

**The Arrests of Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith:
A Victory for Cambodia's "Peasants"**

Cambodians often refer to the Democratic Kampuchea regime, which was responsible for the deaths of nearly a quarter of the population between 1975 and 1979, as the “Pol Pot – Ieng Sary clique.” Although few people knew the identities of the secretive leaders of Democratic Kampuchea until after the regime fell, they knew about Ieng Sary by the mid-1970s. By placing his name next to Pol Pot’s (the two were brothers in law), Cambodians clearly recognize him as one of the masterminds of the genocide.

Ieng Sary became an ardent communist while he and Pol Pot were studying in Paris in the 1950s. During Democratic Kampuchea, he served as both deputy prime minister and foreign minister. After escaping to the gem- and timber-rich Khmer Rouge zone of Pailin near the Thai border in 1979, he continued to hold senior positions in the Khmer Rouge until 1982, even though he had been given an in-absentia death sentence in 1979 by the Vietnamese-backed government. In 1996, he was pardoned by King Sihanouk at the request of then-co-prime ministers Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh in exchange for his defection to the government in the name of peace and reconciliation.

His wife Ieng Thirith was one of the few women who held power during the regime. Minister of Social Affairs during Democratic Kampuchea and head of the regime’s Red Cross Society, this strong woman came from a well-to-do family and met Ieng Sary while she was studying Shakespeare at the Sorbonne. Ieng Thirith has denied that she was a member of the Central Committee, saying she only wanted to serve her country and people, and never wanted any “high position.” She also claimed that without the sacrifices of those who joined the revolution, Cambodia would have been erased from the world map.

Like perpetrators everywhere, both have denied any wrongdoing and are seemingly without remorse. In 1999, Ieng Thirith wrote to a Phnom Penh newspaper, praising those who left their comfortable villas and took up residence in

Cambodia's jungles during the early 1970s to defend their motherland. She has never wavered from the ideals of a Maoist-inspired revolution in which peasants would rule.

But the couple, who are now in their mid-70s, have not chosen to live according to their ideals. Instead of adopting the modest circumstances of the people they claim to revere, they have a lavish villa in downtown Phnom Penh and regularly fly to Bangkok for medical treatment. They are also active Buddhists and have built a *stupa* at their local pagoda. They seem to forget that the Communist Party of Kampuchea had eliminated Buddhism, considering it, like all other religions, to be "reactionary."

Cambodians are quick to grasp the irony. This husband and wife, who were among the chief architects of Cambodia's "killing fields," serve the revolution in name only. They live a privileged and comfortable life, while the majority of Cambodians still earn less than a dollar a day. The poor, in whose name the revolution was formed, are perhaps even poorer because of them and they are still powerless today. The Khmer Rouge left us with a terrible legacy in 1979: a country whose education system, religion, banks, commerce, communications, and agriculture had all been destroyed. About three-quarters of the survivors were widows who were left to pick up the pieces and move on.

Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith, Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and others turned all Cambodians (except themselves, of course) into peasants during Democratic Kampuchea. The entire population was forced into the fields to grow rice and build irrigation systems, yet a huge percentage of them starved to death or died of overwork and untreated diseases. Ieng Thirith visited the irrigation projects many times during Democratic Kampuchea and doubtless saw the results of the regime's policies. The revolution may have failed, but its effects are still very much with us today.

The November 12 arrests of Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith will at last give us ordinary Cambodians a victory. This couple, who have changed little and still fail to understand the pain their victims endured, will finally be called into account and we may soon see justice done in a court of law. The arrests of the most politically

untouchable of the Khmer Rouge leaders is a powerful message to the people of Cambodia and gives us hope that our country will move toward a better future.

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