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The Contextual Relation between Ideology and Political Violence: Khmer Rouge

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ABSTRACT

During the Cold War era in the world, the ideological approaches of the East and the West driven by the bipolar system directly influenced the state systems. The Soviet Union's communist system, in particular, made a significant impact in Asia, notably due to the dominant role of the People's Republic of China. With the critical role of China, the communist regime stood out as a distinctive ideology in the Asian territories. The exploitation efforts by imperial powers such as the United States, France and the United Kingdom in Asia led to torture and oppression, resulting in the repugnance and hatred of people. This repugnance not only sparked a revolutionary movement in Vietnam but also gave rise to terrorist activities in the Cambodian territories. Founded during the Pol Pot regime, the Khmer Rouge violent regime led to a brutal mass murder of millions of people especially in Cambodia under the Communist regime. The present study focuses on the massacre of the Vietnamese people by the Communist Pol Pot violent regime under the communist regime. Thus, the contextual relationship between ideology and political violence is tried to be proved with the data obtained from this case study, elite interviews and other secondary sources.

Keywords: Cambodia; Khmer Rouge; Vietnam; Political Violence; Communism

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 15 January 2025 | Revised: 2 February 2025 | Accepted: 23 February 2025 | Published Online: 6 March 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63385/sadr.v1i1.239>

CITATION

Ezikoglu, C., Karabulut, A., Merdan, A.S., 2025. The Contextual Relation between Ideology and Political Violence: Khmer Rouge. Southeast Asia Development Research. 1(1): 16–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63385/sadr.v1i1.239>

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1. Introduction

During the Cold War era, armed conflicts based on ideologies escalated rapidly worldwide in parallelism with the spread of communism. Particularly in the Far East Asia, numerous armed groups guided by communism attempted to seize the power in various countries, resulting in appalling atrocities. Therefore, it is safe to suggest that communism also brought along its own tyrants. For instance, the achievement of independence by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948 entailed the Korean War. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea did not lose the war, and the ideological stance of the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Socialist Republic influenced the adoption of a communist regime in the country. According to Jasper Becker, the adoption of the communist regime by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea transformed the Kim family into a tyrannical rule ^[1].

Lenin came to power in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution on 25 October 1917 and the subsequent adoption of communism. Following his death, Stalin assumed leadership, marking the enforcement of a tyrannical regime in line with the communist ideology. With Stalin in power, the Katyn Massacre took place in 1940, resulting in the massacre of 14,700 Polish citizens, mainly officers and police forces. According to Mark Harrison, Stalin's surreal dictatorship can be described as the rule of a tyrant who orchestrated the murder of millions ^[2].

Stalin's harsh political approach and forced imposition of communism on a society are characterized in the literature as a terrorizing regime. Stalin's severe political stance also bears resemblance to Shakespeare's portrayal of Macbeth, a medieval Scottish tyrant ^[3].

Coupled with the economic impoverishment of the Far East Asia, the rapid spread of communism in neighbouring countries can be attributed to the influence caused by the military policies of the People's Republic of China in the 1940s considering especially the country's status as a dominant national power in the region ^[4]. Another factor contributing to China's influence in the region is the sequence of interminable invasions and colonial movements in Asia. Following the occupation of Cambodia by France in the 19th century, the Cambodian people began to nurse grievance against the assimilation and colonial practices

carried out by the French ^[5].

Communism has not only influenced state regimes but has also adversely affected state and societal security. Among its ideological sub-schools, the emphasis of radical communism, in particular, on the necessity of carrying out the revolution through armed means has provided an ideological foundation for many terrorist organizations from the Cold War era to the 21st century ^[6].

Europe has witnessed the emergence of terrorist groups such as the Red Brigades and Baader-Meinhof Group whereas Turkey also struggles against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê-PKK) and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi/Cephesi-DHKP/C), among others. In this sense, one could argue that these ideologies are not limited to a specific geographical area. In the same vein, Hungary, too, has experienced terrorist organizations like Lenin's Children (Lenin-fiúk). Having devised the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia inspired by the communist ideology, the Khmer Rouge violent regime is another example that has manifested itself in world history.

The violence initiated by the Khmer Rouge violent regime can be explained with the image of horror evoked by the word terrorism. In this sense, Vietnam has undertaken a comprehensive counter-terrorism operation against the Khmer Rouge violent regime. The struggle between the two parties represents one of the most salient examples to conflicts among varying types of communist systems. It also clearly shows the prioritization of security by communist systems through a realistic perspective and high policies. In this context, the significance of this study lies in its two-dimensional analysis serving both as a field investigation and an examination of the armed actions of two communist systems.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this study is to elucidate how communist violent regimes create their own tyrants through acts of violence and genocide as they attempt to subdue people from which they garner support. Furthermore, they endeavour to justify any and all their actions as legitimate in order to attain power and establish their own authoritarian regime emphasizing that ideology is irrelevant for violent regimes. The case study is the Khmer Rouge violent regime in

Cambodia.

