

The Politics of Coercion: State and Regime Making in Cambodia.
By Neil Loughlin. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,
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Neil Loughlin attempts to solve a puzzle: How can a regime that has long been viewed with distrust by swathes of the population and persistently challenged by outspoken political opponents have successfully held onto power for so long? By tracing the evolution of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) over three intertwining periods from the mid-1970s, he argues that the answer is its carefully built and maintained monopoly of violence and coercion—its “most important strategic advantage” (p. 3).

By focusing on the CPP’s organizational structure and its methods of coercion, Loughlin convincingly challenges some of the views held by other scholars. Perhaps most importantly, he questions the widely held notion that patron-client relations are key to understanding the regime’s ability to maintain power over the military, private sector and the masses. Reciprocal relations between the CPP and the Cambodian people, let alone the development of mass-based support, he argues, have been impeded from the beginning by the ruling party’s inability to embed itself in society, its stewardship of an extractive and corrupt economy and its routine use of violence to advance the interests of the state and business tycoons. From this basis, Loughlin makes a decisive analytical shift, framing the CPP and the ruling Hun family not as personalist rulers but as overseers of a “coercive ruling coalition”, which consists of “political elites, many drawn from within the state’s coercive apparatus who, in close coordination with a group of state-dependent tycoons, came to control Cambodia’s politics and its economy” (p. 2).

The Politics of Coercion also rejects the idea that a political leader and not the system they built should be the primary focus when analysing Cambodia’s past and future political trajectory. Hun Sen, the prime minister between 1985 and 2023, when he handed down power to his eldest son, has undoubtedly been the central protagonist/antagonist in Cambodia’s political drama. However, the problem with how some scholars have written their scripts is that they have given little screen time to other actors, making it

difficult to discern how others ensure the regime's survival. Taking a different tact, Loughlin argues, for instance, that the CPP is not the "master" of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces but that the relationship is "symbiotic" (p. 101). By carefully mapping out how clan, business and political interests are concentrated in the hands of the military, business tycoons and party grandees, he also demonstrates the hollowness of Cambodia's democratic institutions and the futility in thinking that electoral contests can help one understand how power is distributed.

Although more awareness of these domestic, inter-elite "coalitions" is unlikely to dent Hun Sen's carefully crafted "strongman" image, it does help us appreciate the institutional factors determining the government's use of coercion. It explains why certain actors within the system feel emboldened to use coercion or violence or why they assume that it is justified. The system Hun Sen built does not necessarily need him to *order* every act of coercion; it creates an enabling context for other powerful actors. Significantly, moving from the personalist to the institutional exposes the areas where the ruling coalition has a weak grip on power. Indeed, *The Politics of Coercion* is most engaging when it widens its line of sight and situates the interactions and interests of the coercive elite into the wider socio-political context to highlight the regime's vulnerabilities. For instance, it shows how the regime's violent repossession of people's land (done in the interests of tycoons) "went hand in glove with the building of elite political alliances has also been key to its popular undoing electorally" (p. 61) or how the allocation of official jobs based on "connections" not "competence" (p. 105) during the CPP's dynastic succession process in 2023 led to tensions between the party and the military.

Readers familiar with contemporary Cambodian politics will appreciate the integration of key political events into a focused, historically grounded analytical narrative, which offers fascinating new insights into the relationship between violence and power. The passages on how military and political actors exploited business opportunities created by the UN Transitional Authority in the early 1990s to establish positions of dominance will interest political economists. These sections also contribute to debates on the political impact of peacekeeping economics.

The book's clear-eyed analysis of Cambodia's deeply entrenched illicit economy and the networks of elite actors that it sustains should put an end to naïve hopes that the CPP will impose democratizing reform by virtue of Cambodia having a new prime minister, Hun Manet. It will also be welcomed by the observers who have grown tired of Phnom Penh's repeated claims that strengthening relations with other countries will not only bring economic benefits for the elites and the masses but will improve the human rights and the lives of ordinary Cambodians.

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