

Hun Sen’s Consolidation of Personal Rule and the Closure of Political Space in Cambodia

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The crackdown on the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) that began in 2017 marks the abandonment of even the veneer of democracy in Cambodia. While previous work has identified China’s support for the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and the electoral threat posed by the CNRP’s popularity as major factors explaining the turn towards a more assertive authoritarianism, this article highlights the importance of changes within the CPP to understand the speed and extent of political closure in the country. It re-examines Hun Sen’s more than three decades of rule to argue that, contrary to existing interpretations, he succeeded in fully consolidating personal control of the regime only after the death of CPP President Chea Sim in 2015 and the consequent collapse of the long-standing factional divide in the party. This final removal of internal constraints on Hun Sen’s personal rule implies that a compromise solution to the crackdown is unlikely, and that political change through institutional channels in Cambodia is now becoming an increasingly remote possibility.

Keywords: Cambodia, Hun Sen, authoritarianism, personalism.

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Although democracy has always been more of a chimera than a reality in Cambodia, for many observers the dramatic escalation of repression in 2017 marked a turn away from even the illusion of democracy towards “outright dictatorship”.¹ The crackdown, initiated shortly after the local commune elections in June, began with the closure of media and non-governmental organizations, including the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia radio stations, the US-backed National Democracy Institute and the English-language newspaper *The Cambodia Daily*, which had been highly critical of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s government.² Shortly afterwards, opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) leader Kem Sokha was arrested on trumped-up charges, without a warrant and in violation of his parliamentary immunity.³

The crackdown culminated in the formal dissolution of the CNRP on 16 November 2017, with the party’s national assembly seats and commune council positions redistributed — mostly to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) — and its senior officials banned from politics for five years.⁴ Mu Sochua, who had taken over as party leader following the arrest of Kem Sokha, was forced to flee the country along with a number of other senior party figures, while former leader Sam Rainsy has been threatened with treason charges and remains in exile in France.⁵ The CPP followed up with a campaign of intimidation and coerced defections against CNRP members at the grassroots level, with Hun Sen ordering officials to “break the legs” of the party.⁶ With civil society cowed by the crackdown and the remaining opposition parties not presenting a serious challenge to the CPP, Cambodia is currently undergoing a period of political closure that is unprecedented since the end of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) administration and the elections that were supposed to bring multiparty democracy to the country in 1993.

In explaining these developments, existing analysis has emphasized two main factors. The first is the increasingly prominent role of China as an economic and diplomatic backer of the Hun Sen regime.⁷ This support, together with declining pressure for democratization from Western governments, has given Hun Sen greater freedom to manoeuvre against domestic challenges to his position. The second is the emergence for the first time in years of an opposition party capable of challenging the CPP’s hold on power.⁸ Not only did the CNRP perform far better than the CPP had anticipated in the 2013 general election — securing 44.5 per cent

of the vote against the CPP's 48.8 per cent — but the subsequent months-long protest campaign in Phnom Penh over the allegedly fraudulent result was the largest display of mass mobilization that Cambodia has seen since the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. The CNRP's strong performance in the 2017 local elections further signalled that the party continued to pose a serious threat to the CPP's ability to convincingly win the 2018 general election.

This article adds to this analysis by highlighting the importance of internal changes within the CPP in explaining the nature and extent of the crackdown. It argues that the death of Senate President Chea Sim in June 2015, while receiving little attention from the outside world,⁹ marked a major turning point in Cambodian politics, as his passing effectively removed the final limitations on Hun Sen's personal power from within the regime. Following this, Cambodia has transitioned from what this article refers to as a power-sharing regime, in which Hun Sen faced internal constraints on his rule, to personal autocracy, where these constraints are effectively absent and he now is able to rule almost entirely at his own discretion.¹⁰

This transition has important consequences for how the political situation is likely to evolve. Past episodes of repression have typically been followed by negotiation and some form of compromise with political opponents, albeit always on terms favourable to Hun Sen and the CPP. Yet with Hun Sen no longer moderated by the need to balance competing interests inside or outside the regime, a compromise solution that would allow space to challenge his dominance is now highly unlikely. The article thus highlights the importance of changes in the balance of power within the CPP in understanding likely future trajectories for Cambodian politics.

