

**April 2, 1974**

**Conversation with Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary,  
Leader and Deputy Leader of the Delegation of the  
National United Front and the Royal Government of  
National Union of Cambodia**

**Citation:**

"Conversation with Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary, Leader and Deputy Leader of the Delegation of the National United Front and the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia", April 2, 1974, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Song Yongyi, ed., 'Jimi Dangan zhong Xin Faxian de Mao Zedong Jianghua' (Talks with Mao Zedong Newly Discovered in Secret Archives) (Guoshi chubanshe, 2018). Translated by Caixia Lu.  
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/122045>

**Summary:**

Mao talks with Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, and Prince Sihanouk. They discuss the civil war in Cambodia, the leading political figures in that country, and China's revolutionary experience.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Henry Luce Foundation

**Original Language:**

Chinese

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Conversation with Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary, Head and Deputy Head of the Delegation of the National United Front and the Royal Government of the National Union of Cambodia

2 April 1974

Khieu: We have all the conditions for engaging in protracted war. The people are mentally prepared for this. Economic conditions are also in preparation, and we are self-sufficient in provisions and clothing. The current domestic situation indicates that it is possible for us to achieve victory within a shorter period of time.

Chairman: It's better to keep it longer, make it a long-term fight. If it's a victory won in short term, that's also good.

Khieu: Right.

Chairman: For how many years have you been fighting?

Prince Sihanouk [henceforth referred to as Sihanouk]: Four years and a month. We started fighting in March 1970.

Chairman: Prepare (to fight) for another six years, and make it ten years in total. That's the idea. But it's also good if you only need four or three years to solve the problem.

Sihanouk: Quite right.

Chairman: We fought for 22 years and made many mistakes. Who is Comrade Ieng Sary? What's your view on this?

Ieng Sary [henceforth referred to as Ieng]: I completely agree with Chairman Mao's view, and I am prepared for a prolonged struggle. (But) as Deputy Prime Minister Khieu Samphan have said, conditions are now ripe for a swifter victory.

Chairman: The two princes, do you wish to overthrow them or join forces with them? [Everyone laughs]

Khieu: We are unanimous in our views, and there is no reason to overthrow them.

Sihanouk: His Excellency the Chairman is referring to the future. [Everyone laughs]

Khieu: The purpose of uniting is to join forces to bring down imperialism and to restore a neutral and independent Cambodia in the future.

Chairman: Ah.

Ieng: The Cambodian revolution, which took place with the aid of China and (North) Vietnam, has its own special characteristics. Our revolution includes people from all the social classes. In other words, we do not exclude any stratum of society. We have every reason to unite everyone, and there is no reason to alienate people of any particular stratum.

Chairman: You have to exclude the Lon Nol clique and get united with the two princes. I agree with your guideline. You two princes, you should not attack them

either [referring to Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan]. [Everyone laughs]

Sihanouk: With the liberation of Cambodia, I plan to completely withdraw myself from political life. I have openly said so many times in the past.

Ieng: We think that Prince Sihanouk is a great patriot. He stood the test and he participated in the struggle to save the country. This is not just my personal view but also the view within our country (referring to the Khmer Rouge leadership in Cambodia). We think that the form of government in Cambodia is not important. What is important is the substance, which is that we must have real democracy. I had raised this point with the Head of State and the Prime Minister many times. Recently, the leaders within our country have also concurred with this view of mine.

Chairman: What are the names of the leaders in your country?

Ieng: Hou Yuon and Hu Nim.

Sihanouk: And Son Sen. He is the Chief of Staff.

Chairman: I am talking about the Communist Party.

Sihanouk: They are all from the Communist Party.

Premier (Zhou Enlai): The Chairman is referring to the top leaders.

Chairman: I've not seen them.

Sihanouk: And also Prince Phurissara. We are a united front, and there are no party factions within. The Cambodian communists have their own special characteristics. They have never established a party and have only announced a political principle supporting the united front.

Ieng: The National Military Committee directs our domestic military operations.

Sihanouk: There are Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Nuon Chea and Son Sen.

