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A Cambodian Fusion of Personality, Party, and the State

KOSAL PATH

After Cambodia's latest general election on July 29, 2018, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) declared a crushing victory, claiming that they had taken 77.5 percent of the vote and all 125 seats in the National Assembly. The result was unsurprising, given that the main opposition party had been banned since last year. But the question remains: Why has Cambodia, after pursuing a democratic transition since United Nations–sponsored elections in 1993, slid back into undiluted authoritarianism?

In the summer of 2017, Hun Sen's government and the CPP launched attacks on the political opposition, the independent press, and civil society that were unprecedented in their ferocity. The regime alleged that there was a grand conspiracy afoot between the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) and nongovernmental organizations, assisted by the Central Intelligence Agency, to stage a “color revolution” and overthrow the government.

A powerful CPP lawmaker, Chheang Vun, began denouncing US-based civil society groups such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Freedom House, and the Open Society Foundations. Vun also accused foreign-owned media including the *Cambodia Daily*, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia of serving as “tools” of the West, especially the United States, to weaken the ruling party and help the opposition. Leaks revealing details of the purported plot featured prominently in pro-CPP media outlets like the website Fresh News.

In August 2017, Fresh News republished several posts from a Facebook page called *Kon Khmer* (Khmer Child), which advanced the narrative that

a slew of conspirators including the CNRP, the CIA, the US embassy, NGOs, and journalists were in on the plot. Several foreigners, notably freelance reporter Geoffrey Cain and US embassy political officer Sam Downing, were accused of being spies with close links with CNRP leader Kem Sokha's two daughters. Downing allegedly was not only an undercover CIA agent but also in a romantic relationship with Sokha's eldest daughter.

Kem Sokha was arrested September 3 on charges of conspiring with the United States to topple the government, which Sokha and Washington both denied. Former opposition leader Sam Rainsy was already in exile, facing jail time if he set foot on Cambodian soil. On November 16, Cambodia's Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the CNRP on charges of treason. (Article 38, one of several amendments to the 1997 Political Parties Law swiftly enacted in February 2017 by the CPP majority in the National Assembly, gives broad discretion to the interior ministry to file a complaint with the Supreme Court to dissolve a political party on vague grounds.)

After a five-hour trial and two hours of deliberation, the presiding judge (and senior CPP official) Dith Muntz shut down the CNRP and banned 118 of its senior officials from any political activity for five years, effective immediately. The hearing was one-sided since the CNRP declined to send legal representation—a move cited by Muntz as an admission of guilt. The court's ruling was final, with no possibility of appeal.

These drastic measures, just months ahead of the general election in July, were sure to undermine Cambodia's democratic process, delegitimize the ruling party's inevitable victory, and compel the United States and the European Union to impose targeted economic sanctions. What motivated Hun Sen to take such risks?

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The proximate cause of the ruling party's radical actions was undoubtedly fear of losing power to the CNRP in a free and fair election. Without institutionalized mechanisms of succession in place to guarantee CPP elites safety from political vengeance, Hun Sen and his colleagues are clearly determined to cling to power—at least until they can secure a dynastic succession for their offspring. In the run-up to the July 2018 elections, the prime minister insisted, according to the *Khmer Times*, that any successor “must come from the Cambodian People's Party, because only children of an angel would succeed an angel.”

Recent elections had revealed growing support for the opposition. In the 2013 elections, the CNRP won 55 out of 123 seats in the National Assembly. The opposition received approximately 2.9 million votes (44 percent), while the CPP took 3.2 million. Then in the June 2017 local elections, the CNRP won 489 communes to the CPP's 1,156, a dramatic improvement on the 40 communes the opposition won in 2012, when it competed separately as the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party. These shocking results—the CPP had dominated in every election from 2002 to 2012—raised the prospect of a CPP defeat in July 2018 or a political deadlock if it could not win a solid majority. Under those circumstances, eliminating the CNRP was a logical step to ensure the ruling party's success in the July elections and beyond.

There are multiple other background causes for this recent authoritarian turn, including Hun Sen's personality cult, the increased costs of maintaining political domination, and the convergence of strategic interests between the ruling parties in Cambodia and China in rolling back Western influence and quashing domestic proponents of liberal democracy. The correlation of these forces provided the CPP with additional impetus to take the radical step of dissolving the main opposition party.

FATHER FIGURE

From his early career as a guerrilla fighting the US-backed Lon Nol regime in the early 1970s, to his stint as foreign minister in the early 1980s, to his record as the longest-serving prime minister of Cambodia, in office since 1985, Hun Sen has earned his reputation as a strong, stubborn, and resilient leader with shrewd political instincts.