The methodology involves literature review, secondary sources and qualitative research methods. Additionally, field research was conducted in Vietnam from 18 July 2023 to 17 August 2023 which based on interviews. Interviewees were selected on the basis that they had played an active role in the military or bureaucracy during the period of conflict with the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Originally planned for Cambodia, the field research was redirected to Vietnam due to political elections scheduled in Cambodia on 23 July 2023. Similarly, crossing the border was restricted to Vietnamese or Cambodian citizens, with no permission granted for entry by the holders of foreign passports. This prompted the decision to conduct the field research in Vietnam. As a precaution against potential internal conflicts in Cambodia, Vietnamese soldiers amassed military forces along the border between Vietnam and Cambodia. Another reason for conducting the field research in Vietnam was the engagement of Vietnamese soldiers in counter-terrorism operations against the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge violent regime. During the field research, a semi-structured interview method was employed. While the same set of questions was addressed to all the participants, the questions were expanded with specific inquiries relating to the topic. Photographs documenting the genocide actions of the Pol Pot regime were taken during the interviews and included in the study. A significant limitation of the studies is their execution in Vietnam, as previously outlined. Consequently, there was a decline in the number of military and bureaucratic officers who were reached, and a corresponding decrease in the number of elite interviews conducted. In order to maximise the negative effects of this limitation, particularly important secondary sources were used.

Before explaining the relationship between case analysis and elite interviewing, this research will define 'elite interviewing' as a research technique with a special relevance to politics. An increasing number of political analysts use and recognise elite interviewing as an important research method in modern political science for gathering information and knowledge. Elite interviews offer political scientists a rich and cost-effective method for generating data to analyse the complexities of politics^[7]. In recent years, many researchers like; Duke, 2002; Harvey, 2011;

Hertz & Imber, 1995; Mikecz, 2012; Morris, 2009; Neal & McLaughlin, 2009; Smith, 2006 have focused on elite interviews in qualitative research. 'The term 'elite' is not always defined in this literature, but is often used to describe individuals or groups who are allegedly closer to power or a particular professional expertise^[7]. Several challenges to elite interviews have been documented in the literature, including the suggestion that elite participants may try to exert too much control over the research and manipulate dissemination processes. More specifically in the context of policy research, it has been suggested that additional issues need to be considered when such 'elite' participants interact and operate within policy networks.

Beamer^[7] argues that elite interviews target people directly involved in the political process. Individuals may have particular ideas about the causal mechanisms or processes of politics, and elite interviews offer an in-depth exploration of specific political issues. The resulting information is not only useful for a richer description of political processes, but also describes more efficient and valid data for inferential purposes. Elite interviews should be an important part of the research to find answers to the main research question^[7]. As mentioned earlier, some scholars such as George and Bennett^[8] argue that elite interview methods are appropriate for case study research. Another of these scholars, Oisin Tansey, explains the importance of elite interviews as a means of collecting the necessary data and explores the specific advantages of this method. Tansey presents four important uses of elite interviews and their causal processes when using this data collection technique^[8].

Firstly, elite interview methods can be used to corroborate early findings from documents or secondary sources about the overview of events or issues. In this research, elite interviews were conducted to supplement secondary sources such as party documents, historical sources and similar secondary sources, especially on the Pol Pot regime and political violence during the period. Second, elite interviews aim to determine what a group of people think. By interviewing military and civilian elite bureaucracy about the regime in Vietnam at the time, this research helped to identify how the Khmer Rouge organisation fuelled political violence. Third, elite interviews draw inferences about the characteristics or decisions of

the larger population. According to Tansey, interviews with key political groups can be used to generalise the thoughts or decisions of the larger population. Finally, elite interviews help to reconceptualise an event or set of events. Elite interview methods reveal hidden elements of the political process that are not clear from analyses of political outcomes or other sources.

3. The Literature of Political Violence in Asia

Political violence in Asia has been a significant topic of scholarly inquiry, given the region's diverse political landscapes, historical legacies, and socio-economic conditions. Asia, home to more than half of the world's population, has witnessed various forms of political violence, including civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, state repression, and communal conflicts. This literature review explores the key themes, trends, and theoretical approaches in the study of political violence in Asia.

The historical roots of political violence in Asia are deeply intertwined with colonial legacies, nation-building processes, and Cold War dynamics. Authors like Ayesha Jalal^[9] and Sunil Khilnani have discussed how colonial rule and the subsequent partition of countries like India and Pakistan led to communal violence and persistent state conflicts. Additionally, the decolonization process and the emergence of new nation-states in Southeast Asia often resulted in violent struggles over national identity and political power^[10].

Civil wars and insurgencies are among the most studied forms of political violence in Asia. In Southeast Asia, the conflicts in Myanmar and the Philippines have drawn significant scholarly attention. David Steinberg^[11] highlights the ethnic dimensions of Myanmar's civil wars, where the central government's attempts to impose a unified national identity have clashed with the aspirations of various ethnic minorities. Similarly, Zachary Abuza^[12] analyzes the insurgencies in the southern Philippines, where Muslim separatist movements have engaged in prolonged conflict with the state, driven by both ethnic and religious grievances.

In South Asia, the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) has been a focal point of study. Nira Wickramasinghe and Jonathan Spencer^[13] examine how ethnic tensions between

the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority escalated into one of the deadliest conflicts in the region, fueled by issues of language, religion, and national identity.

Religious extremism and terrorism have become major concerns in Asia, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Rohan Gunaratna^[14] provides an in-depth analysis of the rise of Islamist terrorist networks in Southeast Asia, including Jemaah Islamiyah, which has been responsible for several high-profile attacks in Indonesia. In South Asia, the nexus between terrorism and political violence is evident in the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. Sumit Ganguly^[15] discusses the role of Pakistan-based militant groups in the insurgency, highlighting the complex interplay between religion, nationalism, and regional geopolitics.

Moreover, the radicalization of Buddhist extremism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka has also been studied by scholars like Matthew Walton and Benjamin Schonthal, who explore how religious nationalism has fueled violence against Muslim minorities in these countries.

