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Steve Heder

Introduction

Events of 2004 were the *dénouement* not only of the national elections of July 2003 and subsequent political deadlock, but of the decade of political transition since the departure of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), and even of the course of Cambodia's political trajectory since the end of French colonialism. The UNTAC elections of 1993 aimed at restoring the country's independence and peace following ten years of communist Vietnamese occupation and insurgency against them and their Cambodian protégées. The elections were intended to launch the country on the path of liberal democracy, free market economics and human rights. None of these had existed in Cambodia since the early 1950s, in the twilight of French colonialism and early years of King Norodom Sihanouk's reign, when nascent liberal democrats and Khmer Issarak insurgents contested his control of the French-constructed administrative state. Democracy, market economics and human rights were suppressed under Sihanouk's post-independence Sangkum regime, murderously expunged during the 1975–78 rule of the Khmer Rouge, and repressed under the Vietnamese who liberated Cambodia from Pol Pot, but imposed their own colonial-like, socialist state-building project.

The UNTAC mandate over Cambodia and the years since have been analogous to the earlier period of contestation for control of a post-colonial state in Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. 2004 saw it end with the overwhelming victory of prime minister Hun Sen and his political and economic entourage, self-made

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men who emerged out of the apparatus created by the Vietnamese and the beginnings of market liberalization in the late 1980s. Their decisive triumph may determine the trajectory of Cambodian politics for many years to come. Their political juggernaut is interknit through marriages among children of key players, including premier Hun Sen, deputy premier Sok An, national police chief Hok Langdy and army procurement czar Moeng Samphan.¹ Family connections and economic interests link them and other members of Hun Sen's political entourage, such as army generals Pol Sareuan and Kun Kim and agriculture minister Chan Sarun, to expanding business conglomerates headed by prominent tycoons, like Cheung Sopheap and Lav Meng Khin of the Pheapimex-Fu Chan company, Kung Triv of the KT Pacific Group, Mong Reuthy of the conglomerate named after him, Keut Meng of the Royal Group, Ly Yong Phat of the Hero King company and Sok Kong of the Sokimex company.²

This decisive melding of bureaucratic, military and economic power is rooted in a sea change of socioeconomic transformation driven by this self-regenerating, oligopolistic and predatory entrepreneurial elite,³ intimately linked with East and Southeast Asian capital. Their revolution is generating unprecedented growth and wealth in a few sectors, while leaving most Cambodians in dire and in some ways deepening poverty,⁴ creating unheard of socioeconomic polarization. The losers include perhaps a million landless people, many thrown off their land and out of their forests by the start-up of enormous agro-industrial plantations and rampant land grabbing by the elite.⁵ The upheaval has also produced a mostly female proletariat, comprising 265,000 largely unionized employees in garment and other factories⁶ and 100,000 sex workers.⁷ Runaway urbanization is changing parts of Phnom Penh beyond recognition, amidst the rise of a new generation of semi-educated, under-employed youth, numbering in the tens of thousands.⁸ The capital and other towns are also home to the beginnings of a middle class, some with liberal aspirations and connected to the plethora of international financial institutions, foreign embassies and aid auxiliaries, UN agencies and international NGOs that, together, continue to play an indispensable role in financing both the formal state apparatus and a rambunctious domestic civil society and media.⁹ Alongside them are the business offices of East and Southeast Asian companies whose activities are creating more conservative strata within the still small middle class.

In this environment, the old Vietnamese-built state is now a vastly elaborated, more western-looking but still substantively empty shell, a vehicle not for good governance, but for serving the interests of Hun Sen and his entourage, a maze of patronage, corruption and repression.¹⁰

The Alliance of Democrats Challenge

In early 2004, consolidation by Hun Sen did not seem certain. He appeared to face a serious, but non-violent, challenge from a seemingly reunited and supposedly democratic-minded opposition, which railed against the corruption, economic oligopoly, political violence, incompetence, rural poverty, social degradation, environmental destruction and numerous other ills that it attributed to his domination. Ranged against him were Sam Rainsy's eponymous party (SRP), Prince Norodom Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia), the octogenarian Sihanouk, parts of Hun Sen's own Cambodian People's Party (CPP) associated with Chea Sim, the elderly CPP chairman and also president of Cambodia's symbolic senate, and urban civil society, including labour unions, students' and teachers' groups, and human rights, environmental, community and development NGOs.¹¹ Sihanouk's support was implicit in his November 2003 brokering of a deal in which Hun Sen agreed to head a three-party government,¹² and obvious from constant signals of disgust at what was happening under Hun Sen's rule. Royal messages decried political assassinations,¹³ other political violence,¹⁴ and clumsy attempts to cover up governmental responsibility for them;¹⁵ popular misery¹⁶ due to poverty in the countryside and unemployment in the cities, corruption, the galloping gap between rich and poor, land seizures, forestry destruction and widespread prostitution;¹⁷ and cultural and moral degradation.¹⁸

