

Observation no: 168

Country-year: Cambodia 1976

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No

The regime of Democratic Kampuchea came to power through communist military capture of the capital, Phnom Penh, after a period of civil war. Although Prince Sihanouk was technically still the head of state until the spring of 1976, the communists, led by Pol Pot, wielded all real political power during this period, deliberately using Sihanouk only as a figurehead to disguise their true authority and objectives.¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes

In 1952, Norodom Sihanouk mounted a bloodless coup against his own National Assembly with the help of Moroccan troops brought up from Saigon. He effectively sidelined the Democrats in the National Assembly and took over the role of prime minister.² Another coup brought Lon Nol to power in 1970.³

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

Yes

Pol Pot had led a revolutionary communist insurgency in Cambodia for many years prior to his seizure of power in 1975.⁴

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No

Cambodian society was largely (though not entirely) ethnically homogeneous, making ethnicity and sect relatively unimportant as a basis for inclusion in the armed forces or government. Ideological purity and class origins played much more central roles (See question 5).

¹ David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), chapter 11.

² Chandler, p. 225.

³ Chandler, chapter 11.

⁴ Chandler, chapters 11-12.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes

All members of the Khmer Rouge had to display intense fealty to the ideals of the revolution, as well as appropriate class origins.⁵

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes

Pol Pot's forces consisted entirely of those dedicated to the ideals of communist revolution in Cambodia.⁶

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes

The instillation of revolutionary ideology was paramount in the training of Pol Pot's forces.⁷ It was often prioritized above technical training.⁸

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes

Pol Pot's forces were focused heavily on the domestic task of carrying out the revolution. They forcibly evicted most of the population from the cities and supervised their agricultural work in the countryside under very harsh conditions.⁹

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes

Khmer Rouge cadres were tasked with running the newly created administrative zones of Democratic Kampuchea.¹⁰

⁵ Chandler, chapter 12.

⁶ Chandler, chapter 12.

⁷ Chandler, chapter 12.

⁸ Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 311.

⁹ Chandler, chapter 12.

¹⁰ Chandler, chapter 12.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No

Authoritative histories do not discuss the existence of such forces.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

No

Sihanouk did fear plots against him (see question 2), but there is no evidence that he used his intelligence apparatus against his own military in response.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes

Almost as soon as he came to power, Pol Pot initiated ongoing purges of anyone suspected of middle class origins, connections to the former regime, or loyalty to foreign powers.¹¹ He had also purged his forces extensively during the earlier period of civil war.¹²

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No

Authoritative histories provide no evidence of these sorts of institutions in Democratic Kampuchea.

¹¹ Chandler, pp. 268-9.

¹² Kiernan, p. 363.