For Passion or Power: Buddhism and Communism in Cambodia and Laos

BY JASON RAY HUTCHISON

Ideology is a powerful tool. It has the power to inspire, the power to enlighten, the power to change the world. Some might say that religion is the most powerful ideology. For as long as religion has existed, people have died in its name. In government, when one regime topples another, it is called a coup, but when that new regime brings with it a new ideology, it assumes the mantle of a revolution.

Revolutions, religious or otherwise, have provided many of the watershed moments in human history. Take for example, the French Revolution and its cries for liberty, equality, and fraternity, or the American Revolution and its protests against taxation without representation. How many monarchies have fallen, and how many independent democratic republics have been created because of those ideas? In the same vein, how much of the fabric of world culture has been shaped by Christian crusades or Islamic jihad? Some modern day revolutionaries attempt to impose their ideology on large swaths of the population, while others, like Peru’s Shining Path and Nepal’s Maoists, try to influence just their corner of it.

Over the past century, perhaps the most important revolutionary ideology has been communism. From the first days of the Bolshevik Revolution to the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Soviet Union, communism headlined newspapers around the globe. Within that span, an overwhelming proportion of countries dealt with the Marxist challenge through elections, protests,
and insurgencies, and a substantial number committed to its ideals. For that reason, Marxist revolutions in their many variations provide fertile ground for the research and comparison of social change. One question of particular interest is the potency of ideological passion as a driver for revolutionary change, especially in the medium to long term, as opposed to political pragmatism for the sake of seizing and retaining power. More simply, how important is ideology, really, in relation to power? A surprising answer lies in the history of two communist revolutions operating at the same time in neighboring countries in Southeast Asia.

**The Curious Case of Cambodia and Laos**

Since the days of French Indochina, when Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were united as a single colony, the countries of Cambodia and Laos have resided in geopolitical obscurity. As junior partners in Indochina and as sideshows in the American Vietnam War, the surface commonalities and interconnections of Cambodia and Laos overshadowed any sense of uniqueness between the two. Both are defined by predominantly Theravada Buddhist cultures, both gained independence from their French colonizers in 1953 only to endure continuing upheaval from within and without, and both were marked by powerful communist governments that took hold in 1975. The materialist doctrine of Communism, though, is in direct conflict with the Buddhist precept of detachment from the material world. It is interesting to note how differently the two communist regimes dealt with this inherent contradiction. While the Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy Cambodia’s Buddhist community altogether, the Pathet Lao embraced Laos’ Buddhist community and manipulated it for political gain. For two Vietnamese-bred communist regimes, they adopted very divergent strategies towards Buddhism. The degree of radicalism in each regime, while not unimportant, does not account for the divergence by itself. The political clout of each country’s Buddhist institutions was important as well, and the strategies adopted towards them were, at least in part, a function of their relative capacity to pose a political threat to the communist regime.

**Marxism and Buddhism in Conflict**

In any revolution, the two major functions in play are the destruction of the existing institutions and the creation of new ones. Those institutions that pose the greatest threat to the revolutionary movement are the ones most likely to be eradicated, while those posing less of an obstacle may be captured, manipulated, or adapted to the revolutionary goals. In a Marxist revolution, the key targets of change are ideology and organization. Marxism stresses the importance of the material. Its doctrine is one of economic development, one in which progress is made through altering the relations of production. Class conflict is instigated, economic inequality is suppressed, and private property is ceded to
the state. In a communist state under a one-party system, tolerance of political opposition is not a luxury.⁵

Buddhism, on the other hand, stresses detachment from the material world. It values merit and spiritual development in a life that is viewed as more cyclical than linear.⁶ Whereas Marxism promotes the altering of relationships and initiation of class conflict, Buddhism stresses harmony over conflict and opts to minimize class distinctions.⁷ Economic inequality too, is legitimated by Buddhist requisites of harmony. Private property has its place, as does community support for the local sangha.⁸ In contrast to the dominating intolerance of Marxism, Buddhism is exceedingly patient and tolerant of ideological and organizational competition.⁹

