

Book Review

Norén-Nilsson, A. (2016). *Cambodia's Second Kingdom Nation, Imagination, and Democracy*. Singapore: SEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

Cambodia's political elites play an integral role in re-imagining the relation between its people, nation, and modern democracy. Cambodian elites have survived the toppling of the US-backed Lon Nol regime, the Khmer Rouge's ruthless genocide, Vietnam's invasion that installed Hun Sen's rise to power (1979 to current), international intervention which subsequently installed 1993 multiparty elections, and the 2013 elections which despite the marginal victory by Hun Sen, demonstrated the potential for opposition party politics. To any outsider, Cambodian political party politics is confusing. Norén-Nilsson's book is a political study in the discursive rhetoric used after the Paris Peace Accords agreement. Norén-Nilsson's methodology relied on seven in-depth interviews with political elites (including Hun Sen, Norodom Ranariddh, Sam Rainsy, and Kem Sokha), archival and field research in 2009-2011 and 2013-2014 at the Senate Library, Hun Sen Library, and the analysis of published political writings. The work of Ben Anderson's *Imagined Communities* looms large as the premise for the reconstruction of Khmer nation post-Khmer Rouge, in which myth-making and narrative building of what constitutes the leader and the people is integral to party politics. The author does a seminal job in writing about the complex intricacies on how contested powers in Cambodia- Hun Sen and Sihanouk's son Norodom Ranariddh both utilize competing Khmer Buddhist God-king-usurper mythologies to invoke the right to rule or win elections.

It is not difficult to imagine that because Southeast Asian countries stem from notions of power rooted in the embodiment of Brahmic Buddhist God-kings, those in power would fashion their own rise to power by relying on such myth-making. For example, Hun Sen often crafts himself as the embodiment of Sdech Kan both in his public speeches, as well as by condoning the installation of said statue in the likeness of Hun Sen, or supporting the integration of such myths into public education. Sdech Kan was a temple servant born in the year of the dragon and was targeted for assassination by King Srey Sokonthor Bat (r. 1504-1512). Sdech Kan left in exile and returned with an army to defeat the King in 1512. It is easy to draw parallels with Hun Sen's rise to power. Sihanouk on the other hand, in order to appear more populist, referred to himself as the gardener King Trasak Ph'aem, a servant gardener who killed the previous king when ordered under absolute terms to kill anyone who entered the royal gardens. Unable to recognize his own king having never met the royal, Trasak Ph'aem kills the king and becomes King himself due to an ironic interpretation of absolute loyalty to the institution (41, 45). After the early 1990s Paris Peace Accords leading to the most expensive United Nations elections monitoring operation to date, Sihanouk (who participated in party politics in exile through the FUNCINPEC) was partially discredited due to his support of the Khmer Rouge (Democratic Khmer) to dislodge the Lon Nol regime and later allied with Hun Sen as the "protector" of the monarchy. Hun Sen aligning with Vietnam, essentially toppled the DK and brought his version of crony capitalist populism into absolute power through his Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

In contrast, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha eventually formed a coalition party in the 2013 elections utilizing Khmer articulations of western liberal democracy. One can imagine it a difficult feat to transform Cambodians from the loyal subjects of the Buddhist-King and beggar-victim of the Khmer Rouge time into citizens endowed with political and economic rights (149-151). With overt contrasts to Thailand, Norén-Nilsson reveals how eventually political royalism through FUNCINPEC became fractured and discredited as a strong opposition party. Moreover, while in Thailand the democratic liberal elite view the role of the monarchy as arbiter of conflict and democratic elections as suspect of vote-buying, in Cambodia due to a different set of historical and political configurations, elites view the monarchy as a discredited but respected figure of nation and democratic elections as essential (177-178). It could be said that Thailand perhaps has something to learn about itself from closer study of its neighboring countries. In the 2013 Cambodian elections, democratic coalition party members often encouraged citizens to take the money from vote-buying, but vote according to their policy preferences (184). As such, the formation of the National Cambodia Rescue Party brought together opposition party among liberal elites like Sam Sainsy, Kem Sokha's Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, Human Rights Party, and other fragments of opposition and won 44.46 percent of votes (to the CPP winning with 48.83 percent). With 70 percent of Cambodians under 35 years old, even the CPP began to engage in "democratic dialogue" with the opposition in 2015 (187).

In sum, Cambodia's Second Kingdom does a good job in delineating differences between political party rhetoric. But questions remain. What was the efficacy of the rhetoric? Could an examination of media outlets (ie. radio, Khmer newspapers) reveal a different set of findings? While the focus on the seven interviews and public writings/speeches were illustrative of political elite thinking and party rhetoric, there were several non-state actors that ultimately played a role in Cambodia's political life after the Paris Peace Accords --- namely United Nation agencies, international aid agencies that flocked into the country, transnational and foreign corporate investors, of which Cambodia's elite also played a role. One could not help imagine that such powerful non-state actors also had an impact on the rhetoric of what constitutes the Khmer nation and its future of democracy. Cambodia's Second Kingdom leaves much to the imagination for future intriguing studies as to the disjuncture between democratic rhetoric, illiberal state actions, and the cult of personality in the study of power-elite in Southeast Asia.

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