The article begins by setting out the conceptual framework, drawn from research on comparative authoritarianism, in which regimes can be divided into power-sharing or personal autocracy based on the relative balance of power between autocrats and their elite allies. It then examines power struggles within the CPP since Hun Sen first took power in 1985, highlighting the marked shift in the ruling coalition that has taken place since Chea Sim's death and arguing that this represents a critical juncture in Cambodia's recent political history, as it is the first time that Hun Sen has gained outright control over both the party and the state apparatus. It then discusses the implications of this shift in the context of the ongoing closure of political space in Cambodia.

Conceptual Framework: Power-sharing and Personal Autocracy

In order to maintain their rule, authoritarian leaders rely on the support of a broad governing network, including the military and internal security forces, political parties, the state bureaucracy, business leaders, the media, academia and other areas of society.¹¹ Within this network is the ruling coalition, the leader's core group of supporters who together wield substantial political power.¹² In Cambodia, this group consists primarily of upper levels of the CPP, most of whom defected from the Khmer Rouge in 1977 or gained their positions during the Vietnamese occupation of the country from 1979 to 1989. To obtain this support, leaders agree to share the benefits of holding power, such as influence over policy, profits from natural resource exploitation and opportunities for bribery and graft.¹³ As well as enabling access to resources and decision-making, leaders will also typically maintain functioning legislatures and governing councils, share key government posts among different factions of the political elite, and accept both formal and informal limits on their own decision-making authority. These institutional characteristics allow elites to monitor the leader's commitment to continue sharing power and can assist them in coordinating to remove the leader if this commitment begins to look doubtful.¹⁴

In this article these forms of authoritarian government are referred to as power-sharing regimes. Although institutional features vary, their defining characteristic is that the ruler of the regime is not able to act entirely as they see fit in relation to the ruling coalition.¹⁵ Although they may be powerful in regard to those outside the regime, within the regime they must take the interests of other centres of power into account when making decisions, either because of institutional limits on their position or as a pragmatic response to the status quo distribution of power.¹⁶ These centres may include individual elites who have independent political or economic power as well as larger groupings, factions or autonomous institutions within the regime. In Cambodian politics, the most relevant competing centre of power constraining Hun Sen was the former faction centred on Chea Sim and associated with other influential figures such as Heng Samrin, Sar Kheng, and Say Chhum, although prior to his abdication in 2004 the monarchy under King Norodom Sihanouk played an important role as well.

Although the vast majority of authoritarian regimes begin with power-sharing arrangements, these are not always stable, and can be

subverted by ambitious autocrats who wish to acquire more power for themselves or deter potential threats from powerful rivals within the regime.¹⁷ Autocrats can gain power at the expense of their elite allies by carrying out overt power grabs, such as eliminating term limits or purging rivals, or by more gradually building up their own support base while undermining those of others by filling core ministries with supporters, modifying internal rules, and diverting resources and authority away from rivals, tactics that Dan Slater labels “packing, rigging, and circumventing”.¹⁸

Attempting to personalize power is risky, often triggering coup attempts from within the military or ruling coalition.¹⁹ Indeed, the abortive coup attempt in Cambodia in 1994, discussed below, is alleged to have stemmed from dissatisfaction with Hun Sen's increasing influence within the CPP.²⁰ Yet, if successful, personalization may result in the elimination or undermining of rival elite coalitions, autonomous institutions, or constitutional or other institutional constraints that had limited the ruler's authority, allowing the ruler to concentrate power over decision-making, coercion, and the distribution of resources in their own hands.²¹ In doing so leaders typically gain full personal control of drafting and passing legislation, establish parallel security and intelligence agencies that bypass regular security force hierarchies, gain complete authority over government appointments and carry out personnel rotations in the government and military.²² This article refers to these forms of government as personal autocracy; while only a minority of leaders ever achieve this level of power, those who do often remain in office until they die or are forced to retire by ill health.²³

While institutional characteristics may vary across cases, the defining characteristic of personal autocracy is that autocracy leaders are not constrained in their decision-making by the need to take competing interests within the regime into account, or indeed any other kind of rules-based procedures or institutional limits.²⁴ Intra-elite ties and independent bases of power are weakened to the extent that the ruling coalition becomes largely atomized; that is while it still retains power and influence as a group, the overwhelming perception that any individual can be removed at the autocrat's discretion makes it difficult for elites to collectively agree on an alternative to the status quo.²⁵ This can be described as a “hub and spokes” system, where the autocrat is at the centre of all things and elites only retain their positions at his or her pleasure.²⁶ In this context, autocrats are able to act largely as they see fit in relation to the ruling coalition. Prominent examples of leaders who created

personal autocracies include Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Indonesia's Suharto, the Kim dynasty in North Korea, Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mobutu Sese Seko in the Congo, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, to name a few; all succeeded in completely dominating politics within their respective regimes at some point during their rule.

