

FOCUS / CAMBODIA : 31 YEARS SINCE THE KHMER ROUGE TOOK CONTROL
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The making of a Khmer Rouge ideologue

Nuon Chea talks about his time as a student at Thammasat University, a civil servant of two ministries in Bangkok and a member of the Communist Party of Thailand; and what inspired him to join the Khmer Rouge

"Thammasat taught me to serve the people. Thammasat also taught me to sacrifice personal interest for the public good. I was deeply touched by the principles of justice, equality and democracy that Thammasat stood for," said Nuon Chea, with his wife close by, at his modest wooden house close to the Thai border in Pailin, western Cambodia.

The old man expressed fond memories of his youthful days at the university, just like many of his Thai contemporaries who attended class there in the 1940s. His Thai had the eloquence and tone of a learned man, and as he spoke, he often quoted from Thailand's most respectable political thinkers.

"Cambodia gave me my natural life; Thammasat gave me my political life. I will always be grateful to Thammasat," he said.

While Nuon Chea cherishes his memories of Thammasat, the university doesn't seem to recall having had him as a student. His academic record is nowhere to be found and there is minimal effort to assist genocide researchers from Cambodia who have asked for cooperation to complete his profile ahead of the opening of the United Nations-sponsored tribunal in Cambodia later this year.

If there is any reassurance for Thammasat, which may or may not have its own reasons for not being able to find the academic records of its most infamous alumni, Nuon Chea explained that what set him on the path to a political life was French colonial rule of Cambodia, widespread poverty and huge social disparities in his home province of Battambang in western Cambodia.

"The beginning was in my hometown in Battambang. As a teenager I didn't know what nation meant. Thailand inspired me because it was an independent nation while Cambodia was a colony of the French. I really

wanted to go to Thailand to study but when I actually got there, I saw many foreigners living and working there, I thought maybe Thailand too was not an independent nation after all. I saw many poor people in Thailand too (while I thought Thailand was rich).

"I asked myself what were my options; I was really fed up with society, why should I continue to study, to serve whom? At that time, I considered two options: either to ordain and live a Buddhist monk's life, or to struggle to free the people from poverty and oppression.

"My politicisation was a step-by-step process, driven by the events surrounding my life. At night when I slept I thought about the true meaning of nationhood, I was determined to make a choice for myself."

At age 16 and not knowing a word of Thai, having studied at the local French school in Battambang for seven years, Nuon Chea took the advice of a Buddhist monk in Battambang to further his studies in Bangkok.

Technically _ and some genocide researchers believe, emotionally _ he was Thai, as Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon were under Thai control (1941-46) under a deal between Bangkok and Tokyo during World War II.

Nuon Chea was given the Thai name Runglert Laodi by the monk and joined dozens of other Thai and Cambodian boys at Wat Benjamaborpit in Bangkok.

One of his contemporaries was none other than the late right-wing monk, Phra Kittiwuttho, who was well-known for preaching during the 70s that killing communists was not a sin.

"In 1944, I enrolled at Thammasat's preparatory school," recalled Nuon Chea. "I was in Class 7, Room 9. I was head of my class. I remember that World War II had intensified and Thammasat had to close for safety reasons. All the students took refuge in the provinces. The university had to mail the material and homework to students. I only saw my classmates during exams. When the situation improved, Thammasat re-opened and I went back to study," he said.

Nuon Chea said he took seven or eight subjects, mostly law, but didn't finish his freshman's year as he worked while studying. He worked briefly with the Irrigation Department and then moved to the Comptroller Department at the Finance Ministry, where he worked for three years before taking a three-month leave to enter the monkhood in Chachoengsao province.

Upon his return to Bangkok, Nuon Chea took another civil service exam, this time to join the Foreign Ministry. He was assigned to the

Indochina Desk but was denied a professional position. Instead, he was given the same level of clerical position he had held at the Finance Ministry with the same amount of salary of 24 baht per month.

After less than three months, he quit to join the pro-democracy movement, without any explanation to his boss.

That year, Field Marshal Pin Choonhavan successfully staged a coup and arrested four prominent ministers from the previous government. The four were former lecturers at Thammasat and Nuon Chea joined the student movement to demand their release.

"At that time there was a movement against France's second colonisation of Cambodia, operating from the Thai-Cambodian border. When I worked at the Foreign Ministry, I saw a report from Laos that the French had shot at innocent villagers who were fetching water from a river in Pak Se. I thought at that time: I study law to serve whom? To serve the ruling class? There was so much injustice. When I was in the monkhood, many farmers came to me for advice. They told me they were poor and had mortgaged their land to the district chief and lost it. I could only listen to them, I was really tired of social injustice."

