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Forging Autocratic Legitimation: Charisma and Mythmaking in Hun Sen's Cambodia

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Abstract: This essay discusses Hun Sen's rise and longevity by examining the former Khmer Rouge battalion leader's emergence from the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979 and subsequent steady consolidation of political power in the years since he took over as Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1985–89) and the State of Cambodia (1989–93). The essay explores how he accomplished an autocratic coup de grâce by ousting political rivals and then attempted to forge autocratic legitimation via self-mythologization and appeals to royal imagery. Through these means and heavy-handed repression, Hun Sen today has come to hold virtually unchecked, unmediated political power over a country that is still searching for the truth in its fraught post-independence history.

Keywords: Cambodia; Politics; Autocracy; Legitimacy; Corruption

> [Le culte de devarāja] est une sorte de déification aux divinités brahmaniques, des rois et même des personnages de distinction, hommes ou femmes, qui érigent des temples ou contribuent d'une façon quelconque à rehausser le culte de ces divinités. [(Worship of the devarāja) is a type of deification of Brahmanic divinities, kings, and even persons of distinction, whether male or female, who erect temples or contribute in some way to enhance the worship of these deities.]
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> —French archaeologist Etienne F. Aymonnier (1904: 582)

On 16 November 2017, in a 'terminal blow to democracy' in Cambodia (Head 2019), the nation's Supreme Court officially dissolved the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), the principal political rival of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) chaired by Hun Sen (1952–). Advocates for the CNRP's dissolution accused the opposition party led by Kem Sokha (1953–) and Sam Rainsy (1949–) of plotting to overthrow Hun Sen's government. The five-year ban on over one hundred CNRP members, many of whom forfeited their seats because of the Party's dissolution, and the subsequent CPP electoral sweep in a non-competitive election in 2018, further cemented Hun Sen's autocracy. The promise of free elections in a democratic country that came with the 1991 Paris Peace Accords long dead, today Hun Sen's grip on power appears to be unassailable.

In office as Prime Minister (or co-Prime Minister) since 1985, Hun Sen's political longevity is due in no small part to his ability to

serve the interests of powerful elites who wish to benefit as much as possible from a rapidly changing Cambodia, and of common folk who regard him as one of their own (Galway 2019a; Peou 2019). A one-time Battalion Commander for the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK, the infamous 'Khmer Rouge'), Hun Sen has steadily risen to power by consolidating the CPP and Cambodian armed forces around him (Ear 2013: 7; Chandler 1999: 66; Becker 1998: 100). As political scientist Sophal Ear (2013: 7) wrote: 'He proved that if he did not win by the ballot, he would resort to the bullet.' In the years since his rise to political leadership in the mid-1980s, his CPP and its forerunner organization, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), have maintained a foothold on Cambodian politics, either alone or via imbalanced coalitions. They have overseen Cambodia's transition from the CPK's Maoist party-state of 1975–79 to the Hanoi-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) to the 'liberal democratic' Kingdom of Cambodia (1993–present) (Norén-Nilsson 2017a: 68; Ang 2019: 175). But in the process Hun Sen has transformed a fledgling democracy into what Stephen Heder (2005: 114) has characterized as a 'substantively empty shell, a vehicle not for good governance, but for serving the interests of Hun Sen and his entourage, [and] a maze of patronage, corruption and repression.'

How did Prime Minister Hun Sen (official title *Samtej Akka Mohā Senā Patī Tejo,* meaning 'Lord Prime Minister and Supreme Military Commander Hun Sen') accomplish this autocratic coup de grâce? How does he maintain power and support? In the late 1990s, political scientists Garry Rodan and Caroline Hughes (2014: 96) noted, Hun Sen 'built increasingly close alliances between his own party faction, key Cambodian tycoons, and the military … [by] promoting key allies into leading positions in the police and army and rewarding private sector loyalists with lucrative concessions and monopoly contracts.' Fellow political scientists Neil Loughlin and Sarah Milne (2021: 379) credit Hun Sen's longevity to his Party's subversion of the following three transitions: the end of civil war to relative peace; the reinstitution under CPP rule of multi-party elections after a decade of autocracy; and the CPP's gradual transition of Cambodia away from a socialist planned economy and towards a free market economy in which it actively 'exploit[s] the benefits of previous incumbency to shape the country in its interest, often at the expense of the broader society.'