Organizationally, the Buddhist sangha is not all that different from the Marxist party. Following Lenin’s October Revolution in Russia, all communist leaders were expected to be important theorists, and even beforehand Marxist parties were essentially small collections of scholars devoted to the text and theory.¹⁰ The Communist Manifesto defines the Marxist party as it relates to its flock:

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.¹¹

Likewise, the monks and nuns of the Buddhist sangha who spend their days meditating and studying religious texts are also those tasked with guiding the great mass of the laity toward spiritual enlightenment. Several Buddhist countries still require all male youths to spend some time living in the monastery, and many religious leaders are initially discovered in that fashion.¹² In a sense, Buddhist and Marxist institutions are like two academies teaching rival theories.

Marxist ideology, in order to secure its revolutionary success, must be taken wholesale.¹³ The differences between Marxist and Buddhist ideologies are stark, and opposition is theoretically unavoidable. The Marxist variety of revolutionary movement infiltrated all three independent states of the former French Indochina during the post-colonial period, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and
in 1975 all three Marxist revolutions succeeded in defeating the opposition and forming a central government. Given Marxist intolerance to opposition and the inherent ideological challenges it faced in Buddhist Indochina, attempted extermination of Buddhism would seem a forgone conclusion. Practice, however, does not always correspond to theory. Political clout, more than ideological sentiment, determined the strategy each regime adopted.

Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge

Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge is the model for how communists should have theoretically responded to Buddhist opposition. Article 20 of the 1976 Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea gave Cambodians freedom of religion while at the same time outlawing all religions that were deemed “detrimental.”\(^\text{14}\) Branded as subversive and “reactionary,” Buddhism was banned by the Khmer Rouge government along with virtually every other religion in Cambodia.\(^\text{15}\) “‘Buddhism is dead,’ proclaimed Yun Yat, DK Minister of Culture in 1978, ‘and the ground had been cleared for the foundations of a new revolutionary culture.’”\(^\text{16}\) As Southeast Asian scholar Charles F. Keyes argues,

> The attack on Cambodian Buddhism went well beyond the Marxist notion that religion serves to disguise class relations. The Khmer Rouge sought, by eliminating the institution that had for so long served as a basic source of Khmer identity, to create a new order with few roots in the past. The history of the new Democratic Kampuchea utopia was to be written by the revolution alone.\(^\text{17}\)

The Khmer Rouge, according to this argument, behaved as expected; they were intolerant of opposition in any form. By writing the history of Kampuchea alone, the Marxists ensured a monopoly on ideology.

The elimination of Buddhism as an alternative in Cambodia went well beyond Article 20. Physical destruction of institutions, reorganization of communities, and re-education of the populace underscored the full extent to which the Khmer Rouge was willing to go. Buddhist monks were disrobed, temples were destroyed or converted, imagery was smashed or defiled, and entire libraries vanished.\(^\text{18}\) This aggression, though, cannot be solely attributed to opposition between Marxist and Buddhist ideology. As Keyes points out, the strength of the Khmer Rouge stemmed from Khmer Buddhist culture.\(^\text{19}\) The degree of aggression, in fact, was a function of strength of the Buddhist institution as a political influence relative to the Khmer Rouge.
Buddhism, perhaps more than anything else, is the tie that binds Cambodian society. When one of the Khmer Empire’s most illustrious “god-kings,” Jayavarman VII, converted to Buddhism in the twelfth century, he introduced socialist ideas into Khmer society, developing widespread infrastructure and welfare systems and thereby endearing his people to Buddhism and deepening the preexisting marriage of church and state in Cambodia. At the time of the Khmer Rouge insurrection, Theravada Buddhism was the official state religion, with 95% of Cambodians adhering to its teachings. The sangha was the effectual centerpiece of local Cambodian life. Each village had its own sangha, whose monks and nuns provided the laymen and laywomen with education, spiritual leadership, and social activities.

