

សងគ្រាយការការងាររាជការនគរាល់ខ្លួនក្នុងកម្ពុជា : ទ័សនារៈនិងការគិតថ្លែង

Cambodia from Civil Wars to Fragile Peace : A Secular Perspective



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Doi: 10.14456/jmcupeace.2016.21

บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้ว่าความขัดแย้งทางการเมืองจะได้ถูกลดระดับลงไปในระหว่างสองทศวรรษที่ผ่านมาแล้วก็ตาม การจะมีความมั่นคงทางการเมืองยังคงมีอยู่ให้เห็นเป็นส่วนมาก งานเขียนนี้ต้องการแสดงข้ออภิปรายเชิงประวัติศาสตร์โดยย่อเกี่ยวกับข้อขัดแย้งในกัมพูชาพร้อมกับความท้าทายในปัจจุบันในการได้มาซึ่งสันติสุขเชิงบวกในประเทศไทย

Abstract

The modern history of Cambodia is a tragic one, so much so that American historian David Chandler titled his well-known book “The Tragedy of Cambodian History”. The Indochina Wars during the second half of the 20th century had major impacts on Cambodia. Thanks to her geographical position in the region, it was virtually impossible for Cambodia not to be drawn into conflicts that were in essence proxy wars of the hegemonic rivalry of major powers during the Cold War. Between 1955 and 1993, Cambodia had gone through several regime changes, none of which was peaceful. In 1991, rival factions in the Cambodian civil war signed a peace accord in Paris that paved the way for a UN peace mission the following year and a UN-sponsored multi-party national election in 1993. Following the end of the communist Khmer Rouge guerilla resistance in the late 1990s, Cambodia has enjoyed relative peace and stability. Nonetheless, despite the absence of war at present, Cambodia has not been able to enjoy peace in the fullest sense.

Though political violence has been reduced during the past two decades, the likelihood for political instability remains at large. This paper provides a brief historical discussion about conflicts in Cambodia, as well as the current challenges in achieving positive peace in the country.

Keywords: Cambodia; civil wars; peace; political transitions; democracy

Introduction

During the 12th – 13th centuries, much of mainland Southeast Asia was dominated by the Khmer Empire, predecessor of contemporary Cambodia. Internal dynastic struggles, ecological changes (especially prolonged drought during the 14th century), and a series of attacks from the Siamese kingdom eventually resulted in the decline of the Khmer Empire. By the early 19th century, Cambodia had by and large become a vassal state of Siam (now Thailand) and Dai Viet (Vietnam). In 1863, Cambodia officially became a French protectorate.

After independence from France in 1953, Cambodia enjoyed a brief period of peace and stability. The Sangkum period between 1955 and 1970 under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk is remembered fondly by the older generations of Cambodians as the “Golden Period” of Cambodia. Cambodia remained an “island of peace” during a time of regional chaos. However, the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the Third Indochina War (1979-1989), had major impacts on Cambodia. The Vietnam War that erupted in the 1960s spilled over into Cambodia, and paved the way for the rise of Democratic Kampuchea – the deadliest regime Cambodia had experienced in its recent history.

Civil wars in Cambodia began in 1970 following the coup against Prince Sihanouk, led by pro-US General Lon Nol and Sihanouk’s cousin, Sisowath Sirikmatak. While the coup was supported by nationalists mainly in the city, it was unpopular among Sihanouk supporters in the rural areas. With the support of China, Prince Sihanouk eventually formed an exile government in Beijing, and encouraged those who supported him to join the communists (whom he had called the “Khmer Rouge”) to fight against Lon Nol – now President of the newly established Khmer Republic. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh victorious and was initially greeted by its residents who thought the war was finally over. Ignoring proposed negotiations and surrenders of the

Khmer Republican officers, the Khmer Rouge executed the remnants of the Khmer Republican leaders and soldiers, and proclaimed the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea.