In the years since, Hun Sen and his CPP have drawn upon the power of intimidation at the ballot boxes and the physical presence of the Cambodian armed forces, armed bodyguards, and other toughs to disincentivize dissent or the mounting of any support for an opposition (Rodan and Hughes 2014: 105). The CPP has also promoted its government as the masterful engineers of Cambodia's rapid socioeconomic reconfiguration, as well as a safeguard against a comeback of the social instability that marred the previous decades (Heder 2005: 114, 122; Soeung 2016: 110–11; Un 2013: 74–75; Slocomb 2010). Hun Sen's administration has allowed elites in Cambodia's main urban areas to amass wealth through the extraction and exploitation of the country's riches, in particular its agricultural lands (Loughlin and Milne 2021: 375–97; Beban 2021).

The Cambodian authorities pretend that rising inequality is simply the cost of doing business, and that the country as a whole is overall benefitting from the current direction. Indeed, according to some economic indicators, Cambodia under Hun Sen has prospered. For instance, the country passed from a low-income to a low-middle-income country in 2015, and it is now hoping to attain upper middle-income status by 2030 (World Bank 2023). However, these numbers alone (and the claims they buttress) are not enough to justify Hun Sen's political longevity. Nor is the significant violence that has underpinned his rule since

the very beginning sufficient to explain why Cambodia's strongman remains in power to this day.

To understand how Hun Sen has managed to ensure his political survival, it is important to also look into the narratives that he has repeatedly deployed to justify his rule—in particular, into the ways he also (more or less successfully) attempted to develop a façade that combines the so-called three traditional 'claims of qualification to rule' in a mythmaking exercise that he and his regime use to forge autocratic legitimacy. These claims are: a) possessing royal lineage and/or authority (*stej*, for 'king' or 'prince'); b) holding technical expertise acquired through education (*anak jeḥṭiṅ*, a 'person of knowledge'); and c) having past experience in armed struggle (*anak tasū*, a 'person of struggle') (Heder 1995: 425–29; Norén-Nilsson 2016: 14). A fourth 'claim' that runs across all post-independence Cambodian heads of state and in which Hun Sen partakes is charismatic prestige (*Pāramī,* from the Buddhist term *Pāramitā*, which describes enlightened beings). Although it is important not take them at face value so that we avoid the pitfalls of a facile Orientalism, these elements nevertheless provide an interpretive lens through which we may glance and understand more fully some aspects of Hun Sen's hold on political power.

This essay examines Hun Sen's rise and longevity through the lens provided by these elements of Khmer tradition. The first section provides the *mise en scène* for Hun Sen's political path to power. The second explores the former Khmer Rouge battalion leader's emergence from the CPK overthrow in 1979 and subsequent steady consolidation of political power in the years since he took over as Prime Minister first of the PRK (1985–89) and then of the State of Cambodia (1989–93). The third examines how he accomplished his autocratic coup de grâce by ousting his political rivals (in a 1997 coup and steadily via uneven coalitions until 2008) and how he attempted to forge 'autocratic legitimation' via self-mythologization and appeals to royal imagery, all with the ultimate goal of establishing a political dynasty. The fourth shows how, through these means and heavy-handed repression, Hun Sen today has come to hold virtually unchecked, unmediated political power over a country that is still searching for the truth in its fraught post-independence history. Finally, the conclusion offers some general remarks about the current political landscape and the prospects for Hun Sen's rule.

Figure 1: Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (right) talks to the press with Sam Rainsy (left), leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), after the National Assembly vote to select members of National Election Committee in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 9 April 2015. Source: *Voice of America,* 2015, Public Domain.

Mythmaking in Modern Cambodian Politics

Hun Sen's autocracy is not unprecedented in Cambodian political history. In fact, it has drawn on semiotics, allusions, narratives, and lessons from rulers past and present to appeal

to tradition-minded farmers, profit-driven urbanites, and the staunchest of nationalists, some of whom regard his strong leadership as the personification of Cambodian prosperity.

In the modern era, arguably the most important of the characteristics of a powerful ruler was the quality of charismatic prestige. In recent Cambodian history, no national ruler was more charismatic than Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012), Cambodia's 'King Father'. The country's first post-independence head of state, Sihanouk enjoyed widespread popularity at home and abroad for ushering in Cambodian independence and possessing an indelible charisma (Chandler 1991: 108; Gunn 2018: 410; see also Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox 2013: 1–28; Jeldres 2012: 52–64). His articulateness, worldliness—Sihanouk was a frequent traveler, most famously to Maoist China in the 1950s and 1960s (Norodom and Krisher 1990: 82–83)—as well as his personal diplomacy, anti-imperialism *cum* neutralism (Tarling 2014: 4), and reputation for securing Cambodian independence in 1953 fulfilled all the above-mentioned claims of qualification to rule. His frequent appeals to Buddhism above all other influences on his politics, most famously his advocacy for 'Buddhist socialism' (see Norodom 1965), legitimated him as a righteous 'one who has merits' who governed in accord with Buddhist teachings and, thus, could ensure Cambodia's national security.

