

***Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism.* By Kheang Un. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. E-version: 84pp.**

Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism explains Cambodia's regime performance and evolution since 1993 when the United Nations (UN) intervened to help democratize the war-torn country. The author makes three pertinent arguments.

The first argument, which will not come as a surprise to those who closely follow political developments in Cambodia, is that the country's authoritarian regime has regressed from an electoral authoritarian regime to a hegemonic authoritarian one. Between 1993 and 2017, the government was an electoral authoritarian regime in which there was real contestation for power via regular multiparty elections, albeit with some restrictions on civil liberties and an uneven playing field. However, in 2017, when the government shut down the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), Cambodia became a hegemonic authoritarian regime in which the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), is able to achieve electoral success by controlling the political arena so as to contain any opposition party from competing for power. Indeed, the fact that the (CPP) won all 125 seats in parliament—for the first time since 1993—in the 2018 national election is clearly illustrative of the shift to a hegemonic authoritarian regime.

The second argument, which is rather original, is the author's explanation about *timing*—why the regime only reverted to full authoritarianism in 2017 and not before. Un asserts that there were no actors, internal or external, that seriously threatened the power base of the CPP during those 23 years. Therefore, the CPP granted some democratic space. However, by 2017, Un claims that a new variable had emerged, a formidable counter-movement which the CPP perceived as an existential threat. This counter-movement comprised a united opposition prior to the 2013 national election, citizens' rising political awareness enabled by sustained economic growth, a surge in political activism by massive community-based organizations (CBOs) and demographic change. In order to forestall the threat, the CPP closed all remaining democratic openings.

The final argument, which is not entirely new to keen observers of Cambodian politics but is elegantly explained and framed by the author, is *how* the CPP has managed to contain credible threats to regime survival by opening and closing democratic space as the

party sees fit. Un explains that the CPP has achieved its political objectives by building a party with strong organizational powers using patronage and rent seeking, and perpetuating a weak administrative structure which nevertheless retains strong coercive capabilities. The patronage-based CPP has dominated the state apparatus and deployed state institutions—including the security forces, the legislature, the electoral committee, the judiciary, the constitutional council, virtually all government ministries and subnational administrations—to effectively weaken the opposition while simultaneously consolidating its own power.

Despite these compelling arguments, the book contains three minor shortcomings. First, Un primarily attributes the rising popular political awareness, which the CPP considers as a regime-threatening factor, to sustained socio-economic development. However, the author fails to examine another key variable that could have given rise to this awareness—the unbroken string of multiparty elections since 1993. Cambodia held ten multiparty elections between 1993 and 2018—six at the national level (1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013 and 2018) and four at the local (commune/*sangkat*) level (2002, 2007, 2012 and 2017). The assumption that those elections did not produce any political awareness among citizens, a core component of the counter-movement, over the course of 25 years is problematic. Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated how regular elections in Cambodia, especially local ones, enhanced voters' political awareness and agency.¹

Second, in the conclusion, the author contradicts himself on the roles of the Western democratic community, which has pushed Cambodia to democratize, and China, whose political and economic support has enabled the CPP to resist Western pressure. Un's initial position is that the CPP itself, not the West or China, determines the trajectory of the regime, including whether to allow a degree of democratic space or not. Accordingly, Un asserts that the CPP accepts some political liberalization only if it does not challenge the status quo, or the party's political primacy. However, when the CPP's rule is threatened, the party reverts to authoritarianism to restore its political supremacy “with or without China's engagement” (p. 56)—a compelling argument. That is consistent with Un's argument elsewhere in the book that although China's support has contributed to the CPP's regression to a hegemonic authoritarian regime, its role is only complementary. But this argument is weakened in the conclusion when Un predicts

that if the costs of Western punitive actions become too high, and China's support is unable to cover such costs, "the electoral authoritarian pendulum can swing back" (p. 61).

Finally, while Un does a wonderful job in demonstrating how the CPP has handled both external and internal threats to secure its political dominance, his discussion on how the CPP rose to power in the first place is limited. Various scholars² have noted that powerful parties are strong at their inception, either because there are no strong challengers or because they are the strongest when formed and can maintain cohesion within their coalitions during critical times. Un devotes only one sentence to this aspect, possible due to space constraints (p. 33).

Despite these shortcomings, however, *Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism* makes a major contribution to the scholarship on electoral authoritarian regime change and performance in Cambodia and beyond.

NOTES

- ¹ Astrid Norén-Nilsson, "Elections and Emerging Citizenship in Cambodia", in *Citizenship and Democratization in Southeast Asia*, edited by Ward Berenschot, Henk Schulte Nordholt, and Schulte Nordholt (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), pp. 68–95; Joakim Öjendal and Sedara Kim, *Real Democratization in Cambodia? An Empirical Review of the Potential of a Decentralisation Reform* (Visby, Sweden: Swedish International Center for Local Democracy, 2011).
- ² Ruth Berins Collier, *Regimes in Tropical Africa: Changing Forms of Supremacy, 1945–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

SIVHUOCH OU is a Research Fellow at the Cambodia Development Resource Institute, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and a PhD Candidate in Political Science and International Development Studies at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Postal Address: #4, 649 Albert Street, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, N2L 3V5; email: sivhuoch@gmail.com.