While previous observers have highlighted the personal characteristics of Hun Sen's rule,²⁷ conceptualizing authoritarian regimes as consisting of two distinct types — those where elites can effectively constrain the autocrat, and those where they cannot — provides a new perspective on Cambodian politics. For example, while other common regime typologies can have difficulties identifying transitions from one form to another,²⁸ the focus on whether a power grab has allowed the autocrat to fully supersede institutional or other internal limitations provides a clear demarcation line between the two regime types. It also highlights the need to go beyond surface perceptions of dominance to examine, as much as is possible, power dynamics behind the scenes.²⁹ Indeed, despite its significant efforts to project an image of unity, for most of its history the CPP has featured deep divisions, with little mutual trust at the elite level and no clear unifying ideology or principle.³⁰ Hun Sen himself has been unpopular with many in the party for much of his career; a former government minister, when asked whether senior party members are loyal to Hun Sen, stated emphatically that they are not, but that they merely — to use a Khmer expression — “swallow the hard stone”, cooperating unhappily for the sake of their positions.³¹

Prior to 2015, this internal conflict fell primarily along factional lines within the CPP, with one faction centred on Hun Sen and the other on former Senate President Chea Sim and core supporters of his, including his brother-in-law and Minister of the Interior Sar Kheng. This divide has been one of the main limits on Hun Sen's decision-making power and personal authority throughout his time in power. Indeed, there are few other figures or institutions within Cambodia that have ever been able to provide similar checks. The former king, Norodom Sihanouk, was independently powerful but lost all influence when he abdicated in 2004.³² His successor, King Norodom Sihamoni, is apolitical; indeed, his selection as heir may have been supported by the CPP for precisely this reason.³³ The leadership of the Buddhist *sangha*, or monastic community, is dominated by the CPP, and does not overtly interfere in politics,

while other institutions of government such as the judiciary have virtually no independence from CPP control.³⁴

Hence power-sharing in Cambodia has primarily been a pragmatic response to the conflictual factional division within the CPP, which has placed limits on Hun Sen's ability to act without facing internal constraints. The following section describes the origins of this divide and explains how the balance of power has evolved over time. It examines several episodes that are commonly cited as power-grabs by Hun Sen, concluding that they did not result in the complete breakdown of power-sharing. It then contrasts Hun Sen's decision-making ability before and after the death of Chea Sim — and the consequent collapse of his faction — in mid-2015, showing that this point is a critical juncture in Cambodia's recent political history, one which marks the final collapse of power-sharing into full personal autocracy.

Cambodia's Contested Balance of Power

The factional divide in the CPP originated in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) period, when Cambodia was occupied by Vietnam following the ousting of the Khmer Rouge government in 1978. Khmer Rouge cadres who had defected to Vietnam in 1977, and who formed a major part of the new government, took advantage of the situation to construct extensive patron-client networks in areas under their control.³⁵ Chea Sim was particularly adept at building and promoting his patronage network, and by 1981 had built a loyal force of "children and grandchildren", as they were referred to, by appointing hundreds of former Khmer Rouge cadres to government positions.³⁶ Concerned by this accumulation of independent power, the Vietnamese removed him from his post as interior minister and gave him the primarily ceremonial role of president of the national assembly; however, he retained substantial informal influence in the government.³⁷ Hun Sen was likewise opportunistic in building a personal power base in the foreign ministry, which he headed from 1979 to 1984. Although he accepted the tutelage of his Vietnamese "teacher", ambassador to Cambodia Ngo Dien, when it came to appointments, he maintained control over decisions and was able to fill the ministry with talented young people who were loyal to him personally.³⁸

