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Cham Muslims take part in a ceremony in Takeo province. VANDY RATTANA

Genocide against the Cham?

Comment

Dr Kok-Thay Eng

PHILIP Short's ideas make so much sense: "The difficulty for the Cham was that they had a very identifiable, deeply rooted culture different from that of other Khmers, and [with] Pol Pot . . . the whole of the DK policy was to make everybody equal.

"So those who stood out were under greater pressure to be made equal. And, in the case of the Cham, it happened by dispersing them through the country, by the very savage repression of their rebellions, but that is not the same as a conscious attempt to exterminate a racial group."

Conscious attempt, semi-conscious attempt, half-hearted attempt, or simple attempt. Does it make any difference when the end result is the death of 90,000 Cham intellectuals, community leaders, men, women and children anyway?

For me the attempt is seen through the act. Also, do we have to define genocide using the holocaust as a benchmark? I do not think we have to.

Maybe we have different levels of genocide, but it is still genocide. However, these are the questions that are up to the judges to decide.

Below is my argument for genocide from my upcoming book: *From Khmer Rouge to Hambali: Cham Identities in a Global Age.*

"The research found that the Khmer Rouge committed genocide against the Cham because they were attacked based on their identities as Muslim and as ethnic Cham. They were forced to intermarry with people of other ethnic groups.

"Islam was prohibited. The Cham language was banned. Cham people were forced to eat pork.

"Against Cham's practice of Islam, Cham women were forced to reveal their hair and cut it short. Cham were given Khmer names and prohibited from using Muslim or Cham names.

"Cham people were dispersed from their traditional villages and mixed with people of other groups in the Khmer Rouge's attempt to weaken their sense of unity. By the end of 1978, it is estimated that more than one-third of Cham people died of starvation, forced labour, diseases and execution under the Khmer Rouge.

Of the total 113 mosques in pre-Khmer Rouge time, only five mosques remained by 1979.

The Khmer Rouge's early treatment of the Cham was pleasant. But this changed as the regime grew more certain of their victory against the Khmer Republic.

However, Cham people had expected a better life, freedom of religion and a continuation of their way of life under communism. Thus they resisted the Khmer Rouge's prohibition of Islam and repression.

In several cases they resorted to protests and rebellions, most notably in Trea, Koh Phal and Svay Khleang villages. These protests and rebellions intensified the Khmer Rouge's conviction to kill the Cham rather than "re-educate" them.

Because the Cham community was a close-knit group bound by Islam and shared origin, the Khmer Rouge, who had little knowledge about Cham culture, found it difficult to make a distinction between enemy Cham and normal Cham.

Eventually, they resorted to racial killings which saw all other members (previously only hakem, tuon and intellectuals were targeted) of the Cham community such as girls, young men and women being targeted.

Cham in villages such as Rokar Po Bram (Tbaung Khmum district, Kampong Cham), Koko (Kampong Siem district, Kampong Cham) and O Trakuon (Koh Sotin district, Kampong Cham) were selected based on their core identities.

Victims were asked whether they were Cham or Khmer before they were selected for killing.

The Khmer Rouge also mentioned in their constitution their intent to ban Islam. While they seemed to say that all religions were permitted, it was the Democratic Kampuchea government that decided which religions were to be permitted.

In fact, they did not permit any religion. All religions were considered reactionary, including Islam.

Other Khmer Rouge documents pointed towards the Khmer Rouge's commission of genocide. ■

Dr Kok-Thay Eng is the deputy director at the Documentation Center of Cambodia

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