candidates of other parties which had also played important roles in the independence struggle. These were the newly radicalized Democratic Party, led by republican Keng Vannsak (who was shot at by government agents at a rally the day before the elections), and the communist-led Pracheachon, one of whose candidates won 25% of the vote in his Kompong Cham electoral district despite spending the entire campaign period in jail.⁵ These elections began a series of defeats for the communists in Kampuchea, as a result of imprisonments, assassinations, and internal malaise. Sa Phay defected, and other leaders ceased political activity. In the temporary Central Committee, Sieu Heng was playing a key role in the destruction of the party he led, and N. T. Nhung, according to Nguyen Xuan Hoang, “was much terrorised and abandoned the party line to lead an ordinary life”. With Son Ngoc Minh absent, this left only Tou Samouth and So Phim.

A 1973 party history was to say:

. . . from 1955 to 1959, the rural committees lost about ninety percent of their cadres and party members . . . Only ten percent of the revolutionary movement remained active ...

Although the successful attainment of independence dampened the enthusiasm of revolutionaries as effectively as government arrests and assassinations terrorized them,

⁵ Michael Vickery. “Looking Back at Cambodia,” *Westerly* (University of Western Australia). No. 4 (December 1976), pp 14-28

Sieu Heng's role as a double agent seems largely responsible for the complete debilitation of the KPRP's rural activities. In 1959 he openly defected to the government. According to the 1973 party history:

The committee in charge of the urban movement was named the committee in charge of the country's general affairs. It was composed of four persons, with comrade TSM [Tou Samouth] as chairman.

In 1960, the party's "second general assembly" was held, involving seven urban and only fourteen rural representatives, for a country where 90% of the population were peasants. It was decided to "form the Marxist-Leninist Party" (ibid.), which now considered itself the vanguard of the Kampuchean working class and not simply of the nation. The party apparently assumed the title "Workers' Party of Kampuchea", following the lead of the VWP and assuming similar Marxist-Leninist status. A new Central Committee was formed, with Tou Samouth (secretary-general), Nuon Chea (deputy secretary-general), and Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) making up the politburo, and Moong, Ieng Sary, Keo Meas and Son Ngoc Minh (who were both in Hanoi), So Phim, Prasith and Non Suon as Central Committee members (the latter two being candidate members). (Author's interview with Xuan Hoang.)

The returned students, through their influence on the Phnom Penh party committee, easily the largest urban committee in a party whose rural committees had largely ceased functioning, had thus captured positions 3, 4 and 5 in the party. If the KPRP had really lost 90% of its rural membership (probably an exaggeration) by 1959, active party cadres inside the country would have numbered about one hundred. At any rate they were a group small and scattered enough for twenty or so educated and confident young militants to win considerable influence within the party, despite relatively little experience with the Kampuchean masses. ⁶

The student's main difference with the veterans concerned their perceptions of the nature of the Sihanouk regime. They tended to be implacably opposed to it, as a backward, dictatorial monarchy. The veterans were much more inclined to be sympathetic to the Vietnamese communists, who were about to enter a life-and-death struggle with U.S. imperialism and were therefore concerned to be seen to respect (and therefore effectively encourage) Sihanouk's new policy of neutrality. Tou Samouth documents captured by Sihanouk's police in 1962 suggested this, advising Kampuchean communists to "arm themselves with a little patience",⁶ so as not to drive Sihanouk into the American camp, something that would have undoubtedly spelt doom for all the Indochinese revolutions.

⁶ Norodom Sihanouk, *Le Cambodge et ses relations avec ses voisins* (Phnom Penh: Ministère de l'Information. 1962), pp. 59-61.

Forward to Democratic Kampuchea

For many, patience ran out after 20 July 1962, when Tou Samouth was “kidnapped” and killed. The removal from the scene of the last communist leader with a high level of (traditional) learning left a party whose veterans were nearly all peasants. It is quite possible that Tou Samouth was eliminated by Pol Pot’s group; in 1978 their regime was to describe him as a Vietnamese “puppet” and an “incompetent”, and then selfconsciously withdraw the comment. (In 1969 Lon Nol intelligence reported that Tou Samouth was active in eastern Kampuchea, which suggests that the then government was not aware of his death.) The Pol Pot group of returned students was poised to take over the party.

On 21 February 1963, during the third general assembly of about twenty party leaders, a new leadership took office. Pol Pot became secret ary-general, bypassing Nuon Chea who remained deputy. Ieng Sary, So Phim and Vom Veth completed the politburo, and Moong, Prasith, Moul Sambath, Mok, Phuong, Son Sen, and Son Ngoc Minh (in Hanoi) made up the Central Committee. Returned students from France had moved into positions 1, 3, 5, 6 and 11 (Author’s interview with Xuan Hoang). Party veterans retained only positions 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12, with Son Ngoc Minh as well as Keo Meas and Non Suon (now in prison) suffering significant demotion. Two newcomers on the Central Committee were Mok, a former Issarak district chief from Takeo, and Vom Veth, a returned student who had become a customs official. These two, in military and political affairs respectively, were to share responsibility with the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary group for the most violent and radical policies of the 1975-79 years.