Initially, the Vietnamese leadership relied primarily on Cambodian communists who had been trained in Hanoi to maintain their influence over the new regime, seeing the Khmer Rouge defectors as

valuable but untrustworthy.³⁹ From this group Pen Sovan was appointed to be the PRK's first prime minister in 1981, with policy decisions dictated by Le Duc Tho, the leader of Vietnamese occupation forces in Cambodia.⁴⁰ After six months, however, Pen Sovan was arrested and imprisoned in Hanoi. Although he himself attributed his fall to rivalry with Hun Sen and a dispute with Le Duc Tho over the number of Vietnamese troops stationed in Cambodia, Vietnamese sources have stated that Pen Sovan was removed for abusing his position for personal gain and harbouring too much ambition for dictatorial power.⁴¹

However, although independent political power had been unacceptable to the Vietnamese in the early stages of the PRK, by the time Pen Sovan's successor Chan Sy died in 1984, the Vietnamese leadership was looking more actively for ways to disengage from Cambodia and had found the Hanoi-trained revolutionaries unable to build enough local support to retain power on their own. Despite their association with the Pol Pot regime, the Khmer Rouge defectors had the ability to maintain control without direct Vietnamese support, and so Hun Sen was appointed prime minister in 1985.⁴² From the mid-1980s onwards, the Khmer Rouge defectors increasingly dominated Cambodian politics, with the Hanoi-trained revolutionaries largely excluded from power. Within the CPP itself — known at the time as the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) — the most influential figures could be associated with either Chea Sim (often grouped together with Heng Samrin) or Hun Sen.⁴³ During Hun Sen's early years of rule, however, factional conflict was limited, with struggles in the regime focusing more on ideology versus pragmatism in rebuilding the state.⁴⁴

Internal Power Struggles

Despite the initial lack of conflict, by the early 1990s the Hun Sen faction was becoming more prominent, and Hun Sen himself had grown in influence within the party.⁴⁵ During the deadlock over the CPP's refusal to accept its loss to the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) party in the 1993 election which ended the UNTAC administration, for example, Chea Sim attempted to gain the position of second prime minister.⁴⁶ In the final deal, however, the position went to Hun Sen. Aggrieved at Hun Sen's increasing personal power, National Security Minister Sin Song, senior interior ministry official Sin Sen and Prince Norodom Chakrapong launched

a poorly-organized coup attempt on 2 July 1994, with the alleged support of senior members of the Chea Sim faction.⁴⁷ The coup is reported to have been used as a pretext for Hun Sen to make what has been labelled “a crucial power grab”:⁴⁸ aware of Chea Sim and Sar Kheng’s likely complicity in the coup plot, Hun Sen allegedly pressured them to accept the appointment of a close ally, Hok Lundy, as head of the national police in exchange for not pursuing the issue, thus supposedly gaining control over the most powerful coercive agency in the country at the time.⁴⁹

This interpretation, however, somewhat oversimplifies the circumstances and consequences of Hok Lundy’s appointment. A former adviser to Hun Sen, for example, states that the appointment was in fact a consensus decision made with the backing of Chea Sim and Sar Kheng, who thought that they would be able to control Hok Lundy.⁵⁰ In fact, while Hok Lundy indeed initially worked to undermine Sar Kheng’s control of the national police, he soon began to assert his independence and show signs of ambition for Hun Sen’s own position.⁵¹ He was also suspected of being involved in the drug trade and a number of high-profile killings, and was seen as a liability by other members of the CPP.⁵² Hun Sen attempted to constrain Hok Lundy by supporting a number of his rivals, but was largely unsuccessful in completely controlling him until his untimely death in 2008.⁵³ Thus, although the appointment of Hok Lundy initially weakened Chea Sim and Sar Kheng vis-à-vis Hun Sen, subsequent events show that he was not an obedient loyalist but himself a competing centre of power within the regime, giving Hun Sen only contested control over the national police.

