

## ARE ALL THE KHMER ROUGE CADRES BAD?

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17 April 1975 was victory day for the Democratic Kampuchea regime. After taking power, they began ordering regional cadres to search for hidden enemies burrowing inside the party, causing the entire population to live in fear and under constant pressure. Most of those who were accused had the same fate: they were tortured, forced to work extremely hard, and were sometimes killed. The Khmer Rouge can be considered an atrocious regime for killing nearly two million of its own people. Nevertheless, there were some cadres that had good relations with villagers. For instance, Poch, a former district chief of Democratic Kampuchea, helped release many accused people from prison and provided adequate food for villagers.

Poch has four siblings. His hometown is located in Monorom sub-district, Thpong district, Kompong Speu province. In 1965, Poch was ordained as a monk in Taing Khmao pagoda to study Buddhist morality and literature. Two years later, Poch left the Buddhist monkhood and his father arranged him to marry a woman living in the same village.

### The Liberated Base

In 1971, after hearing the call from Prince Sihanouk to enter the Marqui forest and join the struggle to liberate the country from Lon Nol regime, Poch and many other villagers volunteered to serve the National United Front army. At first Poch was assigned to supervise farmers in Veal Pon sub-district unit. In 1974, Poch was moved to another unit in Kantaok sub-district, Kandal Steung district, Kandal province. There, Poch was required to educate people coming from the cities about revolutionary policy and to coordinate food production for the population of Veal Pon sub-district by buying corn, rice and fish from villagers living next to the river and organizing the villagers to do the farming. Poch recalled that one day when the Khmer Rouge forces and the Lon Nol soldiers were fighting with each other, a little girl and a lady named Mom looking for their relatives at northern Ang Snuol sub-district were captured by the Kandal Steung district liberated army. Because they used to live in enemy (Lon Nol) area they were accused of being hidden enemies burrowing from the base area. Because Poch had known both of them and realized they would be subject to cruel torture, he went and vouched for them.

### Angkar's Appointment

After its victory in 1975, Angkar appointed Poch deputy chief of Sa-ang district where he was responsible for supervising farmers. Meanwhile, because his wife had passed away, Angkar arranged Poch to marry a new wife named Sol who came from Kandal Steung district and they had a baby. Seven months later, Angkar sent Poch to Taing Kok district, Region 42 of the Central Zone. Although Angkar required Poch to note down the names of 17 April people who stole potatoes and rice, or who came to work irregularly, Poch never reported their names to the regional rank or central rank cadres. Because all of them had been evacuated from different places he was not able to distinguish their background clearly and was afraid of accusing innocent people.

As a consequence, Poch's position was downgraded to deputy chief. Then he was assigned to control the farmers. Surprisingly, in just a short period of time Poch's unit

produced hundreds of thousands of tons of rice for the whole sub-district. Poch was not strict; he usually advised lower-ranking cadres that “the higher-ranking cadres only order us to investigate those who have acted against Angkar, not to punish people for their small mistakes.” The day after Poch learned that Krel sub-district militias had arrested female and male youth while they were stealing rice and chickens, he called the Khmer Rouge militias and cooperative chiefs together and told them, “When you are hungry, you can eat, yet when they were famished and stole something to eat, you arrested and threatened them, next time please do not do that.” Later, Poch held a meeting and told the villagers, “You are 17 April people, but that does not mean you always have to make mistakes. To avoid making them, just try not to say anything related to Angkar.”