As a deputy regimental commander, Hun Sen narrowly escaped a Khmer Rouge purge and fled to Vietnam in June 1977. He outmaneuvered his comrade Pen Sovann and won overwhelming support from his Vietnamese patrons and Cambodian colleagues in 1985 to become prime minister of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)—a Marxist-Leninist regime (1979–89) propped up by the Vietnamese—at the age of 33, making him the youngest prime minister in the world at that time. To eliminate the military threat that the China-backed Khmer Rouge posed to its southwestern border since 1975, Vietnam, with support from the Soviet Union, had invaded Cambodia in December 1978. Then the Vietnamese built a socialist regime in Cambodia in an attempt to root out Chinese influence and strengthen their influence in the Soviet bloc.

When he was serving as deputy prime minister in the coalition government that was formed after the UN-sponsored free and fair election in 1993, Hun Sen and his allies successfully staged a coup in July 1997 against the prime minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh of the royalist party FUNCINPEC, and then neutralized its founder, King Norodom Sihanouk. A year later, Hun Sen's “Win-Win Policy” brought the Cambodian civil war to an

end, and he has presided over sustained economic growth for the past two decades. His policy was based on an amnesty-for-peace strategy consisting of three guarantees for Khmer Rouge soldiers and their commanders, namely immunity from prosecution, positions in the government and armed forces, and individual ownership rights, especially to housing and farmland.

A tight-knit alliance of loyalists and family members is a central aspect of Hun Sen's long hold on power and his ability to neutralize political opponents within both his own party and the opposition. He plays the role of father figure in an extended family, sharing the spoils of his rule. He is willing to defend members of his family even when this may displease other senior party members. For instance, in the 2013 general elections and the 2017 commune elections, Hun Sen's elder brother Hun Neng failed to deliver Kampong Cham—their home province, where he served as governor. Yet he and Deputy Prime Minister Yim Chhay Ly, whose daughter is married to Hun Sen's son, were still placed at the top of the CPP list of

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has widened the gap
between rich and poor.*

candidates for Kampong Cham in the July 2018 election. This time they ran unopposed since the opposition had been dissolved a year before.

This is just one example of Hun Sen's giving priority to loyalty over competence, a tendency that continues to plague the CPP. His consolidation of power has elevated family members and ardent loyalists to top positions in the government, the party, the armed forces, the national intelligence agency, economic management, mass media, and youth organizations. The patronage system is organized with a clear intent to facilitate a dynastic succession and hobble the opposition.

In 1998, Hun Sen told his unofficial biographers Harish and Julie Mehta that he read with pleasure the works of Luong Preah (His Royal Highness) Sdech Kan, a commoner who usurped the throne and briefly reigned over the Khmer kingdom in the sixteenth century. In December 2017, a *New York Times* report noted that Sdech Kan "seems to be everywhere, thanks to Prime Minister Hun Sen—another common man turned near-absolute ruler, who has been so intent on identifying himself with the semi-mythical figure that some suspect he considers himself the king's reincarnation." Hun Sen sponsored research by a pro-government historian, Ros Chantrabot, to discover the location of the commoner king's capital, and wrote a forward for Ros's book on Sdech Kan. In 2017, Ly Yong Phat, a tycoon with close ties to Hun Sen, reportedly financed a movie about Sdech Kan, directed by Mao Ayuth, a secretary of state at the Ministry of Information. The scholar Astrid Norén-Nilsson, who has extensively studied Hun Sen's fascination with Sdech Kan, concurs that the prime minister believes himself to be a reincarnation of the legendary peasant king.

There is, however, a notable difference. Hun Sen is in a position to define his own legacy. Sdech Kan was overthrown and killed after just four years on the throne by a full-blooded prince reasserting his family's right to rule.

As Hun Sen ages, ensuring his legacy seems to have become an obsession. Recently his loyalists have stepped up their efforts to enshrine the official narrative of his sacrifices, heroism, and wise leadership in the nation's collective memory. Evidence of this is everywhere—from school buildings around the country that bear the prime minister's name to a grand monument and museum dedicated to his "Win-Win Policy," under construction on the outskirts of the capital city, Phnom Penh. The government-sponsored docu-

mentary film *Marching Toward National Salvation* portrays Hun Sen as the national hero who risked his life to liberate the Cambodian people from Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79).

