

***We Didn't Start the Fire: My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia.*  
By Sam Rainsy. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2013. Softcover: 210pp.**

Sam Rainsy is the French-educated leader of Cambodia's political opposition to Hun Sen, the self-styled "strong man" who, except for a two-year interlude in the 1990s, has been Cambodia's prime minister since 1984. This campaign autobiography was originally published in France, where Rainsy lived in exile between 2010 and mid-2013. It was timed to precede the July 2013 Cambodian national elections, which occurred soon after Rainsy returned to Phnom Penh. In the elections, the opposition unexpectedly won at least 55 seats in the National Assembly.

After the elections, Rainsy claimed on patchy evidence that the opposition had won them outright and was prepared to govern the country. Hun Sen rejected these claims. Rainsy also refused to allow the elected members of the opposition to take their seats. As this is written (July 2014) they still have not done so. Like many Cambodian leaders in the past, and like Hun Sen, Rainsy has no respect for such imported concepts as a loyal opposition or sharing power. In Cambodia, politics is a zero-sum game.

*We Didn't Start the Fire* covers Cambodian history since Sam Rainsy was born. The book is short, and history is often scappily presented, but Rainsy is a well-trained economist and a courageous, intelligent patriot. For these reasons his memoir is worth reading.

The chapters about his early life (pp. 1–22) are poignant and revealing. Similarly, his account of his tumultuous time as Cambodia's finance minister in the 1990s (pp. 63–88) is of interest, because Rainsy's Quixotic failure to clean up the country's system got him dismissed from office while his description of the 1997 grenade attack that almost killed him and did kill 20 of his supporters (pp. 93–97) is vivid, clear-headed and scary. Although it is clear that the attack emanated from Hun Sen, no charges were ever laid and the murders remain unsolved.

The rest of the book is padded out with details of Rainsy's marriage, his career as a banker in France, the support he has gathered in Western countries and the ups and downs of his political life. The memoir closes with a withering (and to my mind accurate) indictment of conditions in Cambodia today, followed by Rainsy's utopian proposals for "putting out the fire" once the opposition under his leadership might come to power.

Sam Rainsy was born into Cambodia's small Francophone elite in the closing years of the French Protectorate. His father, Sam Sary (1917–62) was a fiery, talented official who was a trusted confidant of Cambodia's flamboyant young leader, King (later Prince, later King again) Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012). Sary played a key role at the Geneva Conference in 1954, but by 1957, Sihanouk had become dissatisfied with him and named him Ambassador to the United Kingdom. A scandal there brought Sary home in disgrace. With his career paths blocked, Sary founded a pro-Western, quasi-republican newspaper titled *Sovereign People* and asked Sihanouk's permission to found an opposition party. By this point he had almost certainly received promises of clandestine foreign support, although Rainsy fails to say so in his book.

Sihanouk was enraged by Sary's behaviour. Fearing arrest, Sary fled to South Vietnam, where he was welcomed by the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and the anti-Sihanouk Khmer Serei movement. He died under mysterious circumstances in 1962, probably assassinated, Rainsy asserts, by his new patrons.

The family lingered in Phnom Penh in reduced circumstances until 1965, when Sihanouk, in an impromptu gesture, impulsively exiled them all. The family re-established themselves in Paris, relying on some of Sary's pre-1954 connections for financial support. When Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970, most of Rainsy's family returned to Cambodia. Rainsy stayed behind because he was happy in Paris and was courting Saumura Tioulong, the daughter of a high-ranking ex-Sihanouk official. Saumura, like Rainsy, was about to begin a successful banking career. The couple married in 1971.

Rainsy returned to Cambodia in December 1991, at the start of the UN-sponsored protectorate leading up to general elections. He was already affiliated with the royalist party known by its acronym FUNCINPEC, led by Sihanouk's eldest son Prince Norodom Rannaridh (1944-) a sleek, self-absorbed figure whom Rainsy has never been able to trust. FUNCINPEC campaigned in the 1993 elections against Hun Sen's Cambodian Peoples' Party (CPP), which had dominated Cambodian politics under various names since 1979. FUNCINPEC won the elections, but Hun Sen, threatening a civil war, forced the royalists into a bizarre coalition government with the CPP. Rainsy became finance minister.

Rainsy lasted barely a year before he was forced out after charging a powerful pro-government figure with corruption. A former Khmer Rouge official, trained in Paris in the 1950s, took Rainsy's place. In the aftermath, Rainsy was expelled from FUNCINPEC and removed

from the National Assembly. In 1995 he founded an opposition party, eventually named after him. Its popularity angered Hun Sen, who almost certainly engineered the grenade attack of 1997. In the following year, Rainsy's party gained 22 per cent of the vote and blocked the government from installing the National Assembly. Over the next five years, Rainsy continued in active opposition, drawing financial support from the Cambodian diaspora and political backing from the US Republican Party. Exiled to France by Hun Sen in 2010, he returned to contest the 2013 elections, where his newly named consolidated party the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) performed extremely well, and perhaps even better than the published results.

Where the memoir and his campaigns suffer is in his unwillingness or inability to say how the civil service, police and army in a government he hopes to command will switch loyalties, abandon patronage networks and be paid for when he comes to power. What will happen to Hun Sen? What will happen to the deeply entrenched CPP? Finally, how does Rainsy expect to come to power? A "Cambodia spring" is unthinkable, as is extensive foreign support.

Like many campaign biographies, *We Didn't Start the Fire* is an exercise in wishful thinking. Unlike most unsuccessful candidates, however, Rainsy is worth knowing, via these pages, because he shows no signs of abandoning the fight. His vigorous, almost contemptuous opposition to Hun Sen — whom he accuses of having no vision for Cambodia whatsoever — and his heartfelt promises of cleansing, fast-moving *change*, are immensely appealing, in the short term at least, to a great many Cambodian people.

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