Another apparent power grab took place in July 1997, when fighting broke out in Phnom Penh between Hun Sen’s personal bodyguard unit and FUNCINPEC forces. Widely denounced as a coup by Hun Sen, in reality it represented the result of months of mutual provocation between FUNCINPEC and the CPP.⁵⁴ There was also a factional element to the conflict. In response to the 1994 coup attempt, as well as the build-up of FUNCINPEC military strength, Hun Sen had increased the size of his bodyguard unit to 1,500 troops equipped with heavy weaponry.⁵⁵ When the possibility of military action against FUNCINPEC was raised, Chea Sim and his allies, including head of the armed forces General Ke Kim Yan, refused to support Hun Sen, who had been losing popularity in the CPP and was seen as unpalatable to voters.⁵⁶ During the conflict itself they refused to mobilize security forces under their command in support, with Hun Sen relying instead on his bodyguard unit

and the forces of a few supporters who backed military action. After Hun Sen's victory it was reported that the CPP members who had not cooperated sandbagged their houses and put their personal bodyguards on alert, allegedly in the expectation that they might be attacked next.⁵⁷

The 1997 conflict is often portrayed as a major turning point in Hun Sen's personalization of power, after which he was able to dominate the CPP and install powerful loyalists into prominent government positions.⁵⁸ Yet subsequent intra-party negotiations — not often mentioned in later accounts — indicate that power-sharing survived the conflict, with Hun Sen still facing constraints on his authority and decision-making power. In October 1997 the CPP held its fifth party congress, with widespread speculation in the lead-up to the meeting that Hun Sen would build on his victory to strengthen his position against Chea Sim or challenge him for control of the party.⁵⁹ However, while the CPP endorsed Hun Sen's actions in July, his proposal to add several loyalists to the party's standing committee was blocked due to objections by Chea Sim. He was also forced to withdraw proposed amendments to an electoral law, drafted by Sar Kheng, that would have strengthened his loyalist-dominated council of ministers against Sar Kheng's stronghold in the ministry of interior. Most significantly, the party congress agreed to return to "the classical way of managing the party", meaning collective decision-making by the standing committee.⁶⁰ The reassertion of collective decision-making and constraints exercised on moves by Hun Sen to strengthen his faction against Chea Sim hence show that the July 1997 conflict did not lead to a major breakdown of power-sharing in the CPP.

A third commonly-cited power grab occurred in 2004 when Hun Sen forced Chea Sim out of the country in order to pass legislation favourable to his own position. Following the 2003 general election, an alliance between opposition parties FUNCINPEC and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) — which had the overt or tacit support of King Norodom Sihanouk, the Chea Sim faction and civil society in Phnom Penh — posed a serious threat to Hun Sen's position, demanding substantial concessions that would have amounted to a "political death warrant" if he had agreed.⁶¹ Following a lengthy deadlock, Hun Sen instead proposed a deal to create new government positions for FUNCINPEC if they split the alliance. The deal required a constitutional amendment, which needed the signature of Chea Sim as acting head of state while King Sihanouk was out of the country. However, on the day he was due to sign

the deal he was escorted to the airport by police and flown to Thailand, supposedly for medical treatment.⁶² It was also reported that the night before, members of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit had been posted outside Chea Sim's residence.⁶³ FUNCINPEC minister Nhek Bun Chhay, next in line as acting head of state, signed the amendment instead, before Chea Sim returned to Cambodia the following week.

The event was a political humiliation for Chea Sim.⁶⁴ As noted at the time, it was also a highly unusual public display of disharmony in the CPP, although several days later the CPP broadcast on state television an informal and apparently friendly meeting between Hun Sen, Chea Sim and other leading members of the party as a show of unity.⁶⁵ Indeed, it stands out in retrospect as a remarkable rupture in the CPP's facade of cohesion, with no comparable public conflicts occurring in the years since. That Hun Sen was willing to make such an overt display of party disunity suggests that the move was a last-resort response to the severe threat that Chea Sim's support for the opposition posed to his political survival; from a more dominant position, it seems more plausible that he would have simply forced Chea Sim to sign, avoiding the public spectacle.

The ensuing effect on the balance of power is not entirely clear. Notably, Sar Kheng retained his position in the new government, although Hun Sen's "crony" Sok An was also promoted to the post of deputy prime minister.⁶⁶ Furthermore, there are only conflicting reports about whether appointments to the party's standing committee in January 2005 were dominated by Hun Sen or whether they reflected a balance of factional interests.⁶⁷ Despite Hun Sen's attempts to do so, Chea Sim was subsequently able to block him from promoting further core loyalists to the central committee over the next few years.⁶⁸ Hence, while the episode was an unusual public display of disunity in the CPP, and may indeed have been a blow to the Chea Sim faction, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that it resulted in the power-sharing agreement comprehensively breaking down into personal autocracy by the mid-2000s. Similarly, other more recent attacks on Chea Sim supporters, such as the arrest and imprisonment of his head bodyguard in 2011, weakened his faction but did not fully eliminate its political influence.⁶⁹

In addition to the relatively limited effect of episodes that have been characterized as power grabs by Hun Sen, there are also a number of areas where he continued to make concessions to other interests within the regime prior to 2015. Three examples stand out.