Hun Sen has used the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal to prosecute four leading figures in the regime: Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, and Kaing Guek Eav. When he addresses survivors of the genocide, he can claim to have brought the Khmer Rouge leadership to justice. But he has also kept his promises to spare former Khmer Rouge commanders and soldiers from prosecution. By agreeing to allow the UN to play a limited role in the tribunal, Hun Sen was able to attract significant aid, mostly from Western governments.

The rivalry between Hun Sen and the opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha has been deeply personal. Such personal conflicts reinforce the pervasive fear within the CPP's elite circles that they and their families would be subject to persecution or execution if the opposition took power, much as the Khmer Rouge regime did to its perceived and real enemies.

Hun Sen's political cunning has enabled him to hold on to power for more than three decades. He has succeeded in getting rid of the CNRP, the only viable challenger to his power, without facing mass protests or other domestic political consequences. As China's backing for Hun Sen increases, the West's collective pressure on the ruling party to restore a legitimate democratic process is waning.

CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

Long-term changes in the regional and international political environments have favored Cambodia's ruling party. In the West, the 2016 election of Donald Trump coincided with the rise of populist nationalism in Europe. Under Trump, the United States has turned inward: his administration has pursued an agenda of populist and economic nationalism at home and shown little interest in promoting democracy and human rights abroad.

Meanwhile, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has turned into an authoritarians' club with members including the communist party in Vietnam, a military junta in Thailand, the military-dominated democratic system in Myanmar, President Rodrigo Duterte's populist authoritarianism in the Philippines, and Singapore's dynastic ruling party. These trends emboldened Hun Sen and the radical faction within the ruling party, but it was China's strong support that gave them cover to terminate the main opposition party.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognizes Cambodia as China's closest ally in Southeast Asia. Since the 2012 ASEAN summit, when Cambodia made a strategic decision to back China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, Beijing has rewarded Hun Sen generously with economic and military assistance and all-out political support. China overtook the United States as Cambodia's main trading partner in 2014; by the end of 2017, according to the *Nikkei Asian Review*, China's total investment capital in Cambodia reached \$17.5 billion—in a country where nominal gross domestic product is just over \$20 billion. In 2017, 1.2 million Chinese tourists visited Cambodia, a 50-percent increase from the year before and the most from any country. China's strong backing has convinced Hun Sen and his colleagues that their regime can stave off the West's political and economic pressure.

The CCP and the CPP share a common goal of rolling back Western influence in Cambodia, but for different reasons. In this highly asymmetric alliance, Beijing wants to rid its small ally of Vietnamese and Western influence and deepen Cambodia's reliance on China to the point where it is left without any recourse. The ruling party in Cambodia aims to end the West's one-sided support for the opposition.

Chinese influence has penetrated all levels of Cambodian society, from the military, economy, and politics to the social and cultural spheres. The close linkage between business and political elites in both countries has left its mark on major development projects, youth organizations, the media, and even academic research centers. In addition to bringing Chinese factories to provincial towns, China's public diplomacy in Cambodia also facilitates the ruling party's distribution of goods to villagers. For instance, China sends doctors on a regular basis to augment the CPP's provision of free health services through mobile clinics. These deepening exchanges further cement the Sino-Cambodian alliance.

COSTLY PATRONAGE

Since 1998, the costs of political domination have increased. Hun Sen's populist agenda deepened his dependency on foreign aid and business elites with close ties to the ruling party, known as *Oknha*. (In the early Khmer kingdom, this term referred to a title or status the Khmer kings awarded to court officials in return for their loyalty.) The elite pact coordinated *Oknha* business interests within a client-patron relationship with the ruling party.

The CPP's rule largely depends on the continued distribution of selective goods, which has become increasingly expensive. (Selective goods is a term for public goods and services that a government provides to selected recipients rather than equally distributing them to the entire population.) To provide these roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and assorted handouts, the CPP depends on the flow of cash from *Oknha*. In return, they gain private access to government resources, development plans, major construction contracts, and other privileges, which have brought them large profits.

Popular perceptions of the ruling party have already drastically changed as a consequence of these client-patron networks. The CPP is becoming an elite-serving party, gradually drifting away from the majority of poor peasants and the working class. In material terms, the CPP's patronage system has widened the gap between rich and poor, causing socioeconomic cleavages to widen and popular discontent to brew within Cambodian society during the past three decades.