State repression is another critical aspect of political violence in Asia. Governments in the region have often resorted to authoritarian measures to suppress dissent, leading to widespread human rights violations. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented numerous cases of state violence in countries like China, where the repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang has been particularly severe. Adrian Zenz has contributed to understanding the mechanisms of state control in Xinjiang, including mass surveillance, internment camps, and forced labor. In Southeast Asia, the military junta in Myanmar has been notorious for its brutal crackdown on political opposition, especially during the 1988 and 2007 uprisings^[16]. Similarly, the authoritarian regime in Cambodia under Hun Sen has used violence and intimidation to maintain power.

Communal violence, often driven by ethnic or religious differences, is a recurrent issue in Asia. The 2002 Gujarat riots in India, analyzed by Ashutosh Varshney^[17] exemplify how political manipulation of communal identities can lead to large-scale violence. Varshney's work highlights the role of political parties in inciting violence for electoral gains, a phenomenon observed in other Asian countries as well. The communal violence in Indonesia during the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly in Maluku and Central Sulawesi, has been studied by Gerry

van Klinken^[18]. His research points to the weakening of state authority during the post-Suharto transition as a critical factor that allowed local conflicts to escalate into widespread violence.

External influences, including the geopolitical interests of major powers, have played a significant role in shaping political violence in Asia. The Cold War period saw the United States and the Soviet Union backing different factions in Asian conflicts, such as in Korea and Vietnam. In the post-Cold War era, China's rise as a regional power and its assertive policies in the South China Sea have led to increased tensions and potential flashpoints for violence^[19].

The U.S.-led war on terror has also had significant implications for political violence in Asia. S. D. Muni^[20] examines how the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan has exacerbated regional conflicts, particularly by fueling anti-American sentiment and radicalization.

The literature of political violence in Asia is a complex and multifaceted field, encompassing a wide range of issues from civil wars and insurgencies to terrorism, state repression, and communal violence. The region's diverse historical, cultural, and political contexts require a nuanced understanding of the causes and dynamics of violence. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature in terms of the contextual relations between Pol Pot's regime and terrorism in Cambodia.

4. Political History of Cambodia

Today, we don't know the origins of the Cambodian people, the alphabet they used before the adoption of the Indian script in the third century AD and the language they spoke then. However, evidence from carbon studies indicates that people lived in caves and engaged in pottery making around 4200 BC. Anthropological examinations conducted on skulls pertaining to 1500s BC Samrong Sen in eastern Cambodia suggest that the people of modern Cambodia share similarities with their aforesaid antecedents. Additionally, it is noted that the first cultivation of rice and the practice of bronze craftsmanship in the history of Cambodian lands took place in this area^[21].

Modern Cambodia has been shaped with regard to its historical past to a great extent. King Suryavarman II, founder of the Khmer Empire, ruled until 1550 AD.

Suryavarman II's reign took place after the assassination of Dharanindravarman I, the former's uncle. The literature depicts Suryavarman II as a warrior and an ambitious leader. In this sense, Vaishnavism became the official religion during the reign of Suryavarman II, who adopted it as a state religion. Subsequent to the acknowledgment of Vaishnavism as the country's official religion, Suryavarman II commissioned the construction of the Angkor Wat temple in the name of Hindu deities^[22].

Due to its geographical proximity to China, a powerful civilization in the Far East Asia, Cambodia has consistently encountered political, military, economic and cultural challenges posed by China. In response broadly to India's expansionist policies, China has enhanced expansionist policies to reinforce its influence in the region. China has continuously sent diplomats to improve the economic relations with the Kingdom of Cambodia and encouraged migration from Cambodia to China. However, rather than pursuing a peaceful path to spread the Vaishnavism belief in the region, King Suryavarman II opted for a series of invasion policies. The Khmer Kingdom invaded the Cham region in Vietnam in 950 AD. The Khmer Kingdom's occupation in Vietnam persisted, and the invasion of the Kingdom of Vietnam in the early 12th century resulted in a major war between the two kingdoms resulting in casualties that added up to around 50,000 people^[23].

Angkor Kingdom, also known as the Khmer Empire, experienced its golden age during the reign of King Jayavarman VII. While the power of the Khmer Empire in the Cambodian territories increased during Jayavarman's rule, it began to decline in the 13th century and proved unable to resist against invasion attempts. Military operations were launched against the invasion and exploitation initiatives by the Champa Kingdom. Although the Khmer Kingdom managed to repel, the attempts by the Champa Kingdom considerably weakened the former's power^[24].

13th and 14th-century Mongol invasions in the Chinese Empire resulted in internal turmoil, unsettling the principalities and leading to changes in the regional borders. In response, Chinese principalities launched campaigns against the Kingdom of Thailand which resulted in the Thai populations migrating to the Khmer Kingdom first in small groups and then in masses. The influx of Thai populations into the region triggered rebellions due to the

subsequent population increase in the Khmer Kingdom. One of the factors that adversely affected the power of the Khmer Kingdom was irregular migrations into the region and the ensuing rebellions ^[25].

The rapid migration of the Thai populations into Cambodia and the subsequent rebellions have led to a undesired political, military and diplomatic relations between Cambodia and Thailand from the first migration movements to the 21st century. Cambodia, also known as the Khmer Empire or Angkor Kingdom, has consistently withstood power struggles, invasion movements and internal rebellions which resulted in a perpetual loss of power. Following the age of geographical explorations, it has been recognized as a strategically important region for imperialist states due to its strategic significance for Western colonial powers.