Yet Sihanouk's undemocratic overtures even after he abdicated the throne in 1955 to run in free elections (which he won in a landslide) and heavy-handed policies with the Buddhist community and agricultural sector led to significant criticisms from Cambodian intellectuals, activists, and politicians (Galway 2022: 101–103, 112, 147–48). His removal from power by his then Prime Minister Lon Nol on 18 March 1970 in a bloodless coup while Sihanouk was in China, Ian Harris (2013: 1) notes, 'was envisioned in cosmological terms, and Buddhist traditionalists interpreted his downfall in an apocalyptic manner.'

Although not Sihanouk's immediate successor—the Lon Nol interregnum (also known as Khmer Republic) governed Cambodia from 1970 to 1975—the CPK government drew upon the same four claims of qualification to rule. Its leadership had the revolutionary bona fides and counted charismatic orators such as Hou Yuon (1930–75/76) among its ranks. Men such as Hou operated as the CPK's public face because they were recognizable politicians and intellectuals-activists with technical expertise on the Cambodian agrarian problem and a reputation for championing peasant causes (Galway 2019b: 126–61). Once Sihanouk returned from exile in 1973 as a vocal supporter of the CPK struggle against Lon Nol, the Khmer Rouge leaders now wielded the royal link that, with Sihanouk's charismatic presence and popular visage, positioned the CPK favorably to lay all four claims to authority (which it did, violently, with the conquest of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975) (Galway 2022: 154–156; see also Renmin Huabao 1973).

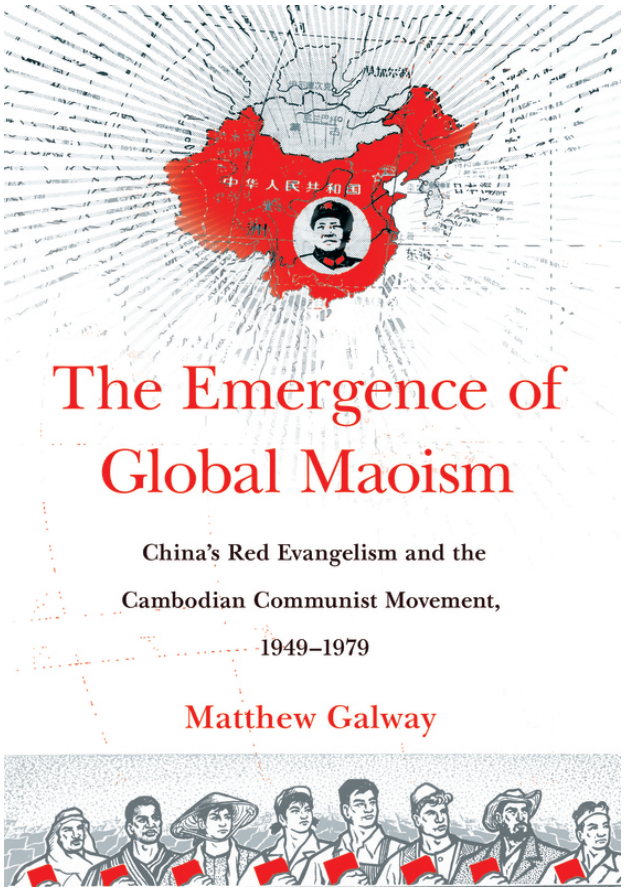

Figure 2: Cover of the author's *The Emergence of Global Maoism: China's Red Evangelism and the Cambodian Communist Movement, 1949-1979,* Cornell University Press, 2022.

In my book *The Emergence of Global Maoism,* I explore how the CPK, as a Leninist organization, combined charismatic-impersonal and rational bureaucratic ways of exercising power first in its liberated zones and then in governing Democratic Kampuchea (DK, that is CPK-ruled Cambodia, 1975–79). In this way, its leaders posited the Party as a charismatic-autocratic collective leadership until Pol Pot (1925–98) and his loyalists systematically weeded out critics. The 'personal charisma' of the CPK's public face—most notably Hou Yuon and Hu Nim (1932–77)—helped the Party's largely intellectual leadership to draw recruits from a largely peasant base. CPK leaders also deployed a public name, the 'Organization' (*Angkar*), in March 1971 'to downplay one individual's revolutionary leadership in favor of stressing collective leadership of the movement (Galway 2022: 8, 151; see also Hinton 2005: 127).

