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Cambodia's Crumbling Democracy
Behind the Growing Repression
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In the early hours of September 4, the final edition of Cambodia's oldest English-language daily rolled off the presses. *The Cambodia Daily*, founded in 1993, was a respected pillar of the country's small independent media. True to its slogan—"All the News Without Fear or Favor"—the newspaper had forged a reputation for meticulous reporting and hard-hitting exposés, which belied its unassuming letter-sized format. A month earlier, the Cambodian government, under the long-ruling Prime Minister Hun Sen, had hit the paper's publishers with a \$6.3 million tax bill, ordering them to pay up or "pack up." They had no choice ^[1] but to fold.

The paper's last day coincided with the arrest of the Cambodian opposition leader, Kem Sokha—an incident that made the front cover of the *Daily's* final issue. Beneath the oversized headline, "Descent Into Outright Dictatorship," was a picture of Kem Sokha being taken into custody by police shortly after midnight on September 2. Kem Sokha, who heads the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), has since been moved to a remote prison in eastern Cambodia. He faces 15–30 years in prison and has been charged ^[2] with treason for conspiring with the United States to overthrow the Cambodian government.

As evidence, the authorities produced a video ^[3] of Kem Sokha giving a talk in Australia in 2013, in which he describes meeting overseas experts "hired by the Americans in order to advise me on the strategy to change the leaders." This, the government claimed, was proof of a conspiracy aimed at delivering a coup. It has since announced investigations of other CNRP leaders and has suggested that the party could be dissolved ^[4] if it continues to back Sokha.

The closure of the *Daily* and the arrest of Kem Sokha represent unprecedented steps for Hun Sen, who has ruled in various guises since 1985. To be sure, periods of repression are a regular feature of Cambodian political life and have occurred periodically over the past quarter century, usually ahead of elections. But the current clampdown—now in its third year—is shaping up as both the most sustained since the early 1990s and the first to assail once untouchable Western institutions within the country.

It is also striking in that it has been accompanied by a sharp turn against the United States. Over the past year, Cambodia has pulled out of Angkor Sentinel, an annual bilateral military exercise, and kicked out ^[5] a U.S. naval engineering battalion that was building school bathrooms and maternity wards in rural Cambodia. Following last month's claims of a U.S. plot against the government, it silenced ^[6] local radio stations relaying broadcasts from the U.S.-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Asia (the latter of which has since suspended ^[7] its in-country operations) and ordered ^[8] the closure of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a U.S.-funded pro-democracy nongovernmental organization, which has been working in Cambodia since 1992.

According to most observers of Cambodian politics, the proximate cause of Hun Sen's crackdown is the national elections scheduled for July 2018. The CPP is bent on avoiding a repeat of the last election in 2013, when the CNRP scored surprise gains ^[9] on the back of rising public discontent related to land issues, corruption, and clogged government institutions. But there could be a more consequential shift going on, one that could alter the international settlement that created Cambodia's democratic system at the end of the Cold War.

A SUPERFICIAL DEMOCRACY

Cambodia became a democracy on October 23, 1991, with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, which ended a twelve-year civil war. The accord authorized the creation of a United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), an 18-month peacekeeping mission tasked with disarming and demobilizing four armed Cambodian factions (including the CPP), repatriating more than half a million refugees from camps along the Thai border, and holding multiparty elections in 1993—all while assuming temporary control of the country's civil administration.

The Paris Peace Agreements and UNTAC transformed Cambodia. After UNTAC was deployed in 1992, prompting a nearly overnight flood of foreign aid into the country and an influx of aid workers, journalists, and development experts, Phnom Penh, the decrepit capital of an impoverished socialist state, became a highly internationalized political space—a tropical outpost of what the British writer Alex de Waal has termed ^[10] the “humanitarian international.” UNTAC maintained a fragile stability, allowing the CPP's enemies from the civil war to form political parties. The new peace also provided the space needed for Cambodian media and civil society to grow.

The peace agreement, however, was not without its flaws. The treaty's framework had been drawn up by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and never had much buy-in from the Cambodian factions, whose mutual antipathy remained undimmed. Moreover, Hun Sen's CPP had good reason to be suspicious of the accord. Despite participating in Vietnam's overthrow in January 1979 of the Khmer Rouge regime, whose pursuit of an ultra-pure vision of peasant communism had resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians since 1975, the new government was isolated and economically embargoed by the West.

This was based on a ruthless Cold War logic. Since Phnom Penh was backed by Vietnam, which was allied with the Soviet Union, the United States and its new ally China withheld diplomatic recognition, instead bestowing legitimacy on the ousted Khmer Rouge, whose emissaries would occupy Cambodia's seat at the UN until 1991. This long decade of isolation from 1979 to 1991 instilled in the senior ranks of the CPP a deep and abiding resentment at its treatment by the West—a factor that continues to influence Hun Sen's behavior today.