The past of a state holds a significant influence on its present and future. Past history reflects some of the factors that define a state's identity, culture, policies, social and economic structure, legal system, and foreign relations. The events, decisions, mistakes and achievements experienced by a state in the past provide insight as to its trajectory. This, in turn, can help to infer ideas and predictions with regard to such country's future decisions and strategies. Moreover, the past of a country serves as cultural heritage for its citizens. In this sense, past also reflects experience. Past is a crucial element for a nation's identity and its commitment to history. Historical events and figures also provide information about a society's values and beliefs, contributing to the formation and maintenance of social identity. In addition, the past of a country influences relationships with other nations. Previous relations, agreements, wars and peace treaties can impact current diplomatic and economic ties.

Cambodia's historical experience, particularly prior the 14th century, has been primarily characterized by political, military, economic and social struggles with its neighbouring countries. In an effort to enhance his influence over the country, King Norodom of Cambodia sought support from France. In 1863, the Protection Treaty was signed between King Norodom of Cambodia and the French. However, in 1883, France began limiting the influence of King Norodom in Cambodia by appointing a governor to the Cochinchina region. In response, King

Norodom rebelled against the French paving the way for guerrilla warfare in Cambodia, which was occupied by thousands of French troops. While Cambodia's guerrilla forces clashed with the French army, correspondence was being held with Sisowath, King Norodom's brother, in France. In 1884, Sisowath ascended to the throne upon French support ^[26].

5. From Rebellion Against Exploitation to Transition to a Communist System and Dictatorship in Cambodia

In order to comprehend Cambodia's advancement towards a communist regime under the leadership of Pol Pot, it is imperative to recognise the pivotal role played by China's support as an external factor. China was the Khmer Rouge's most prominent ally during its rule. The Sino-Vietnamese split and China's deteriorating relationship with the Soviet Union in the 1970s were pivotal in shaping its Cambodia policy. After Vietnam aligned itself more closely with Moscow, China sought to contain Vietnamese expansionism and Soviet influence by backing Pol Pot's regime, which positioned itself in opposition to Hanoi ^[27]. Thus, Cambodia became a buffer state in China's regional containment strategy.

Beyond geopolitical calculation, there was also an ideological dimension to China's support. The Khmer Rouge's radical Maoist-inspired policies echoed China's own Cultural Revolution. Although China was moving away from radicalism after Mao's death in 1976, the affinity remained influential ^[28]. China viewed the Khmer Rouge as an ideological ally committed to a vision of revolutionary purity that contrasted with Vietnam's Soviet-aligned pragmatism.

China provided extensive assistance to the Khmer Rouge, including an estimated \$1 billion in aid between 1975 and 1979, as well as military training, infrastructure development, and weaponry ^[29]. Even after the Vietnamese invasion toppled the regime in 1979, China continued to support Khmer Rouge remnants operating along the Thai-Cambodian border, in part to frustrate Vietnamese consolidation. China also lobbied for Democratic Kampuchea to retain its seat at the United Nations, thereby legitimizing

the regime on the international stage^[30]. Unlike China, the United States had no direct ideological or diplomatic relationship with the Khmer Rouge during its rule. However, following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the rise of Vietnam as a regional hegemon allied with the Soviet Union, the United States sought to curtail Vietnamese influence in Indochina. This led to a de facto alignment with China and ASEAN states in supporting opposition to the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea^[31].

While Pol Pot sought Chinese support, the revolutionary agenda he pursued in Cambodia deviated substantially from conventional Marxist movements. In contrast to the Chinese communist model that aimed at fostering urban industrialization and initiating a cultural revolution, Pol Pot advocated for an agricultural revolution. Central to his ideology was the empowerment of the peasant class so as ensure their rule over the nation.

During the construction of communism in Cambodia, the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties provided support during the initial stage. In 1951, the Chinese Communist Party emphasized the dependence of the Cambodian Communist Party on China at a people's conference hosting China, Vietnam and Cambodia. In 1979, the Khmer Communist Party changed its name to the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party^[32].

Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953 only to suffer internal turbulence in 1967. Appointed by France to Cambodia, King Norodom Sihanouk contributed to the independence process. During the ongoing period, the Khmer Rouge violent regime formed an alliance with the Cambodian Communist Party. Holding the monarchy, Sihanouk shared the state administration with Pol Pot. While Pol Pot's government was in control, Sihanouk declared his monarchy. After Vietnam fought against the Khmer Rouge violent regime in Cambodia and the Khmer forces dispersed, Norodom Sihanouk was sent to exile^[33].

As Pol Pot seized power, he aimed to establish a communist regime in Cambodia that would be led by the peasant class. However, it was later discovered that the agricultural products that were cultivated in his regime were, in fact, drugs. During our visit on 26 July 2023 to the Giang border gate, a pass that ensures easy land access between Vietnam and Cambodia, we obtained answers to the following question in an interview with an anonymous

interviewee. For security reasons and due to his official duty, the 45-year-old male participant, a customs officer who preferred not to disclose his name, stated the financial supports of Khmer Rouge as below:

‘As you can see on the sign, drugs. Drug production is extensive in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge produced so much drugs that Cambodians are still trying to produce drugs and smuggle them into Vietnamese territory. However, selling drugs in Vietnam is a serious crime with severe penalties.’

