

## Cambodia's Failing Democracy

By Ronald Bruce St John | January 23, 2006

The international community has invested well over \$5 billion in Cambodia since 1992 in a flawed attempt to nurture a democratic system. Following elections in 1993, the power elite in Cambodia reverted to sordid aspects of traditional political culture, promoting modernization within an authoritarian model. At a time when some promote democracy as a panacea for the world's ills, Cambodia offers object lessons in the pitfalls to be overcome to implant a democratic system in less-developed political economies.

### High Expectations

Following the October 1991 Paris peace accords, elements of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) were operational by early 1993. UNTAC forces were largely successful in resettling refugees and organizing nationwide elections, but they enjoyed far less success in implementing a cease-fire and disarming rival political groups. In a harbinger of things to come, they also experienced difficulty in containing violence and guarding human rights.

Given the atmosphere of threat and intimidation, the conduct of elections in May 1993 was a surprising success. On the opening day of a six-day polling period, voters lined up in driving monsoon rains to cast their ballots. By the end of the week, some 97% of eligible voters had voted in Cambodia's first national election in 21 years.

Exactly what Cambodians voted for in 1993 remains a controversial issue. In a country in which no government has ever relinquished authority without a fight, the Western concept of a loyal opposition remained an imported idea alien to traditional political culture. Referring to Hun Sen, leader of the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), journalist John C. Brown in a June 1993 article in the

*Phnom Penh Post* rightly suggested "Hun Sen and the CPP understand power only in absolute terms. Power for them," he continued, "is not shared, it is accumulated and protected."

### Sad Reality

The National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), headed by Prince Ranariddh, won 45% of the votes in the 1993 elections, compared to only 38% for CPP. While FUNCINPEC emerged from the polls as the largest and most successful political party, its plurality in the Constituent Assembly was three seats short of a majority, forcing it to turn to CPP to negotiate a power-sharing agreement.

CPP demanded equal power with FUNCINPEC, and the ensuing power-sharing agreement in theory was a 50-50 arrangement. However, CPP over time leveraged its power and reach at lower levels of government to outmaneuver FUNCINPEC, progressively accumulating a disproportionate share of power. In the process, it became all too clear the political elite of Cambodia was not as committed to democracy as the Cambodian people. On the contrary, a series of power-sharing agreements between the two parties over the next few years, all



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of which were increasingly dominated by CPP, made the very idea of power-sharing an oxymoron in Cambodia.

In July 1997, Hun Sen launched a preemptive coup d'état against Prince Ranariddh, ransacking FUNCINPEC offices and newspapers and murdering leaders of both FUNCINPEC and the Khmer Nation Party (KNP), formed in 1995 by ex-minister Sam Rainsy. As in 1993, electioneering rhetoric in new national elections in 1998 was couched in the lofty terms of democratization; however, the electoral process was again clouded by now familiar dynamics of rivalry and intimidation. In the end, as veteran Cambodia observer Pierre Lizée later suggested, the 1998 elections were “not so much a first step in an overdue process of democratization” as “a movement full circle to precisely the situation of autocracy which these elections were supposed to remedy.”

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The extent to which CPP was successful in consolidating political power after 1993 was clear in commune elections held in early 2002. Benefiting from a prolonged monopoly over local government, a disciplined political network, and considerable human and financial resources, CPP won 62% of the votes, 68% of the total seats, and 97% of the top offices. And a new round of national elections in July 2003 produced fresh gains for CPP.

Agreement to a new CPP-FUNCINPEC power-sharing arrangement in June 2004, after a year-long battle in which opponents failed to oust Hun Sen, displayed for all to see the strongman's growing intolerance of dissent.

### Violence, Corruption, and Impunity

Hailed at the time as a notable achievement, the UNTAC-sponsored elections in 1993 failed to establish a foundation for democratic institutions in an immature body politic. In lieu of change in the political culture of Cambodia, the elections led to a reassertion of past political practices. Power brokers after 1993 increasingly practiced politics as usual, evidencing the absolutism, familism, and intolerance prevalent in the earlier Sihanouk and Lon Nol eras.

Violence also remained an integral part of Cambodian political culture. A longtime predilection to force, exemplified by the *bas-reliefs* at Angkor and the cruelties of 19th century uprisings, was in evidence during and after the 1993 election campaign. Violations of human rights were widespread, and voices of even mild dissent received death threats. The U.S. Department of State, in its most recent review of human rights practices, concluded Cambodia's “human rights record remained poor.”

On the related issue of corruption, an anti-corruption law drafted in 1994 remains on the drawing board over a decade later. Even as civil society groups work to strengthen its provisions, the current draft fails to meet the requirements of the United Nations Convention against Corruption, which Cambodia refuses to sign. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) at the end of 2004 issued a detailed report, depicting a corruption-ridden Cambodian state apparatus.

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Depicting impunity as the “norm,” the report concludes that “those most at risk are individuals and organizations that dare to resist corruption.” The European Parliament in November 2005 called on Cambodia “to engage in political and institutional reforms to build a democratic state government by a rule of law,” “to combat effectively the endemic scourges of corruption,” and “to refuse the current culture of impunity.”

### International Collusion

Despite mounting evidence that democracy was not taking root in Cambodia, the international community has continued to extend substantial financial support to the coalition government. The single time financial aid conditionality was exercised in the period May 1993 to July 1997 involved a question of fiscal transparency as opposed to political reform. Thereafter, the primary concerns of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank remained economic and social reform. Donors failed to establish a working group dealing with good governance and the rule of law until 2000.

In November 2004, the World Bank took its strongest stand to date in support of political reform in Cambodia, suggesting that future aid pledges be conditioned on improved governance. In so doing, the report admitted that Cambodia’s aid partners in the past had too often been part of the problem—not part of the solution. It said in part, “failure to speak out for Cambodia’s poor with one voice or to link financial and technical support to performance and outcomes has sent mixed signals to the country’s leadership which has shown itself rather adept at doing just enough to win donor support.” Earlier reports by the Economic Institute of Canada, IMF, and USAID reached similar conclusions as to the need for

political reform. Nevertheless, donors at the annual Consultative Group meeting, which followed issuance of the World Bank report, pledged \$504 million in aid to Cambodia in 2005, raising the post-1993 aid total to over \$5 billion.

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### Conclusions

As the Cambodian experience makes clear, democracy is not synonymous with holding elections. Well-run elections are a peaceful, efficient means to allocate power and authority. But one election, or even many elections, does not necessarily a democracy make. The essence of Western democracy consists of a separation of powers with checks and balances within a system of democratic institutions, political parties, and free elections. The Cambodian elite has yet to embrace central elements of this process, like power sharing, dissent, and loyal opposition.

Unfortunately, the international community has largely sanctioned Cambodia’s failures. It has continued to provide substantial quantities of aid in the face of mounting evidence that even modest democratic reforms are compromised. To this extent, donor governments have long been complicit in sustaining the current autocratic order.

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From the outset, a central weakness in the donor approach has been its assumption that the ruling elite desired to initiate reforms but simply lacked the necessary expertise. Recent experience has shown the political order in Cambodia to be both intimately familiar with the process of political competition and determined to retain political power. No amount of technical assistance could overcome this reality.

To reduce corruption and violence, Cambodia must curb executive powers as it develops an honest, independent judiciary and a concomitant respect for the rule of law. Active political parties remain important precursors for a sustainable, pluralistic order with a strong educational system a

prerequisite for an effective democratic polity. These are only a few of the tough issues the international community must address if it is to succeed in promoting democratization in Cambodia and in other states with little or no democratic tradition, like Afghanistan and Iraq.

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