Overtly, the challenge was mounted by the Alliance of Democrats (AD), a coalition between FUNCINPEC and SRP. The AD was formed in the wake of July 2003 national elections, in which the CPP — with 47.3 per cent of the popular vote — won 73 of the 123 seats, FUNCINPEC 26 and SRP 24, but in which the electorate showed signs of hopelessness that voting could change the government or improve their lives,¹⁹ and almost a quarter of the electorate did not cast ballots.²⁰ Because Cambodia's constitution requires a two-thirds parliamentary vote to confirm a government, the AD was able to create a political paralysis crisis by refusing to attend the assembly. Its strategy was to hold the formation of a government hostage to CPP agreement to basic reforms which, if implemented, would fundamentally undermine Hun Sen's position and create conditions for his eventual downfall by democratic means. It reflected a widespread belief in FUNCINPEC and SRP that unless the two parties permanently joined forces, Hun Sen could never be defeated, the country never be cleansed of residual Vietnamese influence and communist habits, and never be set on a democratic and sustainable development path. It was predicated on a proclaimed recognition by Ranariddh that FUNCINPEC had been

hoodwinked, badly discredited and seriously weakened as a result of his decision to join coalitions with CPP after the elections of 1993 and 1998.²¹

The heightened role in FUNCINPEC of party secretary-general Prince Norodom Sirivudh and of veteran FUNCINPEC guerilla commander Nhek Bunchhay, both with histories of strong animosity to Hun Sen, appeared to augur well for a steadfast FUNCINPEC stance. The AD position also opened up possibilities for young, well-educated and liberal figures in FUNCINPEC to link up with like-minded elements who populate SRP, with whom they shared a common concern about both parties' leaders' autocratic leadership practices. It was seemingly encouraged by emissaries of Chea Sim's CPP faction, threatened with eclipse by Hun Sen.²²

The AD demanded CPP agree to a number of points in political pacts to be signed *before* the convening of the assembly and formation of a tripartite government. The first was to set up a new National Election Commission, replacing a CPP-dominated body that FUNCINPEC and SRP believed had biased the 1998 and 2003 elections against them. The AD proposed that the king appoint the chairman and vice chairman of the new commission, which should include one representative each of CPP, FUNCINPEC and SRP, thus ending CPP control. It also demanded the creation of new village committees with equal representation of all three parties. This reflected AD belief that existing village committees — all controlled by CPP since 1979 — played a key role in skewing election results massively in the CPP's favour. Upon formation, the government would put an amended election law to the assembly to make future elections freer and fairer, thus further levelling the electoral playing field. This was coupled with insistence on a tripartite agreement on reform of the CPP-dominated judicial system, a mainstay of CPP's capacity to use the law against the opposition. Other points the AD wanted agreed in advance were that the assembly would pass an anti-corruption law satisfactory to all three parties, and the government would establish an independent anti-corruption commission acceptable to the AD. This would not only reduce corruption, but also deny the CPP political advantages derived from it.

With regard to the government itself, the AD demanded prior agreement on the abolition of Sok An's post of Minister of the Office of the Council of Ministers, to break this Hun Sen crony's stranglehold on the bureaucracy. At the insistence of Nhek Bunchhay, who had been reduced to position as a vice-president of the powerless senate, CPP was also asked to allocate a number of positions in the army and police to the AD, to neutralize them as anti-AD forces. The clinching AD point was that if any party withdrew from the coalition government, the cabinet must obtain a new parliamentary vote of confidence, and, failing that, new elections would be held.²³ This meant the AD could precipitate the fall of the government and

force new elections at any time, elections that would be — if the AD's reforms worked — much freer and fairer than those on 1998 and 2003 and might well sweep a reunited FUNCINPEC-SRP ticket to victory, making it possible to do a deal with Chea Sim to achieve Hun Sen's sidelining, with Sihanouk's blessing.