Cambodia is one of the countries that produce the highest amount of opium in the world. Therefore, there is an immense scale of drug trafficking in Cambodia. In this regard, use of drugs has almost replaced medication as the latter has traditionally not been applied to patients in the country. That is, there is tendency to view drugs as a form of medical treatment. Consequently, there is a high amount of drug production in the region due to weak central authority which brings about a lack of sufficient controlling power. China regards Thailand as a route in the trade and production of opium whereas, backed by China, Pol Pot's regime became a new satellite state for China in such trade and production. The Red Khmers were also involved in the production of the substance^[34].

In the light of the foregoing, Pol Pot implemented a rural development policy after he declared his dictatorship in 1975. He relocated people from cities to villages by force and compelled them to work in agricultural fields against their will. Pol Pot converted his rule from dictatorship to state terrorism by pushing people for working in the fields. Moreover, it is safe to claim that Cambodia came to exhibit a politically paradoxical structure as Pol Pot's desire to build a communist system took place in conjunction with the persisting monarchy. Accompanying the hammer and sickle ideology, the persistence of monarchy indicates that Cambodia supported a parliamentary monarchy structure unlike the communist regime in Vietnam.

Throughout history, Cambodia has been a country continuously exposed to exploitation by imperialist powers. Having experienced invasions by foreign cultures and civilizations as discussed above, Cambodia also became a target for expansionist communist ideology during the Cold War era.

As a faction of Cambodian communism, the Khmer Rouge regime acceded on 7 April 1975 following the in-

cursion of the Khmer Rouge militants into the Cambodian metropolis of Phnom Penh and the subsequent consolidation of control and displacement of the city's inhabitants ^[35]. Thereupon, military forces confiscated all private property, proscribed religion, repealed the legal frameworks, abolished markets and currency, shuttered public assembly venues and classified all acts of dissent against the regime

as treason (**Table 1**).

The political instability and continuous occupation that inflicted Cambodia after the 1950s are among the reasons that greatly contributed to the development of the Pol Pot faction. The escalating nationalist movements against the exploitation of the region, especially in Vietnam, also played significant role for the Cambodian people ^[36].

Table 1. Democide and Genocide Rates in Cambodia under the Pol Pot Regime: A Comparative Perspective.

Country/Regime	Period	Estimated Deaths	Type (Genocide/Democide)	Death Rate (% of Population)
Cambodia (Khmer Rouge)	1975–1979	1.5–2 million	Genocide/Democide	20–25%
Nazi Germany	1939–1945	6 million Jews (11 million total)	Genocide	≈67% of European Jews
Soviet Union (Stalin)	1929–1953	6–9 million (non-war)	Democide	3–5%
China (Mao Zedong)	1958–1962	15–45 million (Great Leap Forward)	Democide	3–7%
Rwanda	1994	800,000–1 million	Genocide	≈70% of Tutsi population
Bosnia (Yugoslavia)	1992–1995	100,000 (8,000 Srebrenica)	Genocide	≈3% (in affected regions)

In 1963, Pol Pot received guerrilla training in Vietnam. The development of diplomatic relations between the United States and South Vietnam in 1964 led to the termination of those between Pol Pot and Vietnam. In 1973, 250,000 Cambodians lost their lives as a result of the U.S. airstrikes on the borders of Cambodia. Stating that the power of the Kingdom of Cambodia had diminished, Pol Pot instigated an armed uprising against the Cambodian Kingdom. Having his influence felt in Cambodia quite quickly, Pol Pot began large-scale armed operations in 1977 targeting innocent civilians throughout the borders of Cambodia. As Pol Pot's armed operations expanded, the situation all the more adversely affected the lives of innocent Vietnamese living along the border between Vietnam and Cambodia. The foundations of communism in Cambodia were laid by the communists of Vietnam. However, the previous vexing operations of the Cambodian Communist Party and the Khmers against Vietnam and the Vietnamese populations turned into a genocide with Pol Pot ^[37].

The oil basins situated along the border of Cambodia and Vietnam constituted the primary concern in the dispute between the two nations. Nevertheless, Pol Pot aspired to be the representative of communism in the region, and a potential intimacy between China and Vietnam would jeopardize Pol Pot's grip on power ^[38].

Pol Pot regarded internal enemies, that is, the dissident voices against the regime, as more dangerous than foreign actors. Besides frequently emphasizing the support he garnered particularly from China, he asserted success in combating external adversaries ^[39]. Pol Pot was a product of an anarchic approach. The goal to create classless society generated disorder in the regime. As emphasized by Brezenski, the appeal of the totalitarian regime of the 20th century was similarly expressed by the rule of Pol Pot. Nonetheless, this governance paradigm evolved with the terrorism posed by the Khmer Rouge movement ^[40].

Pol Pot initially began to take action against his enemies in power by executing individuals who he believed could pose a threat as opponents in the Toi Pot region in southern Cambodia, where he wielded considerable influence. The Cambodian administration expelled violent revolutionaries who then sought refuge in the Pol Pot regime. As they exerted pressure on the Cambodian army, great numbers of soldiers who defected from the army sought refuge in Vietnam. Despite representing oil and border issues as a justification of his motivations, Pol Pot's true objective was to consolidate his power through acts of terrorism. Nevertheless, the claim that the executed were individuals who posed a threat to the regime is not without a paradox as Pol Pot also carried out terrorist acts against

ethnic populations, such as the Vietnamese and Muslim Cham communities ^[41].

Maoist China, Thailand and Laos supported the Pol Pot regime. Vietnam, on the other hand, encountered the horrifying deeds of the Khmer Rouge violent regime immediately after the dissolution of the armed resistance against the United States. Vietnam, exposed to the U.S. sarin gas attacks, recollected its army following the terrorist offenses that mutilated the limbs of Vietnamese people alive as of 1977 ^[42].