Ieng: We established a military committee led by collective leadership. Khieu Samphan presides over this committee. It is led by Son Sen, now that he (Khieu) is having overseas visits.

Chairman: Don't mutter and mumble. Just be straightforward. The two of them [referring to Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary] represent the Communist Party. The two of them [referring to Sihanouk and Penn Nouth] represent another party. The two parties are joining forces to overthrow Lon Nol's counter-revolutionary party. It's better not to mutter and mumble. Speak the truth. The leaders of the united front are the two of them [referring to the two princes] and him [referring to Ieng Sary]. [To Khieu Samphan] I think that you look like a Communist too. [Everyone laughs]. Don't keep the two princes in the dark.

Premier: The two princes know that you are from the Communist Party, yet they are willing to be friends with China.

Sihanouk: After the war ends and the country is liberated, there will be no quarrel

between us. Prince Penn Nouth and I have been genuinely and sincerely helping the Cambodian Communists to consolidate the outcome of the people's revolution. Political power within the country are now handed over to the people. I have handed over the government, the administration, the military and the police. We have already implemented the changes. After the end of the war, even if I wanted to bring down the Cambodian Communists, it would be impossible to do so, because the military and government are no longer in my hands. I have nothing. Lon Nol was able to overthrow me because I relinquished control of the military, and of course the police too. Chairman Kim Il-Sung told me that had the military been under my control, Lon Nol would not have been able to launch a coup. Whoever controls the military has the political power. I am now fighting together with the Cambodian Communists for a common cause. I have no ambition regarding the future. I think that power ought to belong to them in the future. They are the young people and should rightfully be in power. Some people ask, where are the Sihanoukists in the united front? ; originally there was a good number of them, but now their representation in the united front is too small, and it's out of balance; the Communists are in command of everything. I replied that those who were formerly Sihanoukists have now gone to support Lon Nol and Nixon, and they are no longer with me. Hence it is completely normal for the Communists to be in power in an independent Cambodia in the future which rejects any foreign rule.

Chairman: This is good.

Sihanouk: Thank you Chairman. The Cambodian Communists have been very good to me as well. They said that there was no need to change the form of government, but to rename it the Republic of Cambodia. (But) Cambodia has its own special characteristics, and it should retain the name of a kingdom. What is important is not the form but the substance. Your Excellency had already pointed out in 1970 that the People's Republic of China is a communist country, but it supports The Kingdom of Cambodia. What has decisive significance is the substance. China neither supports Nguyen Van Thieu's Republic of Vietnam nor Park Chung-hee's Republic of Korea. The Cambodian Kingdom is revolutionary. The political power lies not in the hands of a prince like myself but in the hands of the people. We put real democracy into practice. We struggle against imperialism and all evil forces. The Cambodian Communists are in complete agreement with Chairman Mao's views and have agreed to preserve the two-thousand-year-old orthodox form of the kingdom, and to keep the flag and the national anthem of the kingdom. In reality Cambodia has already entered a revolutionary era. I am simply the Head of State and I do not hold political power. I completely agree that the people should hold power. That is to say, the people's representatives, Khieu Samphan and his team, should hold political power. I have formally stated my position, and believe that they should be in power. There will be no domestic upheaval in the future, and I will not quarrel with them over this.

Chairman: Quarrels are inevitable but do not be divided. Have small quarrels but big unity. [Everyone laughs]

Sihanouk: I totally agree with the Chairman's view. The sort of quarrel I was talking about is a serious situation like being on the brink of a civil war.

Chairman: It's not like that.

Sihanouk: With the end of the war, the task of rebuilding Cambodia will be arduous. We should try to avoid ceaseless quarrels as much as possible. The issue of the form of government has been completely resolved and the Cambodian Communists have openly expressed their views. We were historically a kingdom, yet I am okay with the establishment of a republic. However, as I am a prince, I cannot betray my ancestors or let my people down. Hence I agree to retain the kingdom. The form is unimportant. What is important is the substance, and that is to establish the people's political

regime. Now all the problems have been resolved.

