

Op-Ed Series

Khmer Rouge Regime and Its Brutal Legacy after 41 Years

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Khmer Rouge history

On April 17th 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, overthrowing the pro-U.S. regime. Many residents came out to welcome them, hoping peace was on the horizon after five years of civil war and bloodshed. Under Pol Pot, from 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge began a radical experiment to transform the country into a vision of agrarian utopia inspired by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. However, its peasant revolution threw the whole country into upheaval. An estimated [500,000 to 1.5 million](#) people died from overwork, starvation, malnutrition, torture, disease and mass killings. Although the regime collapsed 41 years ago, the length of its reign seared into Cambodian minds for the terror and brutality it evoked. Its genocidal legacy still haunts them in certain ways, and [the mental aftermath](#) left by the civil wars and violent conflicts are highly prevalent.

Reconciliation

Despite a [politically sensitive](#) climate, local NGOs, such as the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) and Youth for Peace, have made enormous efforts to promote reconciliation between the former Khmer Rouge and the survivor victims, attempting to ameliorate the atrocious experiences left by the regime. Developing a wide range of arts-led participatory outreach approaches, DC-Cam has documented crimes committed by Khmer Rouge, and produced Khmer Rouge history text books to promote intergenerational dialogue to enhance [reconciliation](#). Like DC-Cam, Youth for Peace has pursued reconciliation through programs which encourage young Cambodians to explore questions on reconciliation and learn about the experience of survivors. Study tours at memorial sites, [intergenerational dialogues](#), participatory art works based on painting and drama training were organized.

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Regarding this, the United Nations-backed Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) is mandated to try the Democratic Kampuchea's most senior surviving leaders and to facilitate reconciliation through judicial procedures. In spite of [public criticisms](#), it helps shape the memory, history, and knowledge of the Khmer Rouge through [public outreach programs](#) such as school lectures, outdoor film screenings, and Khmer Rouge trial study tours, which bring villagers to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Choeung Ek memorial site and ECCC.

Forty years after the regime's inauguration, the promotion of such reconciliation faces many challenges. Thus, the whole picture of reconciliation in Cambodia remains [elusive](#).

One of main challenges is that mental health problems, such as anger, resentment and desire for revenge resulting from traumatic events during the Khmer Rouge regime, are still common in Cambodia. Cambodians are still struggling to understand how this tragic event happened and how to cope with its painful legacy, as the majority of survivors have experienced the cultural idiom of distress symptom known as [Baksbat](#) (broken courage) during and after the Khmer Rouge. The *Baksbat* survivors are fearful, submissive, distrustful of others, and mute and deaf literally or symbolically.



Cambodian surviving victims holding a ritual ceremony presided over by Buddhist monks at a memorial site. Source: https://tpocambodia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/IMG_7899.jpg

Another key issue pertinent to the reconciliation is that the voices of the former Khmer Rouge have been underrepresented during the reconciliation process. Nevertheless, physically the former Khmer Rouge can be found living next door to the survivor victims in the villages across the country. Feelings of denial, fear, shame, uncertainty and being ostracized is what they have to live with while having [lost their family](#) during the regime. To what extent, are the former Khmer Rouge accepted as members of the community in which they were socially and culturally born and grew up?

Reconciliatory relationships must not be one-sided. Therefore, a [one-sided narrative](#) of the Khmer Rouge is not enough. There should be a narrative of former Khmer Rouge as well. Reconciliation requires participation from both victims and perpetrators. That said, it does not mean that the victims should empathize or agree with the perspectives of the perpetrators. Reconciliation can be achieved neither from only one group's narrative nor through punishment. However, it can be achieved through recognition, understanding, and appreciation. True reconciliation will occur when Cambodia can look to the future and its actions are no longer dictated by the wrongdoing of the past, and when all members in society are valued.

A few ways to move forward

Specifically, then, how can these issues be addressed? While this question should be carefully explored in a nuanced way, there are few practical measures Cambodia can undertake.

First, former Khmer Rouge should be provided with opportunities to make their voices heard and to express their acknowledgement, confession and regret of perpetrated crimes. [Acknowledgement or confession](#) can take place in many contexts, such as in trials, truth commissions, public ceremonies, or in individual conversations. Confession may release the perpetrator from feelings of guilt, especially if it leads to apologies, which then leads to forgiveness. Expressions of regret are perhaps easier than acknowledgement and confession, as they can be general and perpetrators may not have to admit specific wrongdoing. Regret is closely related to apology and, as we know from everyday experience, hearing an expression of regret on the part of the perpetrator (and especially an apology) can lessen the victim's feelings of anger and resentment.

Second, outreach programs aimed at socializing the Khmer Rouge history among Cambodians should be expanded and enhanced. One instance of this is the 'App-learning on Khmer Rouge History' developed by [Bophana Center](#). It is a multimedia platform combining archival, audiovisual material with text, drawn images, film sequences, and interactive elements. It aims to educate Cambodians, especially youth, about the rise, rule and fall of the Khmer Rouge regime via their internet-enabled devices, such as smartphones and tablets. The KR-app aims to assist the healing of survivors, generate dialogue (especially between younger and older Cambodians) and encourage Cambodians to read the existing historical documents about this dark period. The number of young people who access this application is limited, despite the increasing number of internet users.

It is crucial that community outreach programs include the participation of perpetrators, surviving victims, and younger people so that they can share and exchange their personal views about the Khmer Rouge. Open forum allows young Cambodians to engage in deep dialogue with their elders, who may share their personal experiences about what they went through. Constructive and meaningful dialogue between younger and older generations and between victims and perpetrators could be a [precondition](#) for national reconciliation. Youth for Peace can be an example. This kind of initiative genuinely needs to be improved and expanded across the country for there to be deep, true reconciliation.

Third, there is a need to pay attention to how the Khmer Rouge issues are commemorated and remembered in local communities. The events and sites where the victims are commemorated offer many community members, especially youth, important opportunities to understand the regime. Across the country, there are hundreds of genocide/memorial sites, not to mention those that have

not been discovered. However, Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung Ek memorial site are [highly visible](#) and well cared for, while the rest receive no proper attention. Many local commemorative sites and stupas storing skulls and bones of deceased victims were left uncared for and uncleaned. These genocide/memorial sites function as a vital element while Cambodians try to reconcile their horrific past and uncertain future. Depending on how the communities re-establish these monuments, they can be utilized as important sources in which the stories related to the Khmer Rouge can be shared among the community residents. The stories shared encompass their [personal experiences and the truth](#). Through the sharing of stories and individual memories, a collective memory will be built. It is of significant importance to bring to light those uncared for genocide/memorial sites that are remembered by the survivors of atrocities. The significant role they need to play must be realised.

True reconciliation will take place when former Khmer Rouge, survivor victims and the younger generations in our communities are fully engaged in an open, deep and true process of dialogue about the stories, history, and memory of the Khmer Rouge regime, and when a safe space and open environment to articulate their voice and shape their narrative is established. Memories around local genocide/memorial sites need to be localized by active engagement and a sense of ownership of local communities. Reconciliation cannot be achieved when individuals and communities are prevented from processing and understanding what happened during Khmer Rouge regime as a result of the past being suppressed.

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