6. Pol Pot's Regime: A Case of Political Violence

Under the lens of realist theory, Pol Pot's rise to power and subsequent actions can be seen as driven by the desire for absolute control, achieved through military force and Machiavellian tactics. His regime exemplified a brutal form of state terrorism, as vividly described by Phiram Leng in an interview (**Appendix D**). Leng pointed out that Pol Pot's policies, which forced people into grueling labor in the fields, led to countless deaths. This imposition of fear, suppression of dissent, and mass executions were all tools Pol Pot employed to maintain his regime.

A Vietnamese military officer, interviewed in **Appendix B**, recounted the extreme violence executed under Pol Pot's rule. He described horrific scenes where the Khmer Rouge committed barbaric acts, such as vivisectioning people and publicly displaying their mutilated bodies. This method of terrorizing the population reinforced the regime's power and instilled a climate of fear that silenced any opposition.

Pol Pot's state ideology was heavily influenced by Chinese communism, with the Red Khmer organization borrowing from Marxist-Leninist thought. In the article "Not Ideologues but Converts? Red Khmers' Thought Reform in Cambodia 1975–1978", Path and Kanavou highlighted how Pol Pot's regime used organizational techniques such as democratic centralism and psychological pressure, indoctrinating individuals into a collective mentality that prioritized obedience over individuality ^[43]. The interviews indicate that this Chinese communism-inspired system was also expansionist in nature, as noted by Phiram Leng in **Appendix D**, aligning with China's broader geopolitical ambitions.

While China supported Pol Pot ideologically, the United States had more pragmatic motives. According to Chanmony Chea (**Appendix E**), the U.S. provided covert support to Pol Pot, primarily to counterbalance Vietnam, a country that had previously humiliated the U.S. in war. The U.S. sought to transform Cambodia into a pro-capitalist state, while China aimed to enforce its communist ideology. This geopolitical chess game further emboldened Pol Pot's aggressive policies toward Vietnam, a much larger and more powerful neighbor.

The Khmer Rouge regime sustained itself financially through the extensive production and sale of drugs, primarily heroin. In a conversation with a Cambodian customs officer (**Appendix A**), the respondent confirmed that drug production was rampant in Cambodia's fertile lands. Even after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, this illicit industry persisted, with Cambodians attempting to smuggle drugs into Vietnam, where drug trafficking was harshly punished.

Pol Pot's training in guerrilla warfare, received from Vietnam, allowed him to effectively wage war against not only domestic opponents but also neighboring Vietnam. However, his aggression towards Vietnam was ultimately his downfall. According to an interview with a Vietnamese soldier (**Appendix C**), Pol Pot's forces, though initially trained by Vietnam, underestimated the experience and strength of the Vietnamese army, especially after it had honed its skills during the Vietnam War. Armed with American-made weapons captured during the war, the Vietnamese forces launched a counteroffensive, eventually invading Cambodia and reaching Phnom Penh, though they did not occupy the city for long to avoid being seen as invaders.

Pol Pot's regime and the Khmer Rouge's actions drew mixed reactions from the international community. While organizations like the United Nations condemned the regime's human rights violations, military action against the Khmer Rouge came mainly from Vietnam. Armed with Soviet and Cuban-supplied weapons, Vietnam fought the Khmer Rouge to curb its expansionist and terrorist activities. Despite international outcry, U.S. strategic interests in the region led to continued covert support for Pol Pot, as evidenced by interviews with Vietnamese military officers who reflected on the political complexities of the time (**Appendix B**).

In Michael Haas's work, Cambodia, Pol Pot, and the United States, it is suggested that U.S. support for Pol Pot was largely a strategic move to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. However, Pol Pot's uncontrollable and violent actions limited the extent of U.S. influence over his regime ^[44].

Initially, various states as well as the United Nations condemned Vietnam's struggle against the Khmer Rouge violent regime, which had killed millions of people. They labelled Vietnam's cross-border operation as an invasion. After the death of Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, who assumed leadership of the Khmer Rouge, dissolved the organization in 1998. However, the Cambodian state continued its operations against the Khmer Rouge. The Cambodian army conducted operations against and captured the key figures of the Khmer Rouge including Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Duch and Ieng Thirith among others ^[45].

The persistent actions carried out by the Khmer Rouge violent regime in hopes of reinforcing the regime require attention. Having intended to change the cultural fabric of Cambodia's populace through genocide, Pol Pot implemented his approach in a systematic way. In consequence, his policies paved the way for a distinct ritual for the Khmer Rouge violent regime. The atrocious massacres by the Khmer Rouge violent regime became a ritual per se ^[46].

The aversion of the local population towards the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War has led to a strengthening in China's presence in the region. According to Annan, the veto by China during Pol Pot's trial has limited the influence of the United Nations on the global stage. Annan suggested that a hybrid approach was required to control the genocide and ensure Pol Pot's trial. After the latter's death, the focus shifted to prosecuting the remaining Khmer Rouge leaders. Although the slow response by the UN can be attributed to adherence to the principle of self-determination, this approach is still open to criticism. Criticized for enabling major powers to assert dominance over other countries, the principle of self-determination became evident in the case of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge with countries (such as China) seeking to maximize their national interests ^[47].