Despite the fact that it was a short-lived regime, Democratic Kampuchea was the bloodiest one, in which approximately 2 out of 7 million people at the time lost their lives to mass execution, diseases, starvation, and inhumane working conditions in labor camps. Every Cambodian who lived through the period lost at least a few members of their family. The Khmer Rouge, under the Pol Pot's leadership, adopted collectivism as a socio-economic structure and broke family ties, as well as abolished the market economy and all kinds of civilian rights. Furthermore, educated people became the targets of execution; for fear that they would become sources of rebellion. All urban residents were evacuated to resettle in the countryside and were forced to become farmers in order to achieve the Communist Party of Kampuchea's utopian Four Year Plan to transform Cambodia into a land of agricultural and industrial revolution. Tens of thousands of people suspected of being enemies of the state were imprisoned and tortured in horrendous conditions before execution. All forms of religious practices were strictly prohibited and suppressed.

By the late 1970s, the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea provoked border disputes –a legacy of French colonial rule in Indochina –with neighboring countries, especially with Vietnam. The invasion by Vietnam into Cambodia in late 1978 and the establishment of the Vietnamese-controlled People's Republic of Kampuchea by January 1979 did not leave Cambodia at peace, for the country became a battleground for different Cambodian factions supported by bigger regional and global powers.

After victory over the Khmer Rouge, the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, backed by Vietnam, proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) in January 1979. The new republic was recognized by the Soviet Union and other socialist Eastern Bloc countries. However, it was strongly opposed by Thailand, China, the United States, and

the ASEAN founding member states. With direct and indirect support of the latter bloc, a coalition of Cambodian resistance forces comprising the Khmer Rouge, republican, and royalist factions also fought against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), rather than the PRK, retained the Cambodian seat at the United Nations during the 1980s. As a result, international aid did not flow into Cambodia but rather to the various camps along the Thai border, attracting hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled the PRK for a better life. With military aid flowing into both sides, the Cambodian conflict dragged on for over another decade until the collapse of Soviet Union, which prompted the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. This paved the way for negotiations and solutions between the two main sides of the conflicts at the Paris Peace Conference.

The Paris Peace Agreements, which was signed in October 1991, helped bring the civil war in Cambodia to a halt, culminating in the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which served as a peace-keeping mission in Cambodia and helped organize the first national election in the war-torn country in 1993. Cambodia was to become a constitutional monarchy again, with Sihanouk being reinstated as King, whereas other factions competed in the multi-party election to head the government. Before the election in May 1993 actually took place, the Khmer Rouge boycotted the process and returned to their strongholds in the northwestern parts of the country, where they continued to sell gemstone extraction rights and timber to Thai companies to finance their guerilla resistance.

Based on the official results of the 1993 national election, the royalist FUNCINPEC Party (headed by one of Sihanouk's sons, Prince Norodom Ranaridh) won the largest vote share (45%), and gaining 58 out of the total 120 parliamentary seats. The Cambodian People's Party (which comprised the incumbent PRK leaders) received 38% of the votes and gained 51 parliamentary seats. Citing electoral irregularities, the CPP refused to accept the results. After

a period of political deadlock, the two major parties agreed to adopt a distinct formula: Norodom Ranaridh (FUNCINPEC) became First Prime Minister whereas Hun Sen (CPP) became Second PM. A coalition government was established, which in essence allowed for a power-sharing formula among the various ministries. In practice, in “powerful ministries,” co-ministers existed, whereas in other ministries, a system of having the minister from one party and the vice minister from the other was agreed upon.

Nevertheless, the coalition government and the power-sharing between FUNCINPEC and the CPP lasted only until July 1997, when deadly clashes between the two factions took place, out of which Hun Sen solely emerged as the “strongman of Cambodia.” In the subsequent national elections in 1998, 2003, and 2008, the CPP had gained an increasing number of vote shares and parliamentary seats: 41%: 64 seats; 47%: 73 seats; and 58%: 90 seats, respectively, despite allegations of electoral frauds and irregularities by the opposition parties. With no clear separation of power between the executive, legislative, and the judiciary branches, Cambodia’s democracy is far from consolidated.