The symbolic importance of the charismatic 'Organization' was that it provided room for the CPK to stress its benevolence and deep cultural-historical ties to Cambodia despite its foreign-educated leadership. The 'Organization' was all loving, all accepting, and a guarantor for future happiness. It was *the* 'national paterfamilias', as CPK propagandists claimed in their slogans; an 'Organization' that was 'the mother and father of all young children, as well as all young men and women' (*Angkar jā mātāpitā rabas' kumārā kumārī niṅ yuvajan yuvanārī*) and which 'tenderly looks after you all, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers' (*Angkar thnāk'thnam paṅpaūn bukmae*) with its 'many eyes of the pineapple' (*bhnaek mnās'*) (Locard 2005: 107–108; Galway 2022: 151).

From CPK Apparatchik to CPP Leader

Hun Sen was a card-carrying CPK member in 1969 or 1970 and Battalion Commander in Region 21 of the DK's Eastern Zone when the Party leadership and propagandists branded themselves as the 'Organization' (Path and Nhem 2022: 128). Not unlike his CPK comrades, his career trajectory was a winding road that led him from his youth as a 'pagoda boy' in a rural area to the epicenter of political activity in the country. Hun Sen was born Hun Bunnal in Peam Kaoh Sna Commune, Kampong Cham Province, in southeastern Cambodia in 1952, shortly before Cambodia won its independence. He came from a reasonably wealthy Sino-Khmer rice- and tobacco-farming family with lineage that traced back to Chaozhou, Guangdong Province, via his grandfather. Bunnal's father, Hun Neang, was

a monk who had defrocked and married, and was active in the anti-colonial resistance against French rule. At 13, Bunnal studied as a monk in Phnom Penh at a Buddhist pagoda and enrolled in classes at Indradevi High School. In 1969, he left school and, after the Lon Nol coup overthrew Sihanouk from power, he joined the CPK movement to capture Phnom Penh (Strangio 2014: 23; Forest 2008: 178).

A shroud of mystery surrounds Hun Sen's CPK years. He changed his name to Hun Sen in 1970 after the coup, and claims that he joined the movement upon hearing Sihanouk's broadcast from Beijing calling Cambodians to take up arms against those who had just ousted him. By his own account, although he was a loyal CPK soldier by the time of the CPK's capture of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975—he sustained several injuries in the line of fire and even lost his eye—he claims to have ignored CPK orders thereafter (Chandler 2008: 272; Vok 2015). However, under the Khmer Rouge, Hun steadily rose from rank-and-file soldier to officer in the CPK Special Forces regiment of Region 21, which according to Ben Kiernan (2008: 266), 'join[ed] in the repression of the Cham revolt, which had broken out the previous month [in August 1975].' Then, as a CPK Battalion Commander, he oversaw Region 21 of the DK's Eastern Zone along the Vietnamese border, though Hun Sen denies any involvement in the CPK's mass evacuations of Cambodia's cities or in the Party's bloody efforts to stifle Cham Muslim unrest (RGC 2011; Ysa 2006: 77–111; Path and Nhem 2022: 128). Hun Sen quit the CPK in 1977 and, fearing that CPK purges of the Eastern Zone would target his Battalion, fled with four 'confidants' who also abandoned their military posts to neighboring Vietnam, where he assisted the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in its plans to remove the CPK (Path and Nhem 2022: 128, 130–31, 132–34).

Although Hun Sen's welcome to Vietnam was anything but warm, he gradually gained the trust of his Vietnamese handlers (and former captors-interrogators). They had initially suspected that he and other DK escapees might be CPK spies (Path and Nhem 2022: 132), but he built a bridge of trust by providing crucial intelligence on the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea (RAK) soldiers and military operations across the DK–Vietnam border. His 'succinct knowledge of the DK political-military situation,' according to Path and Nhem (2022: 135), 'proved very useful to the Vietnamese military at a critical time when the Vietnamese Military Central Commission scrambled to search for information to craft an effective military response to the military threats posed by the DK armed forces.' He even developed a friendship with the man who spearheaded VCP military ops in the PRK, General Le Duc Anh (1920–2019). General Le entrusted Hun Sen with banding together fellow ex-CPK exiles and DK escapees to form a tactical fighting unit in 1978 (Strangio 2014: 24). This unit was the VCP-backed Kampuchea United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS), in which Hun Sen and future *de facto* PRK leader Heng Samrin (1934–) figured