

Religion in Kampuchea

The Khmer (or Cambodian) people have suffered much in the recent past, and their suffering continues under the present regime. The ousting of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime was brought about only by a Vietnamese invasion, and Vietnamese control over the country remains to this day, in spite of recent political moves. Everyday life is made difficult by the continuing guerilla war and a lack of Western aid, aid which will not be given until the Vietnamese withdraw from Kampuchea.

The barbaric rule of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979 brought death through execution, war and famine to between one and two million Cambodians. Organised religion was almost wiped out: clergy of all religious groups were executed and religious buildings destroyed. There were estimated to be 65,000 Buddhist *bonzes* (monks) before 1975, about 25,000 of whom are believed to have been executed under Pol Pot. All the remaining *bonzes* were defrocked, and many perished in the Khmer Rouge years. Islam, with about a quarter of a million followers before 1975, mainly among the Cham ethnic minority, lost many of its believers. All Catholic priests, including the Bishop of Phnom Penh, and all nuns were killed. The Catholic cathedral in the capital was dismantled brick by brick. Evangelical Christians made up only a small number of the population, but of the 15 pastors in 1975, only three remained in January 1979. Some had fled the country whilst others had been executed or perished.

The installation by the Vietnamese of a new regime in Phnom Penh on 10 January 1979 was welcomed by almost the entire population, weary of the killing and destruction

wrought by the Khmer Rouge. The new regime promised religious freedom, as in fact did the Khmer Rouge, but state control of religious life remains. However, the present Kampuchean government does not share the fanatical desire of the Khmer Rouge to wipe out all traces of religion. Consequently, religion has revived strongly and Buddhists and Muslims have been able to re-establish an institutional life.

After 1979 all religious groups had to rebuild almost from scratch. The Buddhists, who make up about ninety per cent of the Khmer people, were helped by a visiting Buddhist delegation from Vietnam in 1979. This delegation ordained monks — the first monks to be ordained in Kampuchea since 1975 — and the few surviving *bonzes* resumed their religious garb. The number of *bonzes* has now climbed to about 7,000. Of the 3,054 *wats* (pagodas) existing before 1975, over 2,000 have been restored with the help of contributions from the faithful. Rice and food are again brought to these temples on special days and holidays to be distributed among the needy. But difficulties remain: a government circular passed in 1985 limits ordination to men over fifty years of age, as younger men are first required to perform obligations of rebuilding and defending the country. The only younger monks are those ordained before 1975 who survived the Khmer Rouge years. The Buddhists have not yet been able to restore many of their religious schools: about half of the pagodas used to have *Pali* schools, (schools for the teaching of *Pali*, the language of Buddhism).* Monks must demonstrate their allegiance to

*Eva Mysliwicz, *Punishing the Poor* (Oxfam: Oxford, 1988), p. 47.

the regime, take part in government propaganda and pay taxes higher than those of most other workers.

Of all religious groups Islam seems to be enjoying the government's favour the most. Seven mosques have been opened in the region of Phnom Penh recently and Koranic schools are functioning. The aim seems to be to undermine the preeminent place of Buddhism as the religion of the nation and to gain a favourable image among the Islamic nations in Asia. In spite of the fall in the Muslim population through the killings of the Pol Pot era, there are reported to be as many mosques functioning now as in 1975.

Christians have fared worse than Buddhists and Muslims. Always a tiny minority, they have received little or no official encouragement over the past few years. The Catholic Church was almost wiped out between 1975 and 1979, and has had a very small base from which to build up again. Half of the 5,000 Khmer Catholics were killed under Pol Pot, including all the priests and bishops. Most of the Catholics now living in Kampuchea are, as before 1970, ethnic Vietnamese. The number of Catholics is currently estimated at 65,000.* The Protestant churches survived better, existing in secret during the Khmer Rouge years. It was perhaps easier for the Protestant churches to survive in secret than for the Catholic Church, since Protest-

ants depend less on ritual. After the Vietnamese invasion, two of the three surviving Protestant pastors fled to Thailand, but another returned from Vietnam and began the task of rebuilding the churches. Worship services restarted in many places and a revival of church life began. Official registration was refused by the new regime, and gradually the state started restricting the life of those illegal churches. Some of them were closed by the authorities in 1980 and 1981. In 1982 an evangelical pastor was told by the President of the National Assembly, Chea Sim, that "the Christian religion has no place in the People's Republic of Kampuchea". One of the reasons given was that Christianity is a foreign religion. Small house groups continue to meet quietly, but there has not been a full-time Protestant pastor in Kampuchea since 1984.

The Christian churches are sure to survive, as they did even under Pol Pot's harsh regime, but an open, institutional life will remain an impossibility until the government changes its attitude to the churches. At present there are more Christians among the Kampuchean in refugee camps along the Thai border than there are in Kampuchea. At least the Buddhists and Muslims have a legal presence in the country and can practise their religion legally, in spite of the restrictions remaining.

*Compiled by members of
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