During the interview, Nuon Chea clearly tried to paint the so-called conventional route to anti-establishment sentiment similar to that expressed by other well-known communist leaders: poverty, social injustice and the like. But perhaps the denial of a professional position by the Foreign Ministry which granted it to real Thais, sealed his political fate. In his mind, Nuon Chea was Thai but was not really Thai; he was not really equal, and didn't have the same rights as other Thais. This perhaps decided him on returning to Cambodia.

Nuon Chea joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) with the aim of learning how to liberate a country. He had, shortly after enrolling at Thammasat, become a member of the Youth for Democracy of Thailand, under the CPT. He and thousands of Thai students at that time, were branded communists by the government for demanding democracy and social justice.

In 1950, Nuon Chea left Thailand to join the struggle against the French in Cambodia. The move was facilitated by a transfer of membership from the CPT to the Vietnamese-dominated Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), which was trying to coordinate struggles in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand as well.

According to records at the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), an independent non-profit research institution working on truth, justice, accountability and national reconciliation, in 1951 Nuon Chea was

appointed Minister of the Economy in the anti-French Issarak Front.

In 1954, he attended a training course in Vietnam and returned to focus on ideological training in various parts of the country.

In 1960, with the establishment of the Cambodian Communist Party (CPK), Nuon Chea became deputy secretary of its Central Committee and a member of its Standing Committee, the most senior bodies responsible for party policy, and held those posts continuously.

Shortly after the CPK took power in April 1975 and launched its policies to purify the country and re-create past Khmer glory, Nuon Chea was appointed prime minister. That was in 1976 but he remained in the position for only a few months before Pol Pot took the post.

According to researchers, there is substantial and compelling evidence that Nuon Chea played a leading role in devising the CPK's execution policies, as well as substantial evidence that he played a central role in implementing those policies. For example, he is alleged to have known of and approved the torture and execution of 14,000 Khmer Rouge cadres, men, women and children at Security Office 21 (S-21), also known as Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh.

These researchers have also pointed to the influence of Thai political thought throughout Nuon Chea's life. Research is being conducted on the use of Thai language in Khmer Rouge terminology. The researchers believe that Nuon Chea picked only those terms in the Thai language which were Khmer in origin, a sort of revenge against the Thais whom he both admired and despised at the same time.

At the age of 76 (at the time of the interview), living with his wife in a small wooden house, unlike some of his colleagues who enjoyed a comfortable life in luxurious mansions, Nuon Chea said his greatest fear was not to have to face a UN-sponsored genocide and crimes against humanity tribunal, but to lose his eyesight to old age and be unable to read.

He said he was an old man and that his thoughts no longer mattered, though he had a few worries left:

"I still believe in the principle of serving the people, that's what's missing in Cambodia. I'm worried about the young generation. Cambodia has been deeply hurt. I realise that we can't demand that the healing process be quick. We have to face the reality of things in the country. What I hope for is that the peoples of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam could overcome their prejudice against each other and live together as good neighbours. The Vietnamese look down upon the whole region; the Thais look

down upon the Khmers, and the Khmers look down on the Laotians. Let us not live by the old perceptions of each other, this is the time of globalisation.

"Globalisation is not a matter of borderless technology, but borderless heart," he said.

"I'm an old man now. I hardly need any sleep any more so I wake up very early in the morning, some times as early as 3.30am and turn on the radio to listen to Buddhist preaching. I also keep in touch with news from Thailand and the world through newspapers, radio and other sources," he said.

This April 17 has a different feel than the previous thirty April 17's. DC-Cam and other victims' organisations have been actively preparing people for the forthcoming tribunal by bringing hundreds, both victims and their families, and Khmer Rouge cadres and families, to see the tribunal building and sites such as Tuol Sleng prison. Educational and awareness campaigns are also being conducted to prepare people as best as possible for the tribunal.

Nuon Chea, or Runglert Laodi, took the same path to Bangkok as countless young men from the countryside in Thailand and Cambodia, with dreams of a better life for themselves, their families and their countries. It was impossible to know that path would lead to unspeakable crimes. With the tribunal well on its way and Nuon Chea having told reporters that he is ready to appear in court and tell his story, we will finally have some answers, perhaps, for the millions of lives shattered by Nuon Chea's and his colleagues' youthful dreams. They can finally find closure from the darkest chapter of Cambodian history.