Setting aside the CPP’s clear advantages of having control over the state institutions and traditional media outlets, the CPP’s electoral victories during the previous elections could also be attributed to several other factors. First, having toppled the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and eventually reaching a peace deal with the guerrillas via Hun Sen’s Win-Win policy (which allowed for integration of the remaining Khmer Rouge forces into the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces), the CPP has been credited with bringing peace, stability, and noticeable economic growth to the country. However, with an extremely young population, deep shifts in the structure of the economy, and an emerging middle class, new styles of politics are demanded and slowly emerging. The official result of the latest election in 2013 granted another victory to the CPP, but with a big reduction of number of parliamentary seats to only 68 (down from 90 in the previous election). The opposition, Cambodian National Rescue

Party (CNRP), won 55 seats. The drastic reductions of seats in the National Assembly reflected the widespread discontentment against the CPP's government. Commonly-cited reasons for the unpopularity of the CPP include the presence of illegal Vietnamese immigrants, long-term land economic concessions to private (foreign, especially Vietnamese) companies, political suppression, massive deforestation, corruption, nepotism, social injustice, and rising inequality.

Challenges to peace in Cambodia

Given the afore-mentioned socio-economic and political problems, conflicts in Cambodia have shifted from macro to micro level. Instead of armed conflicts between different political factions as had been the cases in the past, violence in contemporary Cambodia appear generally in the form of clashes between state armed forces and civilian protesters (on such issues as land-grabbing and demands for higher minimum wage). The presence of Buddhist monks in these sorts of protests has drawn ire from the government and the pro-government sangha, who argued that it is not appropriate for monks to be involved in political matters. Monk activists, on the other hand, believe that activism is aligned with Buddhist doctrine so advocating for social justice.

In a country where traditional media are dominated by the ruling party, the rise of social media has provided various platforms as well as facilitation for political discussion and debates, particularly among the youth. Thanks to affordable Internet connection fees and easier access through mobile devices, the number of Internet users in Cambodia has risen dramatically, noticeably in urban areas. By 2015, it is estimated that about one-third of Cambodians (or approximately five million users) are connected to the Internet. Yet, the occasional legal charges brought against social media users who posted content alleged to affect national security (despite the fact that cyber laws have not been passed yet) suggests that the space for political expression is

not without limitation. In fact, when it comes to making critical political remarks, for many people, self-censorship remains the norm.

Another structural challenge for Cambodia in achieving a peaceful political transition, even if the opposition wins the 2018 national election or the subsequent ones, is the fact that the incumbent CPP government, whose leaders rose to power through military backgrounds, still enjoys overt support from the top brass of the security apparatuses. The opposition does not seem to have a clear strategy of how to address this problem should it come to power in the future. The recent electoral success of the National League for Democracy and the cordial acceptance by the Burmese junta for power transfer had given some hope to Cambodian opposition supporters that the country can experience a similar peaceful political transition. However, the so-called “Culture of Dialogue” initiated by the government and opposition leaders in July 2014 is now effectively dead. The leader of the opposition, Sam Rainsy, is currently facing multiple arrest charges, which most domestic and international observers consider to be politically motivated. As of this writing, in spite of the declarations issued by international organizations and donors encouraging the Cambodian government to drop charges against Rainsy, it seems that the government is not willing to give in even if it means aid will be cut as a result.

Finally, on the international front, Cambodia is yet to resolve its border conflicts with neighboring countries, in particular with Thailand and Vietnam. The actualization of the ASEAN Economic Community after 2015 has the potential to lessen the likelihood for future conflicts among ASEAN members, though in the end, transnational peace will rely much more on a sense of regionalism among the peoples, and the political will of their respective leaders in tackling with cross-border conflicts through diplomacy.