Vietnamese sources claim that Nuon Chea would normally have replaced Tou Samouth, pending a party Congress. But the Phnom Penh party committee, led by Vom Veth, demanded an extraordinary Congress as soon as possible. This was difficult to organize in the climate of government repression, and of the twenty who attended only a few were rural representatives, from provinces close to the capital, according to these sources. It certainly seems that the Phnom Penh party committee, now without both Keo Meas and Tou Samouth, was overrepresented: Saloth Sar, Son Sen, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samp han, Moong, Vom Veth, Hou Youn and Hu Nim, who were Phnom Penhbased, were all apparently there. Hou Yuon, however, is likely to have argued for a policy of continued support for Sihanouk’s neutrality in solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution (judging from a book he wrote about this in 1964).¹ Non Suon, for his part, had publicly reaffirmed links with Hanoi in 1961 (Roger Smith,

¹ *Pahnnyaha Sahakor* [The cooperative question] (Phnom Penh. 1964).

“Cambodia,” in George McT. Kahin, ed., *Government and Politics in Southeast Asia* [Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964], p. 627).

Tea Sabun, who seems to have been present at this assembly, told the author in a 1980 interview that So Phim, the former Issarak chief of Svay Rieng province and leader of the Achar Hem Chieu mobile unit, stood against Pol Pot for the post of party secretary-general. He was defeated, “not by a vote but by opinion”. It was such an exercise in party democracy that opened the way for vast changes in the line and the nature of the Khmer communist movement, changes of immense importance for the Kampuchean people. Within a few months, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary took to the jungle, and neither vote nor opinion was to remove them from party power after that. Led by urban-based intellectuals, the party began preparing for a peasant revolution by attempting to create a new rural party structure, in order to fight a guerrilla war against the regime of a Prince who still enjoyed rather widespread rural support. The Pol Pot group did have the benefit, however, of a rather large party membership, even if it had mostly become dormant.

In 1965-66, Pol Pot made secret visits to both Hanoi and Peking. In Vietnam, he would certainly have met with the overseas branch of the party Central Committee, led by Son Ngoc Minh and including Keo Moni, Mey Pho, Yun Soeun and perhaps Rath Samuoeun. This branch was apparently called the “Liberation Committee”, probably a recognition of the continued existence of the Liberation Committee Son Ngoc Minh had founded in the late 1940s. (There also existed in Hanoi a “Northern Regroupees Committee” of Khmers, consisting of Keo Moni, Leav Keo Moni, and Sos Man.)² Subjects discussed included the name of the party, and its date of founding, but there was undoubtedly major disagreement on attitudes to the Sihanouk regime.

Pol Pot then went on to China for discussions with Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and Mao Zedong. According to a Vietnamese source, he spent about four months there, at the end of which a banquet was held and Khmer and Vietnamese leaders invited. On this occasion, Mao himself reportedly made a long speech about the merits of the Kampuchean party, causing the Vietnamese guests to suspect that he had had important discussions with Pol Pot and had for some reason been rather impressed.

After Pol Pot’s return to Kampuchea, the party’s name was apparently changed from the Workers’ Party to “Communist Party of Kampuchea” (CPK). In the light of the 1978 Pol Pot *Black Book*, this period assumes some significance:

As early as 1966, the Communist Party of Kampuchea has judged that it could have only State relations and other official relations with Vietnam, for there was a fundamental contradiction between the Kampuchean revolution and the Vietnamese revolution. (Livre Noir: Faits et preuves des actes d’aggression et d’annexion du Vietnam contre le Kampuchea [Phnom Penh: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1978].)

² Authors interview with Xuan Hoang and author’s interviews with regroupees Keo Chanda and Khun Chhy, in Phnom Penh, August 1980.

The Kampuchean rebellions of the late 1960s, which are too important and the Pol Pot group's role in them too unclear to cover here, exacerbated disagreements between the CPK and the VWP. But the breach closed temporarily with the 1970 overthrow of Sihanouk by Lon Nol, and the end of Kampuchean neutrality towards the Vietnam war. More than 1,000 Issarak veterans, 822 of whom were now apparently CPK members,³ returned home from Hanoi along the Ho Chi Minh trail. They included Keo Moni, Mey Pho, Leav Keo Moni, Sos Man, Nhem Sun, Hong Chhun, Prom Sami th, and former Paris students Yun Soeun, Rath Samuoeun and Hem Phan. By 1977, these leaders and all but a dozen of the other returnees had been killed by the Pol Pot forces, after being assigned local-level positions and playing an important role in rebuilding the mass base of the party. Son Ngoc Minh, meanwhile, died mysteriously in 1972 while on a visit to China for medical treatment.