On the national level, the sanghas used their numerical strength and venerated status to exert political influence. As Southeast Asian scholar Milton Osborne points out, the monks and nuns of sanghas played an important and well-established role in the mobilization and leadership of peasant movements. The sangha system extended vertically as well. Cambodian kings and princes actively protected and upheld the system, receiving formal and informal support for their rule in exchange. The power of the pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodian Buddhist institution was so pronounced that it has been credited as the basis of Cambodian nationalism.

In contrast to the well-established, unified Buddhist component of Cambodian society, the Khmer Rouge was revolutionary and fragmentary. Though joined as Angkar under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge began as an aggregation of disparate rebel groups with the common goal of taking down the Khmer Republic. The cracks in the coalition refused to subside, and in Phnom Penh after the fall, it was not always easy to tell who was in charge. Suspicion was a central theme under the Khmer Rouge. Distrust between and among party leaders and subordinates not only weakened the capability of the regime but also heightened the sense of a ubiquitous enemy.

As Dith Pran notes in The Killing Fields, Angkar taught the Cambodian people that they were surrounded by the enemy, that the enemy was inside them, and that no one could be trusted. This deep suspicion inherent in the Khmer Rouge revolutionary movement, combined with a monopoly on the use of force in the Democratic Kampuchea years, set the stage for targeting Buddhism as a political threat. In fact, all groups with the ability to oppose Angkar were targeted for systematic elimination. This amounted to the wholesale genocide of all classes other than the poor peasants and total replacement of the Cambodian social system, substituting devotion to family and to the local sangha with devotion to the overarching Angkar.
Geopolitical factors, too, played a role in perpetuating the Khmer Rouge’s insecurity. As a low-lying basin country ridged by broken mountain chains, Cambodia is susceptible to both central government and foreign conquest. With Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east, Cambodia is sandwiched between two larger powers that often compete for suzerainty over the weak territory.\textsuperscript{30} The Khmer Rouge, fighting for all or nothing in central government, also struggled in wars with its two powerful neighbors. As perhaps the most influential domestic threat, Buddhism had to be annihilated along with the oppressive classes in order to unify Cambodia and save it from outside threats.\textsuperscript{31} Given the short lifespan of Angkar and of Democratic Kampuchea, their concerns of sustainability were not unfounded. After all, the Khmer Rouge never even managed to reach the peasants they claimed to be saving. Most of their revolutionary aspirations fell on deaf ears and were met with passive bewilderment by the Cambodian peasantry.\textsuperscript{32}

**Laos’ Pathet Lao**

While the Khmer Rouge extermination of Buddhist opposition in Cambodia was highlighted as the model of a Marxist-Buddhist conflict of ideology, the Pathet Lao strategy of co-opting Buddhism in Laos was the exception that proved the theory inadequate. As a real-life test environment for comparison, Cambodia and Laos could not be better suited. Both countries endured French colonialism and neglect as the more remote provinces of Indochina.\textsuperscript{33} Both countries received their independence in 1953-54, and both governments fell to Vietnamese-inspired communist insurrections in 1975. The two neighbors were marked by foreign dominance and suzerainty to Thailand and Vietnam. Both Cambodia and Laos held long traditions of Theravada Buddhism, and the sangha provided potential political opposition to both Marxist usurpers. But similarities cease there.

In stark contrast to the vast lowland basins that characterize an ethnically homogenous and historically unified Cambodia, Laos is marked by cross-cutting mountain ranges, ethnic pluralism, and historical feudalism. Economically dependent on powerful neighbors Thailand and Vietnam, Laos is known less for its militant resistance and more for its unabashed preference to side with the best offer.\textsuperscript{34} Nationalism, a well-spring in Cambodia, is a distinct problem for Laos. Societal cleavages are both horizontal and vertical. Horizontally, Laos is composed of a myriad of ethnic groups. The lowland Lao, united by Theravada Buddhism and a common language family but still kinship-oriented, constitute a shifting majority of the population. The highland tribes, splintered and isolated,
retain animistic beliefs and a wide variety of cultural and linguistic traditions. Geographically, it is difficult to control the mountainous country beyond the capital of Vientiane. Vertically, Laos is divided into a ruling Lao Luom elite and a more general populace. If any nationalist unity developed in Laos, it would not be within the ruling elite, who share the same educational and ethnic background, but who spend their resources fighting each other for power.