Hun Sen Fights Back

Hun Sen refused to sign what was intended as his political death warrant, rejecting key AD demands,²⁴ which Sihanouk, too, thought included unrealistic deal-breakers.²⁵ Some AD members responded to Hun Sen's recalcitrance by demanding a specific pledge that his next term as premier be his last.²⁶ He replied by reneging on Sihanouk's tripartite formula and insisting on a return to a CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition,²⁷ although Chea Sim associates said they still wanted a deal that was "fair for all three parties".²⁸

Moreover, appearances of AD unity were deceiving, and behind the scenes, Hun Sen and his entourage were working to exploit rivalries, ambitions, greed, impatience and fear within the AD. With Ranariddh frequently outside of Cambodia, and Sihanouk in China or North Korea for medical treatment and to signal dissatisfaction at the failure of his formula, Hun Sen took particular advantage of conflicts of interest between Nhek Bunchhay and Sam Rainsy. Previous shared animosity to Hun Sen was dissolved by the aging FUNCINPEC ex-guerrilla fighter's fear that a three-party government would leave rustic men like himself with few posts, because these would have to be split three ways and many would be taken by a new generation of whiz-kid politicians, especially from SRP. Nhek Bunchhay also suspected Sam Rainsy was plotting to usurp leadership of the AD from FUNCINPEC.²⁹ Appealing to the desire of Nhek Bunchhay and other FUNCINPEC members for government posts, Hun Sen promised that if they would join a two-party coalition under his leadership, all would have jobs, because he would create additional posts for them.³⁰

Even more fundamental, however, was the issue of money. FUNCINPEC politicians had seen how the enormously growing power of money had helped CPP buy the 2003 election and was giving CPP moguls a lifestyle which FUNCINPEC officials envied. At a deeper level, FUNCINPEC realized that just as CPP had long since chucked the failed ideology of socialism, FUNCINPEC must also become party for which immediate business links were more important than "royalism". Moreover, during the 2003 elections, many FUNCINPEC candidates' campaigns had been bankrolled by Hun Sen crony capitalists, and some were even financed by their CPP competitors. This made FUNCINPEC a

partly owned subsidiary of CPP and its tycoons, and left FUNCINPEC parliamentarians-elect with debts they could only repay by obtaining government posts through which they could make money.³¹ It also separated FUNCINPEC from SRP, whose candidates were starved for funds by a business community told by CPP that financing SRP was committing economic suicide.³²

The threat of literal death was a further, crucial factor. In 2003, two prominent FUNCINPEC figures had been killed and a third paralysed from the neck down in contract-style hits, which virtually everyone in AD believed were arranged by Hun Sen or his entourage. Two more such assassinations were carried out during the first half of 2004. The targets were leaders of an SRP-affiliated trade union,³³ but FUNCINPEC members took the murders as deadly warnings to both parties. Additional fear was generated by the spectre of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment by the CPP-controlled police and courts, especially after a FUNCINPEC candidate in the 2003 elections was arrested on charges³⁴ trumped up by military intelligence dirty trickster Mol Reuap.³⁵

This relentless combination of inducements and threats increasingly undermined the AD, separating Ranariddh, Nhek Bunchhay and Norodom Sirivudh from the SRP and reform-minded sectors of FUNCINPEC itself. A crucial juncture was a secret meeting in early March in Bangkok between Ranariddh and Thai defence minister Chaovalit Yongjaiyut, with the latter and the tycoon Ly Yong Phat acting as mediators for Hun Sen. Hun Sen and Ranariddh agreed by telephone that CPP and FUNCINPEC would split “commissions” on government business deals 60–40.³⁶ This was the basis for a meeting between Hun Sen and Ranariddh on 15 March at which they agreed, without having consulted their own parties, that the future government would be a CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition, but that Ranariddh could include SRP members in slots reserved for FUNCINPEC.³⁷

Thereafter, negotiations between CPP and FUNCINPEC took place over the composition of the government and leadership structures of the national assembly, government policy pact and the procedure for approving all three. Ranariddh soon conceded Hun Sen’s procedural demand for a “package vote”, guaranteeing Hun Sen would be reconfirmed as prime minister at the same time as those occupying all other parliamentary and government posts were named and government policies approved, although this violated the constitution. The quid pro quo, the prince said, was a reformist policy pact agreeable to all three parties.³⁸ Tedious CPP-FUNCINPEC talks about the pact and power sharing ensued, with CPP tenaciously resisting the substance of the original AD proposals. Some FUNCINPEC negotiators fought back in consultation with SPR and civil society, producing a new sweeping reform proposal on 10 June,³⁹ while Sirivudh pressed for FUNCINPEC to hold on to key

ministerial posts.⁴⁰ They also suggested the unconstitutionality of the package vote could be overcome by having Sihanouk agree to a three-party appeal for him to exercise his constitutional authority as a royal arbiter.⁴¹

