

Cambodia, the nightmare of the past does not delete the desire to smile

It is April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge occupy Phnom Penh and as the story starts from Year Zero, Hun Sen stands out, losing an eye in the battle against Lon Nol's army. But it is worth it. Since 1985, he has continuously been Prime Minister in one of the countries with the highest rate of corruption in the world (according to informal sources of World Bank, Cambodia threatens the unenviable record of Bangladesh). A real symbol of the deceitfulness, transformism and skills in personal management of state affairs that in modern history characterized the political life of this state in Southeast Asia: a Khmer Rouge with Pol Pot, minister with Vietnamese, founder of the Buddhist State but also of the government offices -including more than 330 ministers, state secretaries and undersecretaries - with fee (the French weekly newspaper Express says that it takes at least one hundred thousand dollars for an undersecretary).

But above all, recipient of over two billion dollars of international aid from 1993 on. A real prize to be shared between businessmen, smugglers, politicians, soldiers and foreign schemers, while poor people live in the chaotic streets of the capital Phnom Penh or in floating villages on the Sangker river.

Perhaps explaining why Cambodia is still one of the poorest countries in the world. 550,000 tons of American bombs (1969/1973) and over 250,000 dead people; the odd Americanism of General Lon Nol (1970/1975) which favors the beginning of civil war; four years of Khmer terror (1975/1979) and two million dead people, mostly intellectuals, artists, teachers, victims of Pol Pot's insane illusion of a Cambodian Maoist agrarian cooperative, only led by farmers; guerrilla everywhere and devastating famines during five years Vietnamese invasion (1979/1985) with thousands of Cambodian refugees in Thailand camps; then since 1985, as mentioned, the Hun Sen's Era has started.

Without forgetting French colonialism (1864/1953), Sihanouk's Royal Crusade for Independence (1953) and his kingdom, just not to contradict himself, based on economic and political intrigue with anyone who would pay more: work "properly" continued by his worthy son, Prince Sihamoni, in office since 2004. It should be enough to bring history to book, on the contrary, with an estimated life of just 59 years, and infant mortality of 71 per thousand, 40 percent of the population is below the poverty line.

The exploitation of women and children in prostitution and sex tourism grows. In 2004, Cambodia is one of the hardest hit countries by the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. "Here many children have no future and this is a further sign of deterioration of a country that has the highest percentage of young workers between 0 and 14 years, especially in rural areas, where another legacy of war, 8-10 million antipersonnel mines, still cause injured and victims (source: Peacereporter). But one thing can not be taken away from Cambodians: their desire to smile, curiosity towards those who they meet, maybe a small thing, as the government changes into a regime and imprisons political opponents and forces them into exile, like Sam Rainsy, opposition leader now living in France, after he has been deprived of parliamentary immunity at the beginning of 2005.

The analysts and foreign observers watch with preoccupation the development of the situation, especially systematic arrests and sentences, for offenses provided for old colonial codes, against critics of Hun Sen's power. "The evolution towards control by a single party" complaint Basil Fernando, director of the Asian Human Rights Commission, "was done with the use of force. There was murders and intimidation and ballot rigging attempts. The result is a climate of fear reminding the period of the Khmer Rouge."

Meanwhile, Cambodians continue to smile and be curious about the strangers they meet, maybe it is not enough not to fall again into the abyss of a past that seems destined to repeat itself cyclically,

but they can find someone to trust, someone who propose with the utter lack of personal interest, offering and not asking, because maybe there is not too much to give. A magical country, still tied to the floods of the rivers to move, the country, it is true, of the S-1, the school changed by a Pol Pot into a maximum security prison and torture cells, a hell to go through before the oblivion of Choueng Ek mass graves, a lychee plantation, where over eight thousand corpses were exhumed often killed by beatings, and where even today you can walk among the remains of bones and scraps of clothes coming out of the ground. But there is more. The currents of the Mekong River has always set the pace in fishing or harvesting days, and they remind, yes, Marlon Brando-Kurtz movie, or the chilling oblivion of The Killing Fields. But it is also the country of lost cities of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, pulled out from the forest, witnessing that Khmer is not only synonymous with tragedy, but especially wonderful human ability to create something so unique as to make you forget everything else. As the girls getting home from school by bicycle on dirt roads in Battambang, or Kompong Luong boatmen, no one wants to show oneself unhappy, or maybe they just have a great desire, a great need for serenity. An uncontrollable desire to smile.

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