The CNRP took advantage of rising resentment over the ruling party's endemic corruption, widespread nepotism, disdain for the rule of law, and failed reforms. The opposition party built a formidable coalition of urban intellectuals, civil servants, poor peasants, and workers. As Chheang Vannarith, a Cambodian political analyst, observed in the *Khmer Times* in February 2017, "The CNRP's populist policies focus on anti-establishment and political change. Its social and economic policies emphasize the livelihoods of factory workers, farmers, elderly people, and other vulnerable groups."

Increased popular support for the CNRP forced the CPP to respond with even more lavish distributions of free selective goods to dissuade its voters from defecting to the opposition. The ruling party offered gifts in cash and in kind, cheap electricity, pay raises for garment factory workers and government employees, free health care, and new roads and bridges. For instance, to win over garment and footwear workers, an important voting bloc for the CNRP in the 2013 and 2017 elections, Hun Sen promised to raise their monthly minimum wage from \$170 in 2018 to \$250 by the next election cycle in 2023. This runs the risk of chipping away at Cambodia's competitiveness and discouraging future investment.

As the CPP's campaign in the run-up to the July election revealed, districts that demonstrate the strongest support for the ruling party are now giv-

en priority for selective goods, financed by a mixture of funding from the party representative in each district, the central government, and Chinese aid. This populist campaign has widened the ruling party's client-patron network, deepening corruptive practices and perpetuating a cycle of buying short-term political victories at a high price.

UNEASY ELITES

Several CPP insiders told me privately that the ruling party has fully realized that widespread corruption is a cancer that continues to undermine reform agendas and erode people's trust in the party. An extraordinary congress of the CPP in January 2018 called for reforms to focus on public administration, financial management, and decentralization as a means of escaping dependency on foreign aid, spreading economic development from urban to rural areas, and reducing poverty.

However, to prevent any internal fracture, nepotism and incompetent officials are still tolerated within the top echelons of the government and party. Officials at the local level do further damage to the CPP's image with their corrupt practices such as demanding bribes from local businesses or parties in land disputes. Nonetheless, thanks to the state resources at its disposal and the strengths of its political organization from the center to the local districts, the ruling party remains the most coherent and robust political organization in Cambodia. Of course, sustained repression has also been part of the CPP's strategy to keep the opposition weak and divided.

The elites within the CPP disagree on how to maintain their party's dominant position. They fall into two broad though not always clear-cut categories, with moderates having a clear preference for performance-based legitimacy and conservatives for inducing compliance through repression. The moderates are system reformers who believe that the CPP's continued rule depends on stemming corruption, strengthening the rule of law, enforcing meritocracy, and distributing development projects away from urban districts to rural areas. The conservatives are system maintainers who believe in keeping power through populist nationalism and continued repression. Both, however, prefer a political system with one dominant party (so-called "Cambodian-style democracy"). The moderate political elites tend to be second-

generation CPP leaders and well-educated technocrats, while the conservatives are mostly Hun Sen loyalists within the high command of the state security forces who rose to power in the aftermath of the 1997 coup or old hands from the PRK era.

At the local level, the moderates focus on issue-specific problem-solving and building a strong political organization capable of door-to-door campaigns. Typical village-level issues include providing new jobs for farmers, safe drinking water, irrigation systems, health clinics, scholarships for new high-school graduates, and so on.

The moderates also exhibit concern over certain aspects of Chinese activities and behavior in Cambodia in spite of the huge amounts of investment and tourism pouring into the country from China. For instance, emerging Chinese enclaves in the nation's major tourism destinations, such as Sihanoukville, have often spurred local Cambodians' resentment. This is becoming a political liability for the ruling party.

Since 1998, when the CPP and the royalists reached a coalition deal, the CPP expected to see the United States and its Western allies change their attitude toward Cambodia, shifting away from one-sided support for the opposition. In the moderates' view, the West's constant criticism of

Hun Sen has empowered the radical faction within the CPP. Conservatives are convinced that the West has actively supported the opposition with the aim of removing Hun Sen and the CPP from power through either elections or a violent popular uprising. In the summer of 2017, the moderate faction engaged in self-censorship and refrained from engaging with the West for fear of being framed as disloyal to the party or having their patriotism questioned, while the conservatives escalated their claims of collusion between the CNRP and the CIA to overthrow Hun Sen's government.

POST-DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

How might the CPP, which emerged as a communist party in the 1980s under Vietnamese occupation, appease a younger, more educated, and tech-savvy population eager for change? The CPP presents these citizens with a false binary choice between peace and development under its continued rule or a bleak alternative of war and poverty with the opposition in power. It is true that the CPP has brought about impressive economic develop-

Hun Sen believes himself to be a reincarnation of a legendary peasant king.

ment and a significant reduction in poverty since it took power in 1998, but inequality has also increased. The majority of Cambodians, especially the nearly three million people who voted for the CNRP in 2013, want a free and fair election—and are infuriated by the party’s dissolution.