Laos’ pre-Pathet Lao Buddhist institution, while not weak, was not an omnipresent establishment like its Cambodian counterpart. In Cambodia Buddhism had a monopoly on religion; in Laos it struggled to find a majority. Fortunately for the Buddhists, the popular majority contained the entirety of the Lao ruling elite. While the sangha system was not as wide-spread in Laos, it enjoyed a relationship with the government not all that different from its southern neighbor’s. The Theravada Buddhist institution found its political niche through the legitimation of rule, which it gave in return for a “monopoly over religious office and orthodoxy.”

In Laos, the Buddhist institution provided a flexible medium through which unity could be forged and order reestablished. This was made possible through Buddhism’s precept of tolerance and harmony. Whereas the Theravada Buddhist institution was the perhaps the central obstacle to Khmer Rouge legitimacy in Cambodia, it was the key to Pathet Lao legitimacy in Laos. In relative power terms, the sangha’s political utility offset its potential as an adversary.

The Pathet Lao helped itself in many ways. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge took no quarter in systematically executing Buddhist monks and annihilating Buddhist culture. Laos’ Pathet Lao, in comparison, exercised violence only as secondary means of supporting their quasi-legal assertion of power. In fact, the Pathet Lao first came to power in a coalition government under the guise of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPN). In refraining from unbridled massacre of the general population, the Pathet Lao avoided a widespread backlash of the sangha. Its preference towards a gradual takeover, minimizing political opposition and distrust while mobilizing different contingents of Laotian society, was markedly different from the immediacy that characterized the Khmer Rouge. This had the dual effect of enhancing strength in stability within the revolutionary movement and preserving complacency within the Buddhist sangha.
The Pathet Lao’s rapport with the general populace was also very different from that of the Khmer Rouge. Whereas the latter fought as a fragmented, fragile group against a unified central government, the former fought as an established, unified group against a fragmented government. Whereas the Khmer Rouge fought with no true base area, the Pathet Lao developed and “defended” a domestic base in the country’s northeast beginning in the early 1950s. Playing on the strengths of the country, the Pathet Lao bolstered itself by recruiting from the Lao elite and non-Lao tribal groups, promising equality and inclusion in a marketplace where the opponents offered feudal-tribal, exclusionary politics. The Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, acted against every strength of the traditional social order. The difference in relative legitimacy and power between the Khmer Rouge and the Pathet Lao at the moment of takeover cannot be overstated.

When the Pathet Lao finally toppled the central government in 1975, it quickly sought to establish legitimacy with the sangha. Immediately issuing a political program of peace, offering extensive democratic and traditional freedoms and declaring respect for Buddhism official policy, the revolutionary government won broad appeal and the “enthusiastic endorsement of the Buddhist Sangha.” Co-opting the Theravada institution as an instrument of LPN government, the Pathet Lao “re-educated” monks to be more “progressive” and used them to spread the party’s political doctrine. As Martin Stuart-Fox deduces, the strategy had a two-fold effect: “in the short term, the impact of socialist ideology was enhanced by virtue of the traditional respect accorded to monks, especially in rural Laos; but, in the longer term, use of the Sangha led to a decline in its prestige and social standing.” While the sangha and its activities continued to play a role in Laotian life, that role was diminished as the Buddhist institution forfeited its independence and lost power relative to the Pathet Lao regime. In the late 1970s, the Pathet Lao went on the offensive and began to discourage life-long service, calling on monks to engage in “productive work.” Through the creation of a National Association of Lao Buddhists, the government attempted to replace the sangha with the party. In its underhanded effort to incapacitate the sangha, the Pathet Lao miscalculated its own reliance on the potential political rival and stepped too far.