Chairman: You are indeed generous.

Sihanouk: It is not that I'm generous. Rather, it's the natural outcome of the development of the situation. Various factors have led to this situation. Patriotic forces from all sides have coalesced to bring about the situation as it is today. As Leng Sary, the Special Envoy, has said, the Cambodian Revolution is unlike any other revolution, and it has its special characteristics.

Chairman: We were also quarreling within our party. We've had 10 quarrels over 50 years. The most recent one was with Lin Biao. Lin Biao was not as nice as they [referring to the two princes] are. Lin Biao was rotten to the core!

Your cause will succeed, but I am a little doubtful. For instance, to say that 90% of the land [has been liberated], how can it possibly be so much?

Premier: And 80% of the population, is it really that much?

Sihanouk: It's not from propaganda but objectively speaking. The liberated zones in reality might have 5.5 million people. The areas occupied by Lon Nol, mainly big cities like Phnom Penh and including Battambang, Kampong Cham-Kampong Cham does not have many people-Sihanoukville and Kampong Thom, etc., have a population of over 2 million.. There are possibly 2 million people if you add them all up. Those in the liberated zones are all producers, while most of Lon Nol's 2 million people are consumers. Hence President Nixon had no choice but to increase his aid to Lon Nol. The aid will double annually as the war goes on. Both food and financial aid had to be increased. Rice, meat and so on, have to be transported from the United States by air. Thus Lon Nol's republic is dependent on the American imperialists. The Americans are helping him sustain it.

The difficulty we face in fighting is that, even though China has often given us plenty of aid, the military equipment is hard to transport. Thus we have no navy, air force or tanks, while Lon Nol has the advantage in this regard. Lon Nol also has heavy artillery. We too have some artillery guns and shells, but they were all captured from the enemy. In addition (the enemy has) the mercenaries. Nixon has organized mercenaries from Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam, and these people all belong to America's Central Intelligence Agency. Now, our (North) Vietnamese brothers are no longer helping us to fight the war. They want to implement the Paris Peace Accords. Hence we are completely on our own in this war. Only Cambodians are involved in the fight. The Americans say there are (North) Vietnamese too, but we said no. We ask the (North) Vietnamese not to help us fight. We only request that they assist us with transportation.

Chairman: Standing on one's own feet is good.

Sihanouk: And that is the real situation.

Chairman: We too had no tanks, no navy and no air force in the past. We only had land forces. We fought for 18 years, with Chiang Kai-Shek, and with the Japanese. Later on we fought again after the peace (of World War II). Then we fought the Americans in Korea, but we sent the volunteer army. We fought for 25 years in total.

I read Confucius for six years, capitalism for seven, and (at that time) I had never heard of either Marx or Lenin. I wasn't as progressive as the two princes [Everyone laughs]. Later on Chiang Kai-Shek started killing people! There were 50 thousand of

us and he killed 10 to 20 thousand. The revolution failed. Some people defected to Chiang Kai-Shek and some became too pessimistic to continue. We were left with about 10 thousand people. In the end, we defeated Chiang Kai-Shek, the Japanese and the Americans.

The October Revolution gave me an education. It was mainly because Chiang Kai-Shek was killing people. I was a primary school teacher, a head of the kids [Everyone laughs]. I had never thought about fighting a war in the mountains! As Chiang Kai-Shek was killing people, it was impossible to stay in the city and we were forced to go up to Mount Liang (a phrase from the Chinese Classic Water Margin, meaning to wage struggles after being driven to desperation). I fought for ten years and accumulated some experience. I was no longer a primary school teacher. The Japanese came and we fought for another eight years. Thereafter we fought Chiang Kai-Shek for another 4 years and then the Americans for another 3 years.

Premier: 25 years (altogether).

Chairman: So I am 81 this year, and I have spent more than 20 years fighting. About fighting the wars, you'll learn it once you start. [Everyone laughs]

Sihanouk: Quite right.

Chairman: You won't understand it if you don't fight.

Ieng: In the past we had only read the Chairman's books and now we are experiencing it for ourselves.