However, they increasingly sensed they were operating in a dream world, isolated from the real substance of political developments. One aspect of this was a scramble within FUNCINPEC to take advantage of Hun Sen's promises of a bonanza of government posts.⁴² Hopefuls were caught in a bribery contest in which they gave money to Ranariddh or Sirivudh or both.⁴³ The other was a competition within CPP for posts, in which payments were also made, but to a central party fund, with Chea Sim attempting to replace several Hun Sen loyalists with his own nominees.⁴⁴

Rudely by-passed in all this was Sihanouk, still in piqued exile.⁴⁵ The king's offer to host talks to reestablish a serious tripartite deal⁴⁶ was deflected by Hun Sen and Ranariddh.⁴⁷ Within FUNCINPEC and SRP, many became convinced that Ranariddh had abandoned the whole AD strategy. Rumours spread like wildfire that Ranariddh had been bribed by Hun Sen with money, presents of aircraft and promises that he would be manoeuvred onto the throne when his father died.⁴⁸

Ranariddh's Volte-Face, Hun Sen's Triumph

The worst fears of the reformists and Hun Sen's rivals were realized on 26 June, when he and Ranariddh initialled a protocol on the division of power within the government, to be installed by an unspecified package vote procedure.⁴⁹ The size of the government was more than doubled, but, contrary to Sirivudh's demands, important ministries were lost to CPP; contrary to Nhek Bunchhay's hopes, no provision was made for integration of FUNCINPEC military into the security forces or police; and, contrary to the reformists' hopes, there was no sign of their programme. There was general fury and profound disappointment with Ranariddh in both FUNCINPEC and SRP, combined with fear that a tacit part of the deal was exclusion from power of FUNCINPEC liberals and open season for Mol Reuap to go after the most recalcitrant FUNCINPEC and SRP figures.⁵⁰ The dropping of Mu Sok Huor, an outspoken FUNCINPEC liberal, for consideration for a ministerial post made an example of her.⁵¹

Amidst a whirlwind of bidding for FUNCINPEC posts, Ranariddh agreed with Hun Sen to a final protocol from which all reform substance disappeared.⁵² Meanwhile, a Hun Sen advisor produced an argument that the package vote procedure was legal if the assembly adopted "a constitution addition law", even without royal approval.⁵³ Finally, on 1 July, Hun Sen announced that CPP ministers would keep

their jobs in the new government, on his say so,⁵⁴ contrary to the party's internal regulations.⁵⁵ Given the situation in both parties, Ranariddh and Hun Sen agreed that the package vote must be made by a show of hands, to prevent FUNCINPEC and CPP members voting against them in cahoots with SRP.⁵⁶

Suddenly on 6 July, Sihanouk announced that he had decided to abdicate as soon as the new assembly formed and passed legislation activating the Throne Council, a CPP-dominated body constitutionally empowered to select a successor in the event of his death. It was obvious he was expressing his deep exasperation at the whole course of events since November 2003, with the package vote being the final straw. He was ignoring the constitution, which made no provision for abdication, as CPP immediately pointed out.⁵⁷

Two days later, with SRP boycotting, CPP and FUNCINPEC members convened parliament and voted by unanimous show of hands for the constitutional addition authorizing the package vote.⁵⁸ It was presumed that the bill would be signed into force by Chea Sim as acting chief of state (in Sihanouk's absence) on 12 July.⁵⁹ However, Sihanouk called on Chea Sim to act on his conscience in deciding whether to sign,⁶⁰ and, to the consternation of an enraged Hun Sen, he refused to do so.