Despite his mistrust of Western powers, Hun Sen, a born survivor from the backwoods of rural Kampong Cham, had little choice but to sign the Paris settlement, accepting the welter of competing political factions and civil society groups that followed. But he never accepted its legitimacy, and immediately worked to gain control of the new democratic system through the use of political patronage and, when necessary, violence [11]. Although he tolerated their presence, Hun Sen saw foreign and foreign-funded NGOs as a violation of the country's sovereignty, and a channel through which hostile foreign powers could meddle in Cambodian affairs—just as they had in the 1980s. In one 1995 speech, he lashed out at Western criticisms of his heavy-handed actions: “Let me say this to the world: Whether or not you want to give aid to Cambodia is up to you, but do not discuss Cambodian affairs too much.” In the same speech he threatened to organize protests outside Western embassies—a threat that he also renewed last month [12].

Under Hun Sen's rule, Cambodia fluctuated between periods of repression, usually timed to elections, and periods of relaxation, designed to placate foreign donor governments whose aid was often linked to improvements in good governance and human rights. Hun Sen was always careful about striking a balance. Even in July 1997, when forces loyal to Hun Sen launched a bloody strike [13] against his royalist coalition partner, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, Hun Sen left the underlying democratic settlement intact. (After holding a new election in 1998, which the CPP easily won, the flow of foreign aid resumed.)

All this gave Cambodian democracy a curiously superficial quality. The country held competitive elections, but their result was preordained by fear, intimidation, and CPP vote-buying. NGOs and civil society organizations operated with few formal restrictions, and foreign-language newspapers like *The Cambodia Daily* published freely, but their activities were effectively quarantined from entrenched political interests. (The Khmer-language media, meanwhile, was effectively silenced and brought under the CPP's control). Under Hun Sen, these freedoms existed not as a matter of right but as a temporary indulgence granted by those in power. Recent events suggest that this indulgence is now being withdrawn. Even though a relaxation of the current crackdown is likely at some point, the forced closure of the *Daily* and the ejection of the NDI—two respected Western mainstays of Cambodian civil society since 1992—represent a brazen assault on the legacy of UNTAC and the democratic experiment in Cambodia.

A NEW PATRON

Much of this can be put down to the rise of Chinese influence in Cambodia. Over the past 15 years, Beijing has risen to become Hun Sen's chief foreign friend and patron. In exchange for Cambodian support for its strategic goals in Southeast Asia, including its claims in the South China Sea, China has delivered more than \$2 billion in loans and investments, bankrolling the construction of highways, bridges, and hydropower dams.

No-strings Chinese loans and investments have made Cambodia less dependent on the support of Western governments and have given Hun Sen a free hand finally to jettison the last pretense of democracy and move against organizations, like the *Daily*, whose presence in Cambodia he has always resented. (A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded ^[14] to Kem Sokha's arrest by saying that Beijing supported "the Cambodian government's effort to uphold national security and stability.")

Another dimension of China's appeal is that it allows Hun Sen to satisfy his gnawing resentment that Cambodia is criticized more often than neighboring countries that are seen as more vital to U.S. interests, such as Thailand and Vietnam. This, too, is a legacy of UNTAC, which set a high standard for Cambodia and created the space for foreign journalists and human rights workers to shine a light on government failings in a way not possible in more authoritarian countries. Cambodia's small size and marginal status have also allowed U.S. policy to be heavily influenced by a vocal anti-Hun Sen lobby in the U.S. Congress, which has spearheaded a string of ^[15] resolutions ^[16] seeking to revive Cambodia's democratic experiment through the suspension of aid and, on occasion, even calls for regime change ^[17].

The result is that even as the administration of President Donald Trump warms to autocrats like General Prayuth Chan-ocha of Thailand and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Hun Sen remains a pariah in Washington. From Phnom Penh's perspective, this seems like yet another example of American double standards, and it breeds the sort of conspiratorial thinking that has led Hun Sen to believe a U.S.-backed opposition is plotting to overthrow him. One of the reasons that China has made advances in Cambodia is that it is willing to offer Hun Sen something that he has craved throughout his career: legitimacy and the status of a nominal equal.

The irony of Cambodia's shift is that even as its democratic experiment ends, the pressure for change is building. The 2013 election was accompanied by massive public demonstrations of support for the CNRP from people who were tired of the outrageous levels of corruption and cronyism that have flourished under Hun Sen's rule. Cambodia's leader may have finally shrugged off the unwanted burden of Western influence, but the contradictions within his own brand of authoritarianism remain.

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[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/world/asia/cambodia-kem-sokha-treason.html>

[3] https://www.facebook.com/PressOCMOfficial/videos/1276837405777695/?hc_ref=ARRAiLsUXi-ZLo2QXumB-Vwm77qH0_MqozbC-lHyYLkS0XimOyj3Nm3WgCziXT99CVg&pnref=story

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