

BOOK REVIEWS

***Hun Sen's Cambodia.* By Sebastian Strangio. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014. Hardback: 322pp.**

It is a striking fact that until the publication of Sebastian Strangio's excellent book in 2014 there was no serious study available of Hun Sen, the former Khmer Rouge soldier who is Cambodia's most notable politician and the world's longest serving prime minister. I make this judgement fully aware of H.C. and J.B. Metha's *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen* (2013), which, while useful from the point of view of chronology, is essentially hagiographic in character.

There are probably several reasons why a critical biography of Hun Sen has not appeared previously, apart from the consideration that a "frank and fearless" text might lead to an author's finding it difficult to return to Cambodia. Foremost among other reasons, in my judgement, has been the difficulty Western commentators on contemporary Cambodian politics have faced in reconciling Hun Sen's remarkably successful career — at least up to date — and the means that he has used to achieve success. For without doubt Hun Sen has been an authoritarian leader who has presided over a system deeply marked by impunity and corruption, and who has sanctioned brutality directed against his political opponents. In short, for many observers he has not proved to be an attractive subject to describe. The limits to his appeal apply for both Western and Asian observers as even Lee Kuan Yew once spoke of Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) colleagues as "utterly merciless and ruthless, without humane feelings". Against this lack of attraction has been Hun Sen's capacity to stay in power. One of the strengths of Strangio's analysis is his readiness to recognize

Hun Sen's political skills while remaining critical of the goals to which they have been directed. He rightly notes Hun Sen's success as a populist politician in a traditional Cambodian style as he acts in a fashion remarkably similar to that of Cambodia's long-time leader, Norodom Sihanouk (pp. 97–98 and 105). What may seem boringly long speeches to Western observers are more like entertainment for his audiences and until very recently the distribution of largesse in the countryside has compensated for the antagonism aroused among urban opponents of the CPP for its permissive attitude towards land grabbing in the countryside and in the capital.

Throughout Sebastian Strangio's carefully annotated discussion he chooses the word "mirage" as suggesting a leitmotif for understanding what has happened during Hun Sen's prime ministership, and why. For the Western community that underwrites Cambodia's economy, the "mirage" of achievement, the author argues, is substituted for reality. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the events following the United Nations-supervised elections of 1993. Despite its many advantages in the lead-up to the election, the CPP polled fewer votes and gained fewer seats in the national assembly than the royalist FUNCINPEC. Faced with this situation Hun Sen and his colleagues simply refused to cede power, demanding, and ultimately achieving, a settlement which saw the FUNCINPEC forced into sharing power and the remarkable existence of two co-prime ministers. Yet the international community cheered the apparent virtues of this development, which fell apart in the bloody events of 1997, when the CPP's putsch against the royalists sounded FUNCINPEC's death knell.

Strangio convincingly shows that what was true then and afterwards in Cambodian politics has been the case in almost all other aspects of contemporary Cambodian society. As his title for Chapter Five indicates, under Hun Sen's leadership there has been an example of Potemkin democracy. Economically, Hun Sen and his CPP associates have repeatedly given assurances to foreign aid donors of a readiness to reform, and then ignored those assurances once aid has been received. Yet the West continues to give aid knowing that China has shown its readiness to step into any financing breach caused by turning off the aid tap. Favoured associates benefit from a lack of any worthwhile system of public supervision of enterprises such as Sokimex, which has the lucrative franchise for running the Angkor Archeological Park, while a core group of Cambodian and Sino-Cambodian tycoons have risen in parallel with Hun Sen.

NGOs have not been immune from the readiness to accept the mirage that Strangio sees dominating Hun Sen's Cambodia. He quotes the perceptive words of Ou Virak, the president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, "Hun Sen is telling the donors ... don't bring up democracy.... The donors keep coming up with strategies to change the government from within.... The CPP is much smarter than that. But you don't really need to be smart to play the donors, because the donors don't really care about outcomes" (p. 227).

Nowhere has the mirage central to Strangio's analysis been more apparent than in relation to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia or ECCC). Debate exists as to whether in its present and limited form this tribunal has played a worthwhile role, but there is no room for debate over the fact that it exists in its present form because Hun Sen was determined that there should be no full-scale effort to prosecute those who committed crimes against humanity during the Khmer Rouge regime. In Chapter Twelve, "UNTAC Redux", Strangio details the sorry story of the ECCC and its many failings.

Whether Hun Sen's grip on power in Cambodia has been seriously loosened by the election results of 2013 — which saw Sam Rainsy's Cambodian National Rescue Party win an unexpectedly large number of seats — is a matter for the future. For the moment, and as a detailed and perceptive account of Hun Sen's Cambodia, Strangio's book will remain of fundamental importance for many years to come.

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