Suspecting that Rainsy, Chea Sim and Sihanouk were plotting against him, Hun Sen convened a meeting of some CPP senior leaders at which he declared that if Chea Sim continued to obstruct, he must go into exile, so that Nhek Bunchhay, the next available person to be acting chief of state, could sign the legislation, but Chea Sim balked at leaving the country. On 13 July, security forces loyal to Hun Sen surrounded Chea Sim's residence, and he was warned that if he did not go, his life was in danger. He was escorted to the airport and onto a plane for Bangkok, supposedly to undergo medical treatment. He returned politically humiliated to Cambodia a week later.⁶¹ Nhek Bunchhay's signature of the legislation was also a humiliation for him and FUNCINPEC, demonstrating the party's subservience to Hun Sen, and that it could also be used against SRP.⁶²

The package vote was carried out by show of hands on 15 July. Hun Sen became premier and Ranariddh president of the national assembly. Among the deputy premiers were Nhek Bunchhay and Sirivudh, who were concurrently co-ministers of defence and interior, respectively. Although Chea Sim's man Sar Kheng retained a position as deputy premier and co-minister of interior, Hun Sen's key crony, Sok An, was promoted to an added deputy premier post, while keeping his position as minister of an undiminished council of ministers' office.⁶³ Hun Sen triumphantly declared the CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition government formula should last at least another 20 or 30 years.⁶⁴ With the later addition of undersecretaries of

state, the cabinet expanded even further.⁶⁵ The assembly also approved a government political reform programme, which was verbose but vacuous.⁶⁶

FUNCINPEC Self-Destructs; SRP Targeted for Destruction

After the government's formation, the coalition deal of jobs for FUNCINPEC continued to expand. Nhek Bunchhay was empowered to appoint FUNCINPEC officers in certain military units.⁶⁷ Hun Sen made even more posts and promotions available to FUNCINPEC, and tycoons began contributing money to the party that it used to distribute gifts to its members.⁶⁸ This opened up another round of bidding, with Sirivudh allegedly collecting the envelopes, and resulted in the loss of many posts by FUNCINPEC veterans to upstarts, some with CPP backgrounds and others indebted to CPP-affiliated tycoons. It provoked public protests by FUNCINPEC veterans and widespread commentary that FUNCINPEC was embarking on the path of self-destruction.⁶⁹

One senior FUNCINPEC official explained that the party had made a strategic decision that its relationship vis-à-vis CPP would forever be "subordinate, subservient and lucrative", and that in future elections, it would rely on CPP assistance and follow the CPP model to carry out "organized, paid voting" to get its candidates into the national assembly. In the meantime, FUNCINPEC would also cooperate with CPP to neutralize the SRP opposition and critical civil society organizations by "squeezing their membership at the bottom and scaring their leadership at the top", using the police, the courts and restrictive laws to harass them legally and threatening to use overwhelming force to suppress any demonstrations. Assassinations were not ruled out if other means fail.⁷⁰

FUNCINPEC collusion with Hun Sen to split and intimidate SRP began immediately after government formation. Their attack concentrated on SRP's "shadow government" structures, the function of which was to collect information on corruption and abuse for use in parliamentary debates. While Ranarriddh openly appealed for SRP members to defect so they could be given FUNCINPEC quota government posts,⁷¹ associates of Sirivudh and Nhek Bunchhay covertly did the same with key SRP figures, warning of dire consequences if they did not leave SRP and join FUNCINPEC. The open campaign netted Ou Bun Long, the SRP shadow minister of interior, who became a FUNCINPEC secretary of state. The covert operation focused on SRP MP Cheam Channy, who was the party's shadow minister of defence, and whose active network of informants had made him a constant irritant to Hun Sen. When Cheam Channy rejected all blandishments to join the government,

Mol Reuap fabricated a case that his informants constituted a “secret army” being formed on Sam Rainsy’s behalf.⁷² This melded into a third prong of the attack, the pursuit of legal cases against SRP. Sirivudh lodged defamation lawsuits against Sam Rainsy and another SRP member of parliament for alleging that Ranariddh had been bribed to betray the AD, and the military court laid charges against Cheam Channy.⁷³ Meanwhile Ranariddh initiated moves to strip them of their parliamentary immunity, so they could be arrested.⁷⁴

Another quid pro quo has been FUNCINPEC support against Hun Sen’s rivals in CPP, such as interior minister Sar Kheng, whose continued differences with the premier were revealed when he expressed skepticism about the existence of an SRP secret army.⁷⁵ In retaliation, Ranariddh and Sirivudh supported the notion that Hok Langdy’s national police should be removed from the formal control of the interior ministry and placed under Hun Sen’s command.⁷⁶ Even if this is not achieved, Hun Sen has de jure or de facto control over almost all the combat-ready armed forces and effective police forces in the country, making him virtually immune to the threat of a military coup. FUNCINPEC appointees are kept out of these units.

