

***Beyond Democracy in Cambodia: Political Reconstruction in a Post-Conflict Society.* Edited by Joakim Öjendal and Mona Lilja. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009. Softcover: 320pp.**

Editors Joakim Öjendal and Mona Lilja have assembled a thought-provoking series of essays, each of which casts light on a particular aspect of the weak Cambodian “hybrid” democracy, and offers suggestions on how Cambodia might be made a freer, less unequal and fairer society. The collection includes a knowledgeable chapter by Caroline Hughes on elections and political legitimacy; a cogent essay by Kheang Un on the judiciary and the separation of powers; a piece by Kim Sedara and Öjendal on the potential of local government to spread democracy; an optimistic chapter by Lilja on the effects of globalization on women’s participation in politics; and a contribution by John Marston on the role of the Buddhist *Sangha* in building respect for human rights. Lilja and Öjendal conclude with a chapter on the future directions of what they call “Hybrid Democracy” in Cambodia. The chapters by Khmer scholars are also proof that despite being governed by a system fraught with corruption and cynicism, Cambodian intellectuals are seeking ways in which to improve the lives of their fellow citizens.

The Third World is full of examples of failed democratic experiments, of thinly disguised autocracies ruled by strong men. Seventeen years after the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) oversaw free elections, Hun Sen’s Cambodia is a case in point. The ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) holds the country in a vice. Corruption and patronage are ubiquitous and start at the top. The legal system is in shambles. The poor are abused as they always were. Education and social welfare is largely funded by overseas aid, leaving the kleptocratic government free to focus on “security” and economic development which largely benefits the rich and overseas interests. All this takes place behind a democratic façade.

The UNTAC intervention epitomized the euphoria which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the time, the Free World enthusiastically embraced Fukuyama’s the “End of History” thesis: the United States was the model for the rest of the world, so if Cambodia could have free elections, a liberal constitution, and a liberalized economy, then success would be assured. It is worth bearing in mind — and this volume does not say so — that the comparatively stable democracies in Europe, North America and

Australasia took centuries to emerge, and here too democratic rights were seldom freely conceded by the ruling classes. What, then, were the chances of a democratic system taking root in poverty-stricken Cambodia, a state which lacked a strong democratic tradition, and which had come perilously close to becoming a failed state at the beginning of the 1990s?

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Cambodia was an almost bankrupt pariah state. It had endured almost two decades of war, carpet bombing, mass fratricidal murder, social and economic dislocation, foreign intervention and punishing isolation. Suddenly, with the end of the Cold War in sight, a solution to the intractable problem of Cambodia seemed possible. The UN donned the mask of peacemaker. Brokering a truce between the warring Cambodian factions, the UN created UNTAC and charged it with the formidable task of rebuilding a shattered society, reconciling the factions, and introducing democracy and the rule of law.

The UN meant well but it seriously underestimated the problems facing the country. They imposed democracy in one “big bang” (Chapter 4, “Decentralization as a Strategy for State Reconstruction in Cambodia”, p. 102). This would be done without consideration of the fact that “for countries coming out of an internal war, democratic values are not widespread, institutions are not developed, and few powerful internal interests are prepared to defend ‘democracy’...” (Sedara and Öjendal, p. 101). Civil society, too, was weak. On paper, Cambodia now boasts many of the attributes of democracy. There are regular and fairly free elections contested by three major political parties. The Constitution guarantees civil rights, the rule of law and the separation of powers, yet as Kheang Un shows us in his meticulously written chapter, the judiciary is weak, inefficient, inadequately educated and often incompetent. This is partly a result of a lack of resources common in poor countries, but it also results from webs of patronage and the indifference of the government. As one Khmer legal official put it: “In Cambodia the court is independent to the extent that the government wants it to be self-sufficient.” The executive regularly meddles in the affairs of the judiciary, even overturning its decisions. Defence lawyers dare not argue too aggressively for their clients for fear that they “might lose even their underwear” (p. 79). One judge, Sok Sethamony, was murdered in a crowded city street in broad daylight in 2003, probably because he displayed too great an independence. For poor Cambodians, the “judge’s black robe ... is another hated uniform of another establishment tool” (p. 73).

Not surprisingly, given their powerlessness, ordinary Cambodians seem resigned, cynical and apathetic. They are aware that Hun Sen, like his predecessors, rules by force rather than moral right. Cynicism is corrosive. Realistic as it may be, it kills the dream that things could ever be different. Caroline Hughes cites an Asia Foundation survey which indicated that only 28 per cent of voters said that they were swayed by a party's policies or ideology (p. 60). Stripped of dreams, many voters accept the CPP claim that the alternative is violent chaos, that "any state is better than a failed state", ignoring the fact that "it is the CPP itself which is the organization most likely to cause such chaos" (pp. 63–64).

Nevertheless, there are some grounds for hope. The CPP has been unable to win an absolute majority of votes (47.4 per cent in 2003 compared to the opposition FUNCINPEC's 42 per cent), although it dominates the countryside (p. 65). Kim Sedara and Joakim Öjendal, also note that local (*khum*) government tends to be less corrupt and closer to the people than the national administration, and wonder if decentralization might be a viable strategy for reconstruction in Cambodia (Chapter Four). This would appear to be the view of many Khmers, 87 per cent of whom believed that communal councillors respected ordinary people, 92 per cent of whom agreed that they genuinely tried to solve their problems (p. 117). Similarly, Mona Lilja argues in Chapter 5 that globalization and the penetration of western ideas have led women to challenge traditional views restricting women's place in political affairs.

Arguably, the creation of a viable civil society is a crucial ingredient of any genuine democracy and the idea is mentioned from time to time in the book. As the authors show, it is poverty which creates Cambodia's problems and it is the poor who suffer the most from the deficiencies and abuses of the system. There is nothing new in this and to me, nothing much will really change until the poor begin to organize themselves autonomously to demand real as opposed to paper rights. For this reason, I think the book would have been enhanced had it included some examination of the potential for change *from below*, via such bodies as trade unions, peasant leagues and women's organizations along the lines mapped out by the World Social Forum.

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