7. Conclusions

This study has examined the contextual relationship between ideology and political violence through the case of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The findings illustrate that under the guise of communist ideology, the Khmer Rouge orchestrated a campaign of systematic violence and state terrorism. While the regime claimed to empower the peasant class, its policies instead produced mass atrocities, widespread fear, and severe societal repression. Interviews and qualitative data revealed that the ideological commitment of the Khmer Rouge served less as a genuine social vision and more as a justification for totalitarian control.

From a theoretical standpoint, the case reinforces realist interpretations of political violence, suggesting that ideology often operates as a tool to consolidate power rather than as a guide for governance. Pol Pot's regime exemplifies how ideological frameworks—particularly radical communism—can be instrumentalized to justify violence, establish authoritarian regimes, and pursue geopolitical strategies. The study also demonstrates the importance of elite interviews in understanding how ideology translates into political practice and policy implementation on the ground.

Policy-wise, the findings highlight the dangers of uncritical support for ideological allies in international relations, as seen in the strategic backing of the Khmer Rouge by global powers such as China and the United States. This calls for more rigorous global accountability mechanisms when dealing with regimes that perpetrate mass violence under ideological pretenses.

The research, however, is not without limitations. Due to political and logistical constraints, fieldwork was conducted in Vietnam rather than Cambodia, which reduced the number of elite interviews and limited direct access to primary sources within the Cambodian context. Although this limitation was mitigated through careful use of secondary literature and interviews with Vietnamese officials, further in-country research could provide deeper insights.

Future research should consider a comparative analysis of other ideologically driven regimes to better

understand the conditions under which ideology becomes a vehicle for political violence. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate political science, sociology, and international law could enrich our understanding of how to prevent such atrocities. In particular, further investigation is needed into the long-term social and psychological impacts of ideological terror and the role of international justice mechanisms in post-conflict reconciliation.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, C.E.; methodology, C.E.; software, A.K.; validation, A.K., A.S.M. and C.E.; formal analysis, C.E.; investigation, A.K.; resources, A.K.; data curation, A.K.; writing—original draft preparation, C.E.; writing—review and editing, A.S.M.; visualization, A.S.M.; supervision, C.E.; project administration, A.K.; funding acquisition, A.S.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of YOZGAT BOZOK UNIVERSITY (protocol code 95552562-770-125455 and date of approval 22.02.2023).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used for this article is unavailable due to privacy. Further questions about the data and research instruments can contact the corresponding author at the correspondence address listed above.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

The participant, a 45-year-old male customs officer, has opted not to disclose his name due to security reasons and his official role. He responded only to the question specified below. Andac: Question, Y: Participant

Andac: What were the financial sources of the Khmer Rouge?

Y: As you can see in the table, drugs. Drug production in Cambodian territories is extensive.^① The Khmer Rouge was so prolific in drug production that Cambodians are still attempting to produce drugs and smuggle them into Vietnamese territories. However, selling drugs in Vietnam is a serious crime with severe penalties.

Appendix B

On August 1, 2023, a 53-year-old male participant, identified as Appendix 2 for security reasons, stated that he served as a military officer with the rank of “sergeant” in the counter-terrorism operation against the Pol Pot terrorist organization in Vietnam. The participant’s father also indicated that he was a Vietcong officer in the Vietnam War. Due to security concerns, the participant has not granted permission to disclose his name. Andac: Question, X: Participant

Andac: Who is Pol Pot?

X: Pol Pot was one of the politicians in Cambodia in the 1960s. During that time, his relations with Vietnam were very good. He also had a good relationship with Comrade Ho Chi Minh.

Andac: Who is the Khmer Rouge?

X: The Khmer Rouge is a group that vivisected people, cutting their limbs into three pieces, impaling them on spears, and displaying them in other regions of Cambodia. They were not human. The heads of people were cut off, cooked on hot irons, and exhibited.

^① At the An Giang border gate, warning signs and photographs highlighting the fight against drug trafficking are present at every point of the border crossing, serving as cautionary measures. Additionally, operations against drug smuggling are depicted on these signs. Furthermore, due to the prohibition of taking photographs at the border, pictures of these relevant signs could not be captured.

Andac: Why did the Khmer Rouge carry out the genocide movement? What were their goals?

X: China provided a lot of support to Pol Pot, and they needed to intimidate the people. This way, they could suppress resistance. The people couldn't resist against Pol Pot.

Andac: How did the Vietnam army combat Pol Pot?

X: When we fought against the Khmer Rouge, we always carried our own hand grenade. If we were captured alive, we would detonate ourselves. No Vietnamese soldier wanted to be vivisected alive. However, these forests are ours, and we know how to fight in these forests very well. We even use animals in the war.

Andac: What were the financial resources of the Khmer Rouge?

X: China provided significant support. Thailand and Laos also provided substantial support.

Andac: Both China and Vietnam are communist states. Why did China support the Khmer Rouge?

X: China's communist system is based on dictatorship. However, Vietnam rejects dictatorship within its communist system. Therefore, both in the past and today, China always seeks to spread its dictatorial communism to these regions. This is why Pol Pot accepted China's Maoist dictatorial regime. China already has a strong presence in Thailand and Laos.

Appendix C

On August 8, 2023, a 43-year-old male participant, identified as Vaine, expressed his willingness for his first name to be used in the study but preferred not to disclose his surname. He serves as military personnel providing translation services in the Vietnam Armed Forces; hence, the name Vaine will be used in the study.

Andac: Who is Pol Pot?

Vaine: Pol Pot is a communist leader. He initially learned communism and guerrilla warfare tactics in Vietnam and later collaborated with China, subsequently waging war against Vietnam.