The first concerned military promotions. After the number of senior officers had rapidly expanded in the 2000s, Hun Sen temporarily called a halt to promotions around 2010.⁷⁰ When in spite of this he tried to promote his son Hun Manet — who had only received his first command in 2008 — to the third-highest rank of lieutenant general, other high-ranking officials objected, accusing him of favouritism and demanding that their children be promoted as well. Hun Sen was reportedly unhappy about this, but complied, maintaining a factional balance in further promotions.⁷¹ Sar Kheng's son, Sar Sokha, for example, was promoted at the same time as Hun Manet.⁷² Similarly, although Chea Sim's ally Ke Kim Yan was removed as head of the armed forces in 2009, several weeks after the death of Hok Lundy, he was shortly afterwards appointed to the post of deputy prime minister; due to Ke Kim Yan's widespread support in the military, this was possibly intended to avert the threat of internal conflict.⁷³

A second area where Hun Sen faced constraints was in policy-making, where he operated under a consensus-based decision-making process among the three *samdech*s [lords], himself, Chea Sim and Heng Samrin:

In the old days, before his [Chea Sim's] death, there was a triumvirate [...] Any big decisions must have the consensus of the three. Each can veto. The Soviet system, following Stalin.⁷⁴

Such collective decision-making mechanisms are a common feature of power-sharing autocracies, although they may not be easily observable from the outside. Tools like vetoes allow members of the ruling coalition to block unfavourable legislative or administrative decisions while providing clear signals of the autocrat's intention to further consolidate power if they are breached or ignored. In contrast, in personal autocracies vetoes over the autocrat's decisions by definition do not exist.

Thirdly, although Hun Sen had been the most publicly prominent figure in Cambodian politics since at least the early 1990s, he was not able to gain outright control of the CPP itself until 2015, with Chea Sim retaining the role of president until his death. As party president, Chea Sim resolved intra-party disputes that arose as a result of personal conflicts or turf wars over private interests, preventing them from erupting into regime destabilizing divisions and maintaining the appearance of unity.⁷⁵ But he also acted as a check on Hun Sen by preventing his attempts to replace older party members with younger cadres and limiting his ability to introduce

reform policies that would impact their interests or otherwise allow Hun Sen to exercise discretionary control over the party.⁷⁶ Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that Hun Sen was able to achieve the kind of dominance over the CPP that would be expected of a personalist dictator prior to 2015. As noted above, he was prevented from stacking the party leadership with loyalists in 1997 and there is only conflicting evidence that he did so in 2005, with no further major changes happening until after 2015.

Consolidation of Personal Autocracy

Although Chea Sim had been in poor health for several years prior to his death in June 2015, his continued presence meant that his faction retained some influence and ability to constrain Hun Sen as late as the early 2010s. His passing, however, marked a major turning point for the balance of power in the regime. Without his presence, his faction has fallen apart, as no-one else has been able to muster the kind of personal support required to replace him.⁷⁷ As a result, the former factional division in the CPP is now no longer a major factor in Cambodian politics, leaving Hun Sen as now the only meaningful centre of power in the regime.⁷⁸ The Cambodian government has hence been a fully established personal autocracy since 2015.

A symbolic example of Hun Sen's increased dominance following this point can be seen in the CPP's election campaigns. In the past, campaign posters had always featured images of Hun Sen, Chea Sim and Heng Samrin together. During the 2013 campaign, Hun Sen pushed to have these posters show only himself, or to have his portrait placed more prominently than the other two, but was prevented from doing so.⁷⁹ During the 2017 commune election campaign, however, Heng Samrin's portrait was notably absent from CPP posters, with Hun Sen's image shown alone.⁸⁰ Another symbolic example is the hagiographic documentary "Marching Towards National Salvation", released by the CPP in early 2018, which chronicles Hun Sen's defection from the Khmer Rouge and involvement in Vietnam's 1979 invasion of Cambodia.⁸¹ While Hun Sen is given the most prominence, influential defectors like Chea Sim and Heng Samrin are mentioned only in passing, and others who remain high-ranking members of the CPP, such as Men Sam On and Tea Banh, are not mentioned at all.⁸² This rewriting of history is suggestive of initial attempts at building the kind of personality cult seen in other personal autocracies