After the failure of a 1978 agricultural cooperative program, popular opposition reached crisis levels. Forced to admit poor government decisions, the
LPN, now the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), issued the Seventh Resolution in December 1979 and reversed the political and economic line. Buddhism, as well as the various animisms, received a greater degree of tolerance and the party opened itself up to participation from those who had not been members of the Pathet Lao. Although Laos’ Theravada Buddhism had been altered and manipulated by the revolutionary government, the Pathet Lao regime came to uphold the Buddhist institution as testament to its dependence on the sangha for political legitimacy. The Pathet Lao, in realizing that cooperation with the political other was the only way to ensure its own survival, chose to sacrifice monopoly over ideology and organization. In Laos, Marxism could not be adopted by itself; it had to be moderated by Theravada in a sort of mutual accommodation.46

Conclusions

As ideological opponents, Marxism and Buddhism provided a powerful motivation for conflict between the communist revolutionary governments and Theravada Buddhist sanghas of Cambodia and Laos. The Khmer Rouge, the extremist Marxist regime that nearly extinguished Buddhism in Cambodia, showcased the power of ideology. It provides a model case study in intolerance and ideological warfare, and encourages further investigation of the role ideology can play in driving conflict. Just to the north, the Pathet Lao faced the same ideological conflict at the same time but chose to co-opt Buddhism rather than destroy it. It was a demonstration of the ideology of power, the exception that disproves the theory that ideological opposition demands conflict. Laos raises the question of how two movements such as these could take such different approaches to the Buddhist threat.

Upon closer examination, a dynamic of power politics was at play in both countries. Although the degree of radicalism certainly had an effect on the amplification of policy, the real drive behind communist action toward the Buddhist institutions in Cambodia and Laos was not ideology but relative power and political clout. A fragile and fragmented Khmer Rouge armed with military zeal and a sense of urgency chose to exterminate the entrenched, influential Buddhist institution whose mobilization against it would have meant the end of the revolutionary movement. The Khmer Rouge killed to stay alive. The Pathet Lao, on the other hand, patiently constructed an inclusive following, one that required Buddhist approval for its legitimacy. Avoiding open conflict where possible, the revolutionary movement did not have to fear the mobilization of a
powerful Buddhist institution; the fragmentation of the country combined with the relative civility of the insurrection did not permit it.

The Pathet Lao cooperated in the face of interdependence. Political survival and neutralizing potential rivals meant more to the communist revolutionaries than did the survival of the ideology for which they were supposedly fighting. How many other revolutions and ideological conflicts across the world, past and present, echo that same sacrifice of passion for power?

-Benjamin Shatil served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

4 The author recognizes that there are some differences between Marxist, Leninist, Maoist, and Communist revolutions but will employ “Marxist” and “communist” as the blanket terms for the sake of maintaining focus on the topic of discussion. Where differences in revolutionary styles affect the argument, they will be noted.
8 A sangha is usually defined as a monastic community of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns. The sangha has important spiritual, educational, and leadership roles in its community, and is often based in a local wat, a temple or monastery. The Buddhist laity reciprocates by supporting the local wat and sangha and providing for all their needs. In a broader sense, the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen is referred to as the parisa.
14 Craig Etcheson, The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea (Boulder: Westview, 1984), 151. Also, note that Cambodia was called Democratic Kampuchea (DK) under the Khmer Rouge, from 1976-1979.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
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21 Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center and Presidio of Monterey, Culture of the East Asian World v. 3, p. 150.
22 Charles F. Keyes, “Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia,” 44.
24 Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center and Presidio of Monterey, Culture of the East Asian World v. 1, p. 188.
26 Ibid., 54.
28 Ibid.
31 The Khmer Rouge believed Cambodia was at risk of extinction, as seen in Kate Frieson, “The Political Nature of Democratic Kampuchea,” Pacific Affairs 61.3 (1988): 426.
32 Ibid.
34 Stuart Simmonds, “Laos and Cambodia: The Search for Unity and Independence,” 574.
35 The lowland people, known as Lao Luom, constitute about 68% of the population at present day. The highland people are divided between the indigenous Lao Theung (22%) and the further fragmented Lao Soung hill tribes (9%). See Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center and Presidio of Monterey, Culture of the East Asian World v. 3, p. 171.
44 Ibid., 444. Italics in original.