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Two Decades of Cambodia's Truth Commission

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Confrontation and reconciliation of massive human rights violations, such as those on the scale of genocide, require more than the legal justice meted out by a court. As evident from the perceptibly imperfect process of international, national, and hybrid tribunals, legal justice alone cannot fully resolve past conflicts. In particular, courts that seek to prosecute a handful of individuals in a context of hundreds or thousands of perpetrators tend to leave victims personally unsatisfied and greatly in need of other justice mechanisms. In this situation, some have proposed the establishment of truth commissions because of their perceived valuable role in national and individual healing processes.

With the anticipated commencement of the Khmer Rouge tribunal several years ago, numerous experts and activists have advocated the creation of a Cambodia Truth Commission. What some of them do not realize however is that efforts to investigate and document the atrocities of the past government, which is what truth commissions are tasked with, have been in progress in Cambodia for the past twenty years. Cambodia's experience of producing a truth commission, though at times interrupted and varied, should not be overlooked by the international community. Furthermore, it might even serve a model for other post-conflict societies who do not share the moral philosophies of Western religions. For such societies, notions of confession and forgiveness might vary significantly and such variations should be taken into consideration when deciding on the form and function of the truth commission.

In reviewing Cambodia's long journey of uncovering and recording Khmer Rouge atrocities, we find many concrete and diverse measures. The first measure was the extensive compilation of victim's injuries and deaths along with the collection of over one million signatures. This culminated in the 1982 Renakse petition which requested the international community's assistance in prosecuting crimes of the Khmer Rouge regime. Other measures in the 1980s include the erecting of 88 genocide memorial sites across the country and the establishment of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh. The Cambodian Genocide Justice Act of 1994 and the subsequent Cambodian Genocide Program likewise have been integral in promoting investigation and documentation of Khmer Rouge crimes. Arising out of these two efforts is a Cambodian research center whose sole purpose is to record and research the era of Democratic Kampuchea. With guidance from international specialists and extensive grassroots assistance over the past ten years, this research center has mapped 19,000 mass graves, published over 20 books and a monthly periodical, and promoted the role of victims and survivors in the healing process. It's most prominent manifestation thus far is a collaborative project with the Ministry of Education for nationwide genocide education.

Cambodia's truth commission, or rather its own version of one, provides several insights into this particular justice mechanism. First, that the objectives of a truth commission need not be realized in the strict form of a commission at all; petitions, memorials, museums, research centers, and genocide education may arguably be more appropriate contextual methods. Second, millions of dollars and strong political will are not prerequisites; passionate grassroots initiatives and conscientious implementation can reduce economic and political costs. Third, nationwide education of past atrocities should be an important element of reaching the truth commission's underlying goals of healing and reconciliation. As we can observe from the Cambodia case in the past two decades, which is still a case in progress, there needs to be broader conceptualizations and approaches to truth commissions which consider each country's nuances, the underlying goals of these truth commissions, and the diverse measures needed to reach these goals.