Sihanouk Retires; Long Live King Sihamoni

While senior CPP and FUNCINPEC officials tried to protract all this as a return to the golden age of political stability under Sihanouk’s pre-1970 Sangkum regime, the king made his grave dissatisfaction clear on 18 July, characterizing the government’s formation as an “anti-Constitutional, anti-Democratic, anti-Royalty ‘Coup d’État’”. He also voiced suspicions of a plot either to replace him upon his death by a “puppet” King — an allusion to the role he feared a Ranariddh enthroned by Hun Sen would play — or to manipulate the succession to make Cambodia “a Republic with a 100 per cent dictatorship regime” under Hun Sen.⁷⁷

Hun Sen at first publicly taunted Sihanouk about his expressed intention to abdicate, asserting that “the Constitution states that the King must stay on the throne until he dies”. Sihanouk replied that he wanted implementing legislation to activate the Throne Council so it could select “a male King who is honest, gentle and will try to help the country” as his successor. This was an obvious signal that he wanted his son with Queen Monineath, Norodom Sihamoni, not Sihamoni’s half-brother Ranariddh, to be the next monarch.⁷⁸ Born in 1953, Sihamoni had spent the first nine years of his life in Cambodia, before going to study in Czechoslovakia and North Korea until 1976, when he returned to Cambodia and lived under Khmer Rouge house arrest with his parents. After the Khmer Rouge regime, he was a personal secretary to his parents, then returned to an academic

life in France until he was appointed as the reestablished Kingdom's ambassador to UNESCO in 1993. In a further signal that he was being groomed for the throne, Sihanouk bestowed an elevated royal title upon him in late August, and he joined his parents in Beijing in September.⁷⁹

As SRP proclaimed its support for Sihanouk's desire to abdicate,⁸⁰ Hun Sen and Ranariddh switched to attempting to persuade Sihanouk not to step down.⁸¹ They assuaged him by proclaiming their support for Sihanouk and promising Throne Council implementing legislation that would avoid a succession crisis.⁸² However, in late September he announced his Chinese doctors had discovered he was afflicted by yet another illness,⁸³ and on 6 October he proclaimed he was too weak to be King and asked to "retire". He said he would only return to Cambodia once the Throne Council was operational and named his successor.⁸⁴ Although pushed into a corner of desperation, Sihanouk had managed to outfox the CPP strongman and his FUNCINPEC sidekick by forcing them to name Sihanouk.⁸⁵ The assembly duly passed a law on the functioning of the council, which declared Sihanouk king on 14 October. Sihanouk and Sihanouk returned to Cambodia six days later,⁸⁶ and Sihanouk was enthroned at the end of the month.⁸⁷ Public reaction to events was initially muted, but his coronation speech to large crowds indicated that he would follow in the politically critical footsteps of his father, perhaps more cautiously, but also much more actively.⁸⁸ A message associated with him promised to criticize "the powerful who only think of themselves" on behalf of "the poor who attempt to survive".⁸⁹ He sent a strong signal by giving early and highly sympathetic audiences to victims of human rights violations and to leading Cambodian human rights campaigners. CPP officials soon gave indications that he should not be too ambitious about meeting with the people,⁹⁰ while Sihanouk warned that Hun Sen and Ranariddh might still be hoping to replace him with Ranariddh once the retired king finally died.⁹¹

The International Politics of Reform

At the beginning of the year, AD pleaded for diplomatic and donor support for its challenge to Hun Sen, but these entreaties fell on almost entirely deaf ears. Many western and ASEAN embassies, world and Asian international financial institutions, UN agencies and international NGOs agreed with the AD's critique of Hun Sen's regime as failing to achieve good governance, to establish a genuinely competitive market economy or to reduce rural poverty. However, they described AD demands as unattainable, FUNCINPEC as equally bad if not worse than CPP, and SRP as politically immature and incapable of governing. They also blamed AD obstructionism

for the political paralysis, which they in turn saw as blocking their own efforts at promoting good governance and development. They universally welcomed the formation of the new CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition as giving them a viable partner with whom they hoped to be able to constructively engage to pursue — if not political reform — then financial, administrative and other restructuring and policy adjustment. They also steadfastly maintained that unless they did so, the regime would continue to receive unconditional economic and other support from China.⁹²