### **New Duty**

In 1977, Poch was sent to Baray district, where he took charge of canal construction at Kom Peuy village, Chang Daung sub-district. Over ten thousand people were working at the construction site. Because the workers were able to complete their work in conformity with the regional and zone plan, every ten days Poch allowed all villagers to visit their houses. Once when Poch was working at the construction site, his deputy held a meeting and said, “Those who break the ploughs, farming tools, carts, and those who do not go to work are Angkar’s enemies.” This speech scared all the people. After hearing about it, Poch met with the approximately 600 villagers in the sub-district and explained to them that “the lack of potatoes and rice is because we are poor; the plough breaks because it hits rocks and wood inside the earth; we are not guilty.” He added that “any of you can grow plants such as corns, potatoes, vegetables or raise animals in your own house so that you can eat when you are hungry.” The villagers appreciated his words. For this reason, they all tried to work hard and produced a surplus. Many villagers loved Poch, but some cadres did not like him, so they reported all Poch’s action to the higher-ranking cadres. However, Poch completed all his work in accordance to Angkar’s plan so he was not charged.

Once Poch discovered that some people in his group were former teachers. He gathered them together and trained them about the Angkar’s policies, and then he permitted them to go back. Poch reported a few guilty people’s names to his supervisors, but no matter how big villagers’ mistakes, Poch never reported them to his supervisors. For example, when Poch discovered those who had stolen rice, potatoes and Angkar’s equipment, and made palm juice secretly, he only warned, “Do not do that again; you can drink palm juice but not too much, so in case the regional cadres find out we can tell them that we drank it for curing diseases.” Another time, Poch saw about ten villagers in O Suosdey village, Baray sub-district praying for their relatives who had passed away. He did not blame them but instead stopped his motorbike and told them, “You all know about the situation now, be careful with incense; if Angkar notices the smoke all of you will be accused.” He added, “You can pray for the dead body, but you need to close the door, and as soon as you finish, bring your relatives’ bodies to bury.”

In meetings, Poch always suggested that the upper ranking cadres should not accuse male and female adults because of what they said. Every year Angkar called for districts, and regional chiefs to have a meeting in Phnom Penh presided over by Noun Chea. The meeting was about why the cooperatives were created and committee’s principles. In the meeting, Noun Chea said, “Leadership is just like separating twisted fibers. We can not use the scissor or the knife to break them; if we do so it will cause more trouble.” Poch used this opportunity to express his idea that “the practices in each region and zone are different from

Angkar's principle, if we often charge and kill the villagers, it may affect their relatives who are not guilty."

### **Order from Upper Ranking Supervisors**

In 1978, Poch ordered a messenger to distribute rice to people who were didn't have food. Later, regional cadres visited and asked him, "Why did not you dismiss the old cadres?" Poch responded, "All the cadres have managed the villagers well and never acted against Angkar; if you don't believe me, you can ask my deputy and other lower ranking cadres." Because Poch did not pull out the cadres in accordance to Angkar's orders, higher ranking officials came to remove Denh and his deputy named Chhorn from Baray district, telling them that "the two of you will be sent to a new region, supervised by Oeun."

In early 1979, Poch brought his family and relatives to Boh Pong forest, Baray Leu district. Soon afterward his wife, Sol, and two of their children died of malaria. Then Poch was appointed Baray district chief responsible for receiving KR forces from various sub-districts. After seeing numerous injured and dead soldiers, Poch announced, "Those who are not able to tolerate the conditions here can go back, and those who can stand the situation can stay." In 1980, Poch was assigned to control the forces in Kampong Cham and Kampong Thom province. Afterward, Ke Pok came to supervise the soldiers himself and selected Poch to be his under-secretary. Poch also became responsible for persuading people to join the Khmer Rouge forces.

In 1987, while Poch was fighting on the battlefield in O'Angkrang village, Khvav sub-district, Chikreng district of Siem Reap province, he stepped on a mine and was sent for treatment at O'Trav Ko 7 Camp. As a result he lost a leg. After recovering, he was appointed to manage seventeen families of Khmer Rouge soldiers. Eventually, his commander was captured by the government's forces, so Poch fled to live with the villagers. Because Poch had done good deeds, some people gave him rice, dried and salted fish, and helped to hide his background as a former Khmer Rouge cadre. To date, villagers in Baray and Taing Kok districts still visit him sometimes.

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