

***Cambodia Votes*. By Michael Sullivan. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016. Softcover: 341pp.**

Elections in Cambodia present something of a paradox. On the one hand, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his long-ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) enjoy massively lopsided advantages over their opponents. The CPP controls the security forces, the civil service and the press, as well as the state institutions tasked with administering the electoral process — all of which have helped guarantee its victory in the past four national polls. On the other hand, Cambodian elections have never become entirely meaningless rituals. At the last election in July 2013, the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) saw a huge surge of public support that slashed the CPP's majority in the 123-seat National Assembly from ninety seats to just sixty-eight. While the CPP escaped with a narrow, albeit contested, victory, it now faces serious challenges in extending its power beyond commune elections this June, and national polls in mid-2018.

This tension is the subject of Michael Sullivan's book *Cambodia Votes*, his highly readable account of Cambodia's "authoritarian elections" since 1993. "Over the preceding two decades", he writes, "internationally supported elections in Cambodia have been the central mechanism through which Hun Sen and the CPP have legitimized, maintained, and reproduced their authoritarian grip on political-economic power. At the same time, elections have been the principal instrument through which political and civil opposition have persistently struggled to challenge Hun Sen's system of governance" (p. 284).

Sullivan, a former director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, writes that Cambodia's electoral paradox originated with the Paris Peace Agreements, signed in October 1991, which sought to end the civil war that had raged between the CPP and three resistance factions since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. To implement the terms of the Paris accords, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established, a \$2 billion peacekeeping operation tasked with disarming the factions, repatriating refugees and holding multi-party elections. From its very conception, then, Cambodia's electoral system was unusual for the extent to which it was infused

by outside influence of various kinds. As Sullivan writes of the UN-administered 1993 election, “never before had national elections in a sovereign state been conceived, planned, and organized by foreigners to the extent they had been in Cambodia” (p. 1).

The problem, as Sullivan acknowledges, is that the Paris Agreements were “foisted upon the Cambodian factions by powerful outside forces” with little understanding of the country’s social and political realities (p. 36). For instance, the treaty never had much buy-in from the four factions, whose political interests remained incompatible and unresolved. This was demonstrated in the aftermath of the 1993 election. Despite the CPP’s use of violence and intimidation to help swing the result in its favour, the Cambodian people turned out in large numbers and voted for Funcinpec, a royalist party led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh. Rather than accepting the result, however, Hun Sen and the CPP claimed voter fraud, threatened a secession of the country’s eastern provinces, and thereby blustered their way into a coalition in which Hun Sen served as “second prime minister” to Ranariddh’s “first”.

This was followed by a fresh struggle for power within the government. This reached a crescendo in July 1997, when Hun Sen’s forces launched a violent *coup de force* and seized de facto power. Fresh elections in 1998, backed by most foreign aid donors despite widespread violence and intimidation, would merely formalize and legitimize the CPP’s control. Since then, Hun Sen has used force and guile to bend Cambodia’s democratic system to his will. To mollify foreign donor constituencies, he has maintained an outward adherence to democratic norms, including regular elections, behind which the CPP runs the country through a ductile and decentralized form of patrimonial rule that exists outside and above formal political institutions. As Sullivan writes, national elections in 2003 and 2008, and commune elections in 2002 and 2007, followed much the same pattern as 1998: CPP victories, accompanied by “intimidation, violence, and killings... [and] the misuse of state resources, especially the media” (p. 295).

As Sullivan writes, the international reaction to the subversion of Cambodia’s electoral system was muted. After UNTAC, donors like the United Nations Development Programme and the European Union had offered large amounts of financial and technical

support to improve Cambodia's electoral process. *Cambodia Votes* provides an unparalleled account of the nature of this support, and the complex dynamics that arose between donors and the Cambodian government. Despite the mounting evidence that the CPP had little interest in elections in which its own victory was not assured, donor officials were reluctant to confront the government openly, either taking the government's promises at face value, or making a pragmatic decision to prioritize political stability over democratic progress. It was only by the time of the CPP's landslide victory in the 2008 election that donors recognized that their efforts "had, for all intents and purposes, failed" (p. 300).

Could things have gone otherwise? While it is true that "technical interventions alone would not move Cambodia in a democratic direction" (p. 201), it is far from clear what would have succeeded. Sullivan is critical of foreign donors not only for their hypocritical accommodations, but also on the implied assumption that there was an alternative path that would have prevented Cambodia from slipping into authoritarianism. It is hard, however, to see how foreign actions could have fundamentally remolded the normative mindset of Cambodia's political class. The experience of the past two decades suggests that outside pressure would in the long run have produced not more democracy, but simply more elaborate contrivances of "adherence" to democratic norms.

One possible alternative was for donors to withhold support altogether; but as Sullivan admits, continuing international engagement, however spineless, is one reason that Cambodia's elections have never become completely devoid of meaning. Because of the CPP's need for aid and external legitimacy, it has had to conduct elections that are at least minimally free; and no matter how much the CPP controls at election-time, Sullivan argues that it can never prevent a repressive social and political system from being "on display" to an increasingly skeptical public. As demonstrated by the 2013 election, to which he devotes a detailed chapter, elections have provided a crucial site of political contestation, and thus "hold out the possibility of positive social and political change" (p. 301).

Whether this is the outcome in 2018 is, of course, impossible to predict. One thing omitted from Sullivan's analysis is the rise

of Chinese influence in Cambodia, which has reduced the CPP's reliance on Western support and could conceivably embolden Hun Sen to use greater degrees of force to maintain his hold on power. But the key question, as Sullivan notes, is whether a sclerotic CPP can win over a young, increasingly restive population. If not, its days in power may be numbered.

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