Ironically, the formation of a government snuffing out AD reform proposals was followed by a flurry of highly critical donor and other assessments of Cambodia's performance at good governance, poverty reduction and human rights protection, slamming previous Hun Sen governments' lack of political will to achieve any of these goals. They also predicted that unless at least some of these problems were urgently solved, Cambodia's economy might well go into a serious and prolonged slump, triggered by the opening up of its markets for garment manufacture — the engine of growth over the past several years — to competition from China and other more efficient producers. Some warned of serious socioeconomic unrest among dispossessed peasants, workers let go by closing factories, and angry students, if the economy slowed down and stayed in the doldrums.⁹³ Worries about this were exacerbated by a severe drought that looked likely to have a significant adverse effect on the 2004 rice crop.⁹⁴ The virtually complete ban imposed by the government on demonstrations in Phnom Penh reflected its concern about vulnerability to mass violence in the capital.⁹⁵

Many of the reports were produced in the context of Cambodia's September accession to the World Trade Organization and the run-up to the December meeting of the Consultative Group, which brings together donors and the government to announce aid commitments. Hun Sen saw this coming, and produced his own mountain of paper, accentuating the positive and swearing his new government was dead serious about reform.⁹⁶ As the fudged outcome of the Consultative Group gathering showed by promising almost as much aid in the past while making more insistent calls for reform,⁹⁷ some diplomats and donors profess a willingness to take Hun Sen at his word. They argue that his consolidation of political and economic power is a positive factor, allowing him to embark on reform. Others believe very much the opposite, at least in private. They fear that Hun Sen's promises are simply another in a long line of lies designed to dupe foreigners into paying to keep him in power and make him richer.

Searching for a post-AD role, Sam Rainsy has begun a new attempt to align himself with international sceptics, believing that Hun Sen will fail to deliver, and a deteriorating socioeconomic and political situation may give SRP new

opportunities.⁹⁸ In preparation for this possibility, he has embarked upon an attempt to reinvent the SRP to make it a more plausible political force: a party that is more truly democratic, technically capable of governing and politically responsible.⁹⁹ The trick for him and SRP will be not only to demonstrate to potential foreign backers that his promises are more sincere, credible and realizable than those of Hun Sen. It will more importantly be to continue to build a coherent coalition of intellectual, student, middle class, and palace liberals; the wretched of Cambodia's towns, countryside and forests; covert dissidents within CPP and FUNCINPEC; and entrepreneurs who want an end to the oligopolies that obstruct their business opportunities, without provoking CPP-FUNCINPEC repression so severe as to destroy the SRP.

Conclusion

Returning to where this chapter began, Hun Sen's consolidation of power over the post (Vietnamese)-colonial state, the melding of administrative, armed and business power over which he has presided, is familiar to Southeast Asians. It is comparable to similar trajectory-defining periods in the Philippines in the late 1940s and 1950s, in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in the late 1950s and 1960s and in Indonesia in the late 1960s and 1970s. In each of these cases, powerful individuals, families or institutions presided over profound capitalist transformations that eventually, over periods of two to four decades, produced new socioeconomic and political formations and forces that challenged, more or less successfully and in different ways, their makers. Meanwhile, many in the aging formal CPP party and parliamentary leadership¹⁰⁰ believe that Hun Sen's talk of a 20 to 30-year coalition with FUNCINPEC are indicative of a plan to hold tenaciously on to power for that long, allowing many of them to die off or retire, while the premier and his cronies groom their intermarried children for eventual dynastic successions. Hun Sen's West Point-trained son, Hun Manet, now studying for a PhD in the United Kingdom, is seen as heir apparent.¹⁰¹

If the baton is indeed eventually passed to Hun Manet and others like him, the kind of Cambodia they inherit will be determined not only by the relationship between his father's entourage and Cambodian society, but by the immense transformative power — for good and evil — of turbo-capitalism in the era of globalization. If it is not constrained by good governance, the Cambodia of the future may be a socioeconomic and cultural wasteland. If Hun Sen does not make good on his promises, then the best chance of averting catastrophe may also be familiar to Southeast Asians: People's Power uprisings in the capital in alliance with all the political forces that the strongman has alienated on his way to the top and in

keeping himself there, combined with intervention by the monarch, the international community or the church. However, even if that happens, whether there will be anyone capable of picking up the pieces remains to be seen.

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