such as North Korea or China under Mao, as it creates a narrative lionizing Hun Sen as the most important figure in the “rescue” of the Cambodian nation from the Khmer Rouge. Indeed, personality cults are endemic to personal autocracies, as they reinforce the leader’s paramount political standing and send a clear message to potential challengers in the ruling coalition — as well as broader society — that there is only one person who counts, and they are firmly in control.⁸³

More concretely, after Chea Sim’s death Hun Sen immediately took over as president of the CPP, which gave him direct personal control over both government and party for the first time since 1985. It was noted at the time that gaining control of the party gave Hun Sen the leverage and freedom to ease out party veterans and introduce younger, “reform-minded” figures into key institutions;⁸⁴ in other words, to eliminate entrenched power-holders and replace them with less independent, more easily controlled party members. Indeed, in March 2016, not long after Chea Sim’s passing, Hun Sen carried out a major reshuffle of the CPP cabinet, making changes to leadership and senior positions in a number of ministries. Observers have attributed the reshuffle to the CPP’s poor performance in the 2013 election, with some criticizing it as being “cosmetic” rather than reflective of genuine government reform because many figures were simply moved into different positions.⁸⁵ However, such apparently superficial rotation of officials serves a distinct purpose in personal autocracies, as it prevents government ministers building up independent bases of loyalists in their ministries which could be used to mount a challenge, while simultaneously demonstrating the autocrat’s personal authority. Tellingly, the changes are alleged to have not gone through the normal CPP decision-making processes but were pushed by Hun Sen himself.⁸⁶

Other recent moves similarly reflect the kinds of actions typically taken by leaders of personal autocracies. For example, Hun Sen has recently announced plans to establish a separate intelligence agency — with a training institute for its members run by his son, Hun Manith — that could be used not only to monitor potential opposition but also to spy on Cambodia’s military and security forces to detect or deter potential subversive factions forming.⁸⁷ He has also announced his intention to take personal discretionary control of appointments to the executive branch, reducing its size (and consequent need for patronage) while also bypassing the national assembly, which currently needs to approve appointments.⁸⁸

These and other ongoing changes reflect a far more overt consolidation of personal control than Hun Sen had been able to carry out prior to the collapse of the rival Chea Sim faction.

Concluding Discussion: Implications of Personal Autocracy in Cambodia

This article uses the conceptual framework of power-sharing and personal autocracy to offer a new analytical lens for understanding Hun Sen's rule of Cambodia. Contrary to existing interpretations, it argues that he had not fully consolidated personal power until much later than has commonly been assumed, with a pragmatic power-sharing arrangement surviving, albeit tenuously, until the passing of Chea Sim in mid-2015. With the collapse of the factional divide, however, and with other centres of power outside the CPP long since rendered irrelevant, Hun Sen now no longer faces any constraints on his decision-making abilities. Cambodian politics has therefore entered a new phase, one in which Hun Sen is able to rule according to his personal whims to a far greater extent than at any previous point since the establishment of the current regime.

The main implication of this transition is that the current crisis is unlikely to play out in the same way as previous episodes of political closure. In what had appeared to be an established pattern, periods of repression — often in the lead-up to an election — were followed by an easing of restrictions and periods of relative openness, with the CPP relying on a combination of targeted violence and the exploitation of divisions in the opposition to maintain control. This was at least in part driven by Hun Sen's need to balance competing interests and preserve the relatively fragile balance of power; in 2003, for example, the possibility that the Chea Sim faction could have aligned itself with the FUNCINPEC-SRP alliance limited Hun Sen's room for manoeuvre, creating a lengthy deadlock that had to be resolved by co-opting FUNCINPEC at the SRP's expense. In contrast, while the regime has moved away from the overt violence of the 1990s and early 2000s, the sudden and largely unexpected elimination of the CNRP reflects the new political equilibrium in which Hun Sen faces no meaningful internal challenges to his authority and so can act quickly and decisively without fear of consequences for elite cohesion. Together with diplomatic support from China for a more assertive authoritarianism, and the relatively toothless response from Western governments and donors, the lack of moderating influences on Hun Sen from within

the regime thus implies that a compromise solution, one which would allow Sam Rainsy, Kem Sokha or Mu Sochua to return to the political arena, is now far more unlikely.

