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BRIEF HISTORY OF KHMER COMMUNIST PARTY

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HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

A recent translation of a captured Khmer Communist document has provided some rare details on the early history of the Khmer Communist Party. The document was printed by the political/military section of Khmer Communist eastern regional headquarters--probably in preparation for the "22nd Anniversary" of the party in September 1973--and deals with the history, problems, and aims of the party from 1951 through 1967. The sophisticated treatment afforded these topics and the often blunt self-criticism indicate that the document was disseminated for internal party use at a relatively high level. An explanatory note near the end of the document states that "this presentation of a summary of party history, the first of its kind, naturally lacks many things." Gaps and possible misrepresentations notwithstanding, it confirms many aspects of early party history that hitherto have only been educated speculation.

According to the document, the Khmer Communist Party was founded on September 30, 1951, "with the firm support of the North Vietnamese Worker's (Lao Dong) Party" which had only recently changed its name from the Indochina Communist Party. Although the document makes no mention of it, a front group called the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party was founded about the same time that Ho Chi Minh dissolved the Indochina Communist Party in February 1951. The new front was supposed to provide an independent political organization for Cambodian members of the Viet Minh, and the 1951 conference cited in the document may have been a meeting of this Cambodian Revolutionary Party. Whatever the

case, the captured document clearly implies that September 1951 is an arbitrary date for the founding of the Khmer Communist Party and that the conference held at that time was little more than a loose gathering of former Cambodian members of the Indochina Party who had only a vague sense of organization and direction.* The conference did, however, create a four-man "propagation and formation" committee apparently tasked with organizing an indigenous communist party in the Soviet and Vietnamese mold.

The members of this committee are identified only by their initials but were most probably Son Ngoc Minh, Sieu Heng, Tou Samouth, and Chan Samay. Only Sieu Heng and Tou Samouth can be identified with any degree of certainty. These four early leaders made some effort to carry out their mandate,** but the document indicates they were distracted by the exigencies of the "armed struggle"

* The document mentions a group of 10 Khmer members of the French Communist Party and "three or four" members of the Thai Communist Party who were active in Cambodia at the time of the September 1951 conference. These individuals apparently operated independently of their Vietnamese-trained compatriots until 1952 or 1953.

** Intercepted Viet Minh messages, for example, show that statutes for a Cambodian Communist Party were drafted in Vietnamese at Viet Minh northern headquarters in 1951 and were transmitted to southern Viet Minh headquarters for translation into Cambodian. Although Son Ngoc Minh is known to have frequented southern Viet Minh headquarters, the captured document implies that no formal party statutes were adopted prior to 1960.



1949 photo of National Reconstruction Party leadership. Clockwise from the top: Son Ngoc Minh, Tou Samouth, Sieu Heng, Chan Samsay

against French colonialism which continued until the Geneva Conference in 1954. Some accomplishments were made in the areas of "ideology and politics," but the document admits the so-called party "was like a shadow" three years after the 1951 conference.

The "party" began to assume some bureaucratic identity with the formation of a five-man "temporary central committee" headed by Sieu Heng soon after the conclusion of the Geneva Conference. Sieu Heng apparently delegated responsibility for political action against Sihanouk--presumably through leftist

newspapers and the overt Pracheachon Party--to Tou Samouth who headed an "urban committee." Sieu Heng himself took charge of a "rural committee" which appears to have been tasked with proselytizing and recruiting in the countryside. While the document lauds the opposition activities of Tou Samouth and "a minority of the party members," Sieu Heng is depicted as having fallen victim to "counterrevolutionary tendencies" and "revisionism." He is blamed for the "loss of about 90 per cent of cadres and party members," and his defection to Sihanouk in 1959 is described as bringing the "party" to its knees. The document makes no mention of it, but the regroupment of large numbers of cadre to North Vietnam during this period must also have contributed to the organizational decay.

Tou Samouth as head of a "general affairs committee" began the job of rebuilding in late 1959. Despite Sihanouk's crackdown on leftist activities, a "second party assembly" was held on September 30, 1960. It was this meeting which approved a set of statutes, which the document itself labels "Marxist-Leninist," and established an eight-man party central committee with Tou Samouth as its secretary. Technically at least, these actions appear to mark the establishment of the first bona fide Khmer Communist Party.

The 1960 "assembly" marked the beginning of an intense effort to build a countrywide party apparatus and to increase party membership. On July 20, 1962, Tou Samouth "was kidnaped by the enemy, leaving no trace,"* but other unidentified individuals apparently assumed the mantle of leadership and by 1963--when a third general "assembly" was held--the party was reported to have been in "a solid revolutionary position."

The remainder of the document relates the development of a "unified" and "correct" party organization "based on Marxist-Leninist doctrine." For the

most part, however, the period between 1963 and 1967 is addressed in broad generalities, and few specific details of historical interest are disclosed.

One interesting aspect of the treatment of this period of party history, however, is the lack of any reference to party involvement in Sihanouk's administration. In the late 50s and early 60s Sihanouk placed a group of young and able leftist intellectuals in senior government posts for the avowed purpose of dampening their criticism of the administration and "seasoning" them to cope with the nation's problems. The group included present day Communist leaders Khieu Samphan, Hou Youn, and Hu Nim. This omission of any mention of governmental participation suggests that there may be some credence to claims that the "three ghosts" did not enter the mainstream of Cambodian Communism until after they were hounded into the bush by Sihanouk in 1967.

* Considerable mystery surrounds the fate of Tou Samouth. Knowledgeable defectors claim that he worked on the Pracheachon Party newspaper following the Geneva Conference and that he was "liquidated" by Sihanouk "sometime after 1955." When asked to confirm this story in 1972, Sieu Beng cryptically replied that "Lon Nol knows what happened." In a report on the "Khmer Rouges" widely disseminated in early 1970, Lon Nol--then commander of the army under Sihanouk--claimed that Tou Samouth was still active as "president" of the Khmer Communist Party and commander of insurgent forces in northeastern Cambodia.

According to his own story, Sieu Heng was the leader of a small band of Viet Minh - affiliated guerrillas fighting the French in Battambang Province in 1947 when he was chosen to represent Cambodia at a major conference of the Indochina Communist Party. He subsequently joined the party-dominated Cambodian National Reconstruction Party and in 1949 rose to the party leadership along with Son Ngoc Minh, Tou Samouth, and Chan Samay. He was regrouped to North Vietnam following the Geneva Conference in 1954 and returned to Cambodia within a year to help lead opposition activities. In 1959 he became disaffected and rallied to Sihanouk. Pardoned, he spent the next ten years farming in Battambang Province. Following Sihanouk's ouster in 1970, Sieu Heng was commissioned a major by Lon Nol and commanded an infantry battalion until he suffered a stroke in 1971. A US embassy official interviewed Sieu Heng at his home in Battambang in early 1972. Photographs provided by Sieu Heng, independent interviews with other knowledgeable defectors, and Viet Minh propaganda broadcasts all tend to confirm his story.