In the July 2018 election, about 600,000 voters, or 8.6 percent of the electorate, cast inadmissible ballots—a gesture widely seen as a protest. This suggests political opposition to the ruling party remains a potent force, awaiting an opportunity for a resurgence.

Nonetheless, the CPP’s elites appear to believe that as long as they can maintain the trajectory of economic development and speed up reforms, they can calm restless citizens and give them hope for a brighter future. Also, when there is no serious competition or contestation, distributing selective goods to poor people who have no alternative or regular access to state resources and economic activities becomes much less costly. The result is a fusion of political personality, the party, and the state in a system designed to eliminate opposition and ensure popular acquiescence.

This reasoning was made explicit in the strategies that CPP party cells employed in their campaign for the July 2018 elections. Their propaganda message to voters went something like this: “If the CPP wins more than 50 percent of the vote in your district, our party cell wins. However, if the CPP wins more than 90 percent in our district, then we will be the best party cell in the whole country. When that happens, our requests for resources will be given priority by our prime minister.”

In rural areas, CPP party cells have already taken steps to enable peasants to earn extra income. Getting factories built in their districts is a favored approach. Factories create jobs for unemployed young people, which serves to increase the number of party supporters, but can also be a political liability for the ruling party. When foreign companies that built factories in Cambodia abused workers’ rights, the opposition was able to capitalize on the conflict. In a report released in March 2015, Human Rights Watch cited alleged abuses at Cambodian subcontractor garment factories that supply major brands like Marks & Spencer, Adidas, and Armani. Workers’ rights continue to be violated due to “the envelope system”—factory

managers hand bribes to visiting inspectors in exchange for favorable reports.

CPP party cells have made a concerted attempt to minimize such political liabilities at the local level. Each party cell has local inspectors to hear workers’ complaints and quickly raise their concerns with the factory management. Party cells have also created *prochea-kapea* units (citizen guards at the village level) to beef up local security in the absence of a competent police force and to monitor the political opposition’s activities without giving the appearance of direct intimidation.

In addition, core teams of political operatives, who are both government employees and party members, are always on site to address villagers’ concerns and distribute selective goods. A party leader can monitor his or her core team’s activities in real time via mobile phones and social networking platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, and direct them to address specific problems in the district such as bringing mobile clinics to remote villages, fixing wooden bridges, or providing emergency assistance after floods. This network of grassroots political organizations is a new tool for maintaining political domination. From local to national politics, the state, the party, and the personal interests of elites have merged

into one machine.

Regular news updates about the government’s plans for construction of new satellite cities, skyscrapers, airports, roads, bridges, overpasses, monorails, and shopping malls have drowned out calls for a true democracy. In stark contrast to the international community’s condemnation of the ruling party and Hun Sen himself for attacks on the opposition, civil society, and independent media, regular topics of conversation at cafés in Phnom Penh include real estate transactions and online shopping. Modern supermalls, IMAX movie theaters, five-star hotels, high-end restaurants, and casinos have offered urban dwellers a taste of luxury under Hun Sen’s regime. Although these attractions have become playgrounds for the upper class, the alluring image of economic development and consumerist aspiration has given the rest of the population hopes and dreams of their own, and the perception that the nation is moving in the right direction under the CPP.

The ruling party’s motivation to eliminate its only viable political opposition in the summer of

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2017 is to be found in the confluence of these individual, domestic, and external factors. Hun Sen's personal quest for power and glory, and the bitter animosity between him and the opposition leaders, have made compromise, reconciliation, and trust-building nearly impossible. Without any institutionalized mechanisms for succession that would ensure their safety and privileges in the event of defeat, losing power to the opposition is unthinkable for the ruling party's leadership.

Changes in the external political environment also favored Hun Sen's inclination to rid himself of the opposition party. He was encouraged by Chi-

na's strong support and further emboldened by divisions in the Western alliance and the resurgence of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia, Europe, and even the United States.

After the July 2018 election, the fusion of personality cult, party, and state is likely to become entrenched as a new political order designed by the ruling party to perpetuate its hegemony. Until a new correlation of domestic and international forces compels the regime to return to free and fair elections as the primary means of conflict resolution, Cambodia is on a fast track to unrestrained authoritarian rule. ■