Chairman: It's mainly about the experience, fighting on your own. Thus you have to form a fist, and be able to attack and occupy Phnom Penh, and the big cities. I reckon you'd need about 100 thousand troops, and you have to clench your hand into a fist. Not guerrilla fighters, but regular troops.

Khieu: We have regular troops. We are at a disadvantage compared to the enemy in terms of weaponry. To make up for this weakness, we are simultaneously doing political work of mobilizing the masses on top of our military operations. Now, the movement of the people's struggle is proceeding smoothly in the city of Phnom Penh.

Ieng: We now have three forces-regular forces, local troops and the militia. Our (North)Vietnamese comrades think that our three armed forces have developed very quickly. Currently, our regular force has almost 100 thousand strong.

Chairman: Hmm.

Khieu: Our regular forces, local troops and people's militia add up to about 200 thousand strong.

Ieng: The units of organization in our military are mainly battalions and regiments. We do not have any divisions yet, because the issue of command is more complex. Now our (North) Vietnamese comrades are helping us to resolve this problem. Moreover, we already have seven female battalions, with two of them directly engaged in battle in the northwestern battlefield. These female soldiers were very brave. They usually waited for the enemy's tanks to approach at a distance of 50 meters before launching their bazookas. Sometimes the bazookas don't work well and the tanks ran them over. Thus, we've lost 50 female soldiers in this battle and another six were captured. They (referring the enemy) were propagandizing this and

we verified that this was true. But in this battle, we destroyed six enemy tanks because some other battalions acted in concert (with the female battalions) during the fighting and encircled these tanks.

Chairman: That's good. You should build a few corps, and each should have three divisions. Every division should have 15 thousand people. Such an army is a school. I had never been to university, but I am university-educated as well, and for more than 20 years. It is called the university of the greenwood outlaws. [Everyone laughs]

Sihanouk: Best university ever since.

Chairman: One had to be engaged in military affairs, politics as well as investigation and research, and the issues in the countryside, in the mid-sized and small cities, and land distribution. Have you distributed your land yet?

Khieu: In Cambodia we have taken measures to cancel the high interest rates that burdened our peasants.

Chairman: You have to reduce the rent and interest.

Khieu: We do not distribute the land (owned by the landlords), as there was plenty of uncultivated land.

Chairman: That (referring to the distribution of all the lands) will be in a few years. If the peasants don't get their land, their fighting capacity would not be enhanced. If you can't topple those landlords standing on Lon Nol's side, the peasants would not be active (in the struggles).

Sihanouk: Now there are no longer any landlords in the liberated zones. The people's regime has distributed the assets of former landlords to the peasants. Of course, as soon as the new regime had been established, the people got rid of a small number of landlords, and the rest fled to Phnom Penh or France. [Everyone laughs] In addition, it was the same case with the industrialists and big capitalists. As for their assets, the peasants had distributed those of the smaller industrialists among themselves, while the state and the people's regimes managed the assets of the bigger ones .

Chairman: Be careful about the capitalists. You should only confiscate the assets of the comprador capitalists. There is no hurry with the national capitalists.

Sihanouk: We are not in a hurry to deal with the patriotic capitalists.

Khieu: The national capitalists stand together with us, and so do the rich peasants.

Chairman: Not just the rich peasants, you should also unite some of the middle and petty landlords.

Khieu: The patriotic ones. Some landlords are even willing to surrender their land because they had no labor.

leng: We even adopt a differentiated approach toward the compradors. We are only opposed to those who work for the Americans. We try to win over the other compradors to support our struggle. Hence we could buy medicine and other supplies.

Chairman: This is good.

Premier Zhou: I heard that the French rubber plantations were paying taxes to them (referring to the Khmer Rouge).

Khieu: We are now managing the rubber plantations ourselves. Our own workers harvest the rubber, and then we sell it to the French.

leng: The French pay a low price, only 30 riels for one kilogram. But we had no choice but to sell it to them, because we produce a great deal of rubber and they would turn bad if we don't. Thus, ships that display white flags are allowed to enter our liberated zones to trade, and some ships bring gasoline when they arrive.

