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Media Ruins

Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology

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INTERLUDE: PEACE TALKS

In December 1987, as the Cold War was winding down, Prime Minister Hun Sen of the PRK and Prince Norodom Sihanouk of FUNCINPEC met in France and agreed to begin peace discussions to end interparty violence. On April 29–30, 1989, the National Assembly of the PRK changed the national name “People’s Republic of Kampuchea” to “State of Cambodia” (SOC). The national flag, anthem, and military symbols also changed. Buddhism, which had been only partially reestablished during the PRK, was reintroduced as the national religion.

The first session of the Paris Peace Accords occurred from July 30 to August 30, 1989, and brought together the four competing Cambodian parties—but no agreement was reached. The PRK proposed that if Prince Norodom Sihanouk returned to a governing role as king, the Vietnamese soldiers in collaboration with the PRK battling Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC army would withdraw. With the reduction of Soviet aid to Vietnam, this agreement made sense for Vietnamese forces, too, who withdrew from Cambodia between September 1989 and mid-1990. With this agreement in place, the four parties met from October 21 to 23, 1991, and signed the Paris Peace Agreement. The key goal of the agreement was to establish national reconciliation.¹ The People’s Republic of Kampuchea party then changed its name to the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

The Paris Peace Agreement gave the United Nations a mandate to create the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) in order to support a “free and fair” election in May 1993 and to give international financial support for the “rehabilitation and reconstruction of Cambodia.” Six months after the signing of the Paris Agreement, in March 1992, UNTAC arrived in Cambodia to an environment of extreme tension and hostility. There were many challenges right away with the UNTAC mission. It

brought 22,000 military and civilian personnel drawn from over 100 countries and cost the international community in excess of US\$2 billion for a span of eighteen months. According to Heder and Ledgerwood, academics who worked at the Information/Education Division of UNTAC, UNTAC staff positions were financially lucrative, and “more than a few” UNTAC staff made more money than they had in the previous five or ten years.² In poverty-stricken Cambodia, the huge influx of foreign workers brought distorted wealth dynamics and increased the vulnerability of Cambodians living near or below the poverty line.³

An election in Cambodia at this volatile time was a difficult proposition. The country was used to a “winner-take-all” patronage system, where party leaders helped facilitate the livelihoods for the people who supported them.⁴ The coalition between Hun Sen’s CPP and Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC, and the cooperation of the other parties, was on shaky ground due to deep-rooted distrust. The Khmer Rouge (which was a minority party) and the CPP (currently in control) were particularly resistant to help the UNTAC mission since they had the most to lose in an election.

There was widespread cultural friction in Phnom Penh from the beginning of the UNTAC mission due to popular local perceptions of a condescending attitude from many UNTAC staff. Many UNTAC employees blamed Cambodians for the violence of the Khmer Rouge without recognizing the reconstruction that had already occurred in the 1980s. The mission also broadly marginalized local skills and knowledge. Though some UNTAC staff were motivated by utopian ideals, they also widely assumed “hierarchical relationships between the helper and the helped.”⁵ Instead of partners, Cambodians were treated as targets of the peace-building operation.⁶ According to Heder and Ledgerwood, “UNTAC at times seemed pervaded with the condescending belief that the ‘Cambodians’ were incapable of anything unless UNTAC held their hands and walked them through it.”⁷ For many Cambodians, “UNTAC was seen as one more occupying army.”⁸

For Cambodians hired to work for UNTAC, their role often mimicked the long-standing hierarchical structure of political/social patron-client networks. There was a perception that forming relationships with an “obviously rich and powerful friend enhanced one’s life chances to obtain money, power, and influence.”⁹ Cambodian UNTAC employees also often kept mixed alliances and would work for UNTAC while maintaining relationships with another political party.

Many foreign UNTAC staff understood little about Cambodian culture, and the mission overall did not promote culturally sensitive behavior. Some UNTAC employees acted particularly badly, and to many Cambodians, “UNTAC was seen with horror as a horde of drinking, whoring, half-naked drivers who ran over people and couldn’t care less.”¹⁰ The incidence of HIV increased dramatically in Cambodia during this time, likely fueled by relations between UNTAC workers and Cambodian sex workers.¹¹

Though there were bad actors within the large number of UNTAC employees, there also existed a number of idealistic workers who cared greatly about improving life conditions in Cambodia. The information division of UNTAC specifically hired academics who had significant knowledge of Cambodian language and culture. Judy Ledgerwood, for example, had learned how to read and write Khmer at Cornell. Anne Guillou was an anthropologist and was so fluent in Khmer language that she could act as a radio host. Both went on to write some of the most important scholarship of 1990s Cambodia. Steven Pak returned to Cambodia after nine years of living as a refugee in California and developing a career in journalism. He told me in an interview that he was honored to come back to try to improve the media sector and promote democratic processes in his home country. He emphasized that while UNTAC did not do things perfectly, it tried its best under difficult conditions. The next chapter begins to address how the media infrastructures constructed and repaired in the first two chapters lived on in the transition to the contemporary political structure of Cambodia.

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