Andac: Who is the Khmer Rouge?

Vaine: The Khmer Rouge was initially formed as an armed unity for revolutionary purposes. However, manipulated by China, Pol Pot transformed it into a terrorist organization that beheaded millions of people in Vietnam,

preserving their heads in glass jars.

Andac: Why did the Khmer Rouge commit genocide? What were their goals?

Vaine: The Khmer Rouge had received guerrilla training from Vietnam. The Vietnam-USA war reached an intense level in 1970. After the end of the Vietnam-USA war in 1975, facing a series of economic difficulties, Pol Pot, seeking to exploit the situation, attacked Vietnam. However, they forgot that Vietnamese soldiers were experts in guerrilla warfare.

Andac: How did the Vietnam army combat Pol Pot?

Vaine: The Vietnam army quickly armed itself. It had developed significantly during the Vietnam-USA war. However, their weapons were insufficient. Only Cuba and the Soviet Union were providing weapons to Vietnam. After the Vietnam-USA war, the captured weapons from Americans contributed, and Pol Pot was defeated. When the Vietnamese army entered the capital of Cambodia, they did not stay for more than three days because Vietnam is not an occupying state.

Andac: What were the financial resources of the Khmer Rouge?

Vaine: China, Laos, and Thailand.

Andac: Both China and Vietnam are communist states. Why did China support the Khmer Rouge?

Vaine: (Due to the political nature of the question, he chose not to provide an answer.)

Appendix D

On August 12, 2023, a 47-year-old male participant, identified as Phiram Leng for security reasons, expressed his consent to have his name published in the study. The interview with the participant, who resides in Cambodia and works as a teacher, was conducted at the An Giang Border Gate. The participant is fluent in English.

Andac: Who is Pol Pot?

Phiram Leng: Pol Pot is the most influential political figure of his time. The people accepted him as a leader because, during those years, he was more intellectual than the people in the country. (Pol Pot) made a lot of effort to seize power. He used his organizational skills to gather people around him. In a very short time, he amassed a large number of supporters and sympathizers. I think having many people around him gave him power.

Andac: Who are the Khmer Rouge?

Phiram Leng: Although it was established as a communist organization, it is essentially a terrorist group.

Andac: Why did the Khmer Rouge commit genocide? What were their goals?

Phiram Leng: Pol Pot killed those who were against him and those inclined to be against his ideology. In addition, he forced weak people and those against him to work in the fields, hungry and thirsty. Many people died in the fields after working for a very long time without food and water. This is why they are called “death fields.” In addition to this, many people died due to drought, famine, and disease. With state support, more than a million people were killed, and these killed people were buried in the fields.

Andac: How did the Vietnam army combat Pol Pot?

Phiram Leng: Pol Pot hated Vietnam. Because the Vietnamese government considered Pol Pot harmful to the peace of the Asian region. They wanted someone more compliant in Cambodian politics instead of Pol Pot.

Andac: What were the financial resources of the Khmer Rouge?

Phiram Leng: I know they received financial aid from China. China wanted to dominate Cambodia’s politics. This support was convenient for Cambodia because China was not a neighbouring country. China started to support Pol Pot a lot. The U.S. also supported Pol Pot, albeit not explicitly. Because the U.S. does not like and want anyone opposing the American regime anywhere in the world. The U.S. supported Pol Pot for its own interests.

Andac: Both China and Vietnam are communist states. Why did China support the Khmer Rouge?

Phiram Leng: China wanted to impose Chinese-style socialism/communism on Cambodia and the Asian region.

Appendix E

On August 12, 2023, a 51-year-old male participant, identified as Chanmony Chea for security reasons, expressed his consent to have his name published in the study. The interview with the participant, who resides in Cambodia, was conducted at the An Giang Border Gate. The participant is a university graduate in law in Cambodia but works as an international truck driver. He is fluent in English.

Andac: Who is Pol Pot?

Chanmony Chea: He is normally considered a dictator, but not in my opinion. He appeared to be a Marxist-Leninist, but he didn’t have a Lenin-style policy. In my opinion, Pol Pot was not a strong person, but he was trying to derive his power from the suffering people who needed a leader. During Pol Pot’s rule, there were 7 million people in Cambodia. As a result, it was quite easy to be a leader to such a small number of poor people. He was a leader who exploited the weakness of the poor people.

Andac: Who is the Khmer Rouge?

Chanmony Chea: (The participant did not wish to answer).

Andac: Why did the Khmer Rouge commit genocide? What were their goals?

Chanmony Chea: People say he killed so many people to bring his people to socialism, but that was not the case. Pol Pot only killed those who were against his dictatorship. In this way, he tried to strengthen his authority.

Andac: How did the Vietnam army combat Pol Pot?

Chanmony Chea: Vietnam is one of the powerful countries in the world economically and politically. Moreover, it is a country that defeated the U.S. after a long struggle and bloody wars. China tried to invade Vietnam several times, but it never succeeded. Pol Pot, supported by both the U.S. and China, became more aggressive. If Pol Pot were a smart man, he wouldn’t have shown an aggressive attitude towards a country with a population six times that of Cambodia.

Andac: Both China and Vietnam are communist states. Why did China support the Khmer Rouge?

Chanmony Chea: Definitely, the U.S. supported Pol Pot more than China did. China’s goal was to impose its ideology on Cambodia, while the U.S.’s goal was to turn Cambodia into a capitalist-friendly country. It did not suit the U.S. for Cambodia to be socialist/communist. Currently, the country has a mixed system.

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