Chairman: That's good, barter trade.

Sihanouk: Yes, we trade one good for another.

leng: But the French fear to do real barter trade. They are afraid of Lon Nol.

Khieu: We sometimes procure some gasoline and other industrial products from them, and try our best to sell the rubber. But the French give us Lon Nol's currency, and it often depreciates and becomes valueless. Hence, we have a struggle with the French on this issue.

Chairman: Oh, get them to pay you in US dollars, DOLLARS [Mao says "dollars" in English]

leng: The French did so once in the past, but they have stopped doing so because they are afraid of Lon Nol.

Chairman [to leng]: How long did you stay when you went back this time?

leng: More than three months. I went to many places, Roads No. 4, No. 5, No. 1. I went to all the former rubber plantations. Now our liberated zones have been interconnected into a single integral area. We are free to come and go within. It is an independent part of territory while imperialism is making its incursions from outside. In the cities the enemies are too being surrounded. Due to our own carelessness in Kampong Thom, we once let the people in this region suffer some losses.

Sihanouk: Because the fighting in Phnom Penh drew some of our forces away, so the enemies in Kampong Thom came out. Otherwise, the enemy would only be holed up in the city and very passive.

leng: We mobilized our regular forces into the Phnom Penh battleground.

Khieu: In Kampong Thom, had our cadres been more alert, they would have been able to protect the people with guerrilla operations and strike the enemies who came to harass us. But due to our negligence, we failed to do so.

Chairman: Mistakes are inevitable. It's impossible to be error-free.

Khieu: The issue is to learn and gain from one's mistakes. Thereafter, we used the opportunity to mobilize again, and advanced the work of our cadres in various areas.



leng: It is mainly because Lon Nol had few artillery and munitions, and he seldom shelled the rear of our liberated zones, that our rear became a little like a tranquil region. It is now necessary to push the cadres on.

Sihanouk: The enemy sometimes competes with us for the people but this has not benefited them. For instance, on the issue of Kampong Thom, they won over some residents to their side, but this turned the former producers to consumers. Then they had no choice but to ask Nixon for more dollars.

Chairman: The one (Sihanouk's son) who studied in China, his name is Naradipo?

Sihanouk: Yes, he is currently still in Phnom Penh.

Chairman: Can he get out?

Sihanouk: He was sentenced to 5 years of hard labor for participating in the anti-American and anti-Lon Nol struggle. He was released as he became mentally ill after being imprisoned for more than three years. When my mother left Phnom Penh to come to China, Naradipo's maternal grandmother refused to let him leave. I still have two other children living in the liberated zones with Khieu Samphan. One died of illness after three years, while the other one is still there. Another child is in France. The rest are now all in China with me. Only Naradipo is living under Lon Nol's rule.

Chairman: Alright, let's not talk further. [To the Premier] You people talk. Talk less, and don't go into the details of everything. It'll do to just talk about the outline of the programs.

Sihanouk: Your Excellency the Chairman has spent so much time meeting us. We feel deeply honored. The Cambodian people, especially the soldiers and cadres who now are engaged in the struggle, will be greatly encouraged when the news is announced. When Khieu Samphan returns to Cambodia, he will bring back the spirit of this conversation. The cadres and soldiers will be very happy after hearing it.

Chairman: That's for your reference. I still advice you [referring to Sihanouk] to read a little Marx and Lenin.

Sihanouk: I occasionally read some excerpts.

Chairman: Philosophy, economics and socialism, for instance. I have always hoped that you will make progress. The two of you [referring to the princes] should not learn from China that produced someone like Lin Biao. Lon Nol is Lin Biao. Lon Nol is pro-America while Lin Biao is pro-Soviet.

Sihanouk: We are pro-Cambodia.

Chairman: That's the right. The Third World should get united. (We have) so many people!

Sihanouk: We will walk this road unwaveringly with the greatest confidence.

Chairman: Imperialism fears it!

Sihanouk: Quite right.

Chairman: That's all.