The 17 April 1975 CPK victory over the Lon Nol regime occurred twenty-five years to the day after the founding of the Unified Issarak Front. There had been many changes in the Khmer revolution in those intervening years. While the UIF had not been able to win complete control of the anti-French movement, the CPK was able to do that in the 1970-75 struggle against the U.S. But in doing so they drove many from the cause, and they were now in the process of turning viciously against their own people. One Pol Pot cadre later recalled that, "according to the official analysis" of the CPK, no less than 60% of the rural population were "class enemies". (Stephen R. Heder's interview with Democratic Kampuchea personnel in Sakeo refugee camp, Thailand, 7 March 1980.) This was not a position the UIF/KPRP would have adopted. The urban-based intellectuals who dominated the central party leadership were beginning to betray the Khmer peasantry, however much they romanticized them in theory.

Like the UIF, the Pol Pot group's nationalist struggle had won the loyalty of many Kampucheans, but unlike the UIF they came to power, and then pursued brutal policies that eventually destroyed their popular base, immensely exacerbating deep divisions in Kampuchean society which the UIF (and the Viet Minh) had made modest attempts to come to terms with. The latter's relatively favourable attitude towards the Buddhist religion, which won them the loyalty of many monks, their success in forming a united front with the KNLC, and their attempts to form a "loose front" with noncommunist nationalist forces of the anti-French period,⁴ and after that with Norodom Sihanouk, contrast with the CPK's prohibition of religion and murderous repression of all political opposition. The Democratic Kampuchea regime from 1975 to 1979, led by former students in France — Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Son Sen and (until his 1978 execution) Vom Veth — also turned another major premise of the early Kampuchean communist movement, solidarity with the other Indochinese revolutions, into a policy of chauvinist hostility. Their regime's military attacks on Vietnam, in particular from

³ Author's interview with Xuan Hoang.

⁴ *Elude* mentions one Viet Minh attempt to cooperate with Son Ngoc Thanh in 1952. The first attempt was in 1945. according to Thanh Son (see above).

early 1977, were described by many of their own cadres as an attempt to retake the same provinces of South Vietnam that Son Ngoc Thanh's representatives had tried to recover thirty years before.⁵

⁵ See my article in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, No. 4 (1980), on the Kampuchea-Vietnam conflict, 1975-78.

The Success and Failure of Khmer Nationalism

If the 1942 demonstration protesting the arrest of Achar Hem Chieu revealed the social unrest that French colonialism had fostered in Kampuchea, the palace coup of 9 August 1945 was the clarion call to the militant *nationalism* that followed. But the subsequent careers of the seven youths involved in it also illustrate the division that plagued this nationalist movement.

On one side were Mey Pho, who became a communist in 1947; Neth Laing Say, who became political commissar of a mixed Khmer-Vietnamese communist force and was killed in action by French troops in late 1946; and Mam Koun, who in 1952 was arrested by the French for the second time, accused of “supplying secret information to the Viet *Minh*”. Probably of the same political trend was Mao Sarouth, political commissar of the KPLC at the time of its informal alliance with the Viet Minh, and assassinated by Dap Chuon in July 1949. But the fifth man, Hem Savang, departed from the path the others were following. Trained by Viet Minh troops in South Vietnam in 1946, Savang became political commissar of the KNLC. “He showed pro-Viet Minh sentiments which he has since abandoned”, according to French intelligence. Savang left the KNLC in August 1951 and dropped from sight. Similarly, the sixth of the 1945 coup instigators, Kim An Dore, was released from jail only in 1947 and then joined the colonial army, and later a party led by Lon Nol. The seventh, Thach Sary, also released in 1947, worked in the colonial bureaucracy and became deputy leader of a small right-wing group in Phnom Penh (*Etude*). In the early 1970s, Sary became a military officer under the Lon Nol regime; he was executed several days after the Pol Pot victory in April 1975.

Mey Pho, for his part, had returned home in 1970 after studying Marxism-Leninism for fourteen years in Vietnam and two years in China. He was then a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. On his arrival he became permanent secretary of the Central Committee Office, in the jungle of northern Kampuchea. Five months after the CPK victory, he was arrested, at the celebration of the twenty-fourth anniversary of the party he had helped found.¹

¹ This information comes from Heng, currently a member of the Kandai province committee (1980), who was in confinement in the Boeng Trabek centre in Phnom Penh in 1975 along with Mey Pho, and whose husband was taken away at the same time as Mey Pho.

The longest of these seven political careers, those of Mey Pho and Thach Sary, had diverged widely after their joint mini-conspiracy and jail sentence at the end of World War II. Yet their deaths occurred within several months of one another, at the hands of the same executioners, thirty years after they had launched the armed revolt that (for all its divisions) was to free Kampuchea of French colonialism. It is sadly ironical that their deaths heralded a period of such frenetic and destructive ultranationalism that it became necessary for the Kampuchean patriotic movement to begin all over again.

Ben Kiernan is currently a Ph. D. candidate in Kampuchean history at the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Australia. He is co-editor of *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-79* (1981) and *Prisoner of Pol Pot: The Confession of Hu Nim* (1981).

The Ted K Archive

Ben Kiernan
Origins of Khmer Communism

Southeast Asian Affairs, 1981, *theast Asian Affairs* (1981), pp. 161-180.
jstor.org/stable/27908428
ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

www.thetedkarchive.com