The establishment of personal autocracy is not without its risks. By marginalizing former centres of power within the regime, it can create grievances among sectors of the elite, who may then become willing to support an alternative to the status quo. There is some suggestion that this may have in fact played a role in prompting the crackdown. In the past Sam Rainsy has publicly claimed, for example, that he has a close working relationship with Sar Kheng.⁸⁹ Following the dissolution of the CNRP, he also claimed that the crackdown was precipitated by signs of a possible future *modus vivendi* between the CNRP and an unnamed faction of the CPP that was dissatisfied with Hun Sen's rule.⁹⁰ Although information on this is currently lacking, an alliance between the remnants of the CNRP and former Chea Sim-aligned figures — such as that threatened in the 2003–04 deadlock — could plausibly pose a threat to Hun Sen's continued dominance. Such an alternative ruling coalition could also potentially attract support from Vietnam, which, albeit a major supporter of the CPP, may be concerned about Hun Sen's increasingly close relationship with China and the implications this has for Vietnam's interests in the region.⁹¹ Yet, thus far there have been no outward signs of internal conflict within the CPP since Hun Sen's consolidation of personal control.

The establishment of personal autocracy can also affect the likelihood that an authoritarian regime survives mass protests. Terence Lee, for example, has argued that the autocrat's personal interference in the military can alienate junior officers who resent the breakdown of the professional military hierarchy or hit a promotion “ceiling” because they do not have the right connections, potentially leading them to refuse orders to repress protestors.⁹² Indeed, with no real possibility now for an opposition party to win elections, supporters of the CNRP may see nonviolent resistance as a way of pursuing their grievances, as occurred in 2013 and earlier in 1998. Hun Sen and the CPP's forceful propaganda drive against “colour revolution” since mid-2017 strongly suggests that he is aware of this risk and is taking it seriously. Yet although the CNRP remains widely popular in Cambodia, the persecution of its leadership and systematic destruction of its grassroots organizational structure have drastically limited its ability to effectively carry out a nonviolent resistance campaign, at least in the short to medium term.

Barring such an uprising, a more likely scenario is that Hun Sen remains in power until he is either forced to step down due to ill health or eventually dies in office.⁹³ Some signs point towards Hun Sen grooming one of his sons to take over as his successor; observers have pointed to Hun Manet, for example, who was appointed as Joint Chief of Staff of the Cambodian armed forces in March 2018, replacing former Chea Sim loyalist Kun Kim.⁹⁴ While previous attempts to promote Hun Manet met with opposition from within the CPP, as mentioned above, there have been no apparent signs of discord over his more recent appointments. However, succession is challenging in personal autocracies, as political authority becomes so closely associated with the ruler that it becomes very difficult for an alternative to take over.⁹⁵ Indeed, there are relatively few examples of leaders in modern personal autocracies successfully transferring power to a designated heir.⁹⁶ Even if Hun Sen plans to do so, it is likely to take years of planning and building support before such a transition could be negotiated, lending further credence to his stated intention of remaining in power for at least another ten years.⁹⁷

More generally, the implication of the transition to personal autocracy is that Cambodian politics is entering a new and potentially less stable era. Policy will now be more strongly guided by Hun Sen's individual concerns, including his need to prevent alternative centres of power from forming within the regime as well as deterring external challengers, than in earlier periods of the CPP's history. Moves towards greater efficiency, transparency or improved governance, for example, may happen, but only insofar as they do not affect Hun Sen's personal interests or ability to remain in power. Indeed, based on the experiences of other countries which have experienced personal autocracy, such as China under Mao, it is now more likely that Hun Sen will carry out courses of action that run counter to institutional interests, and those of Cambodian society as a whole.

NOTES

Acknowledgements: The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of participants who provided interview data, the coordinator who facilitated research in Cambodia, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the draft manuscript. Research for this article was supported by funding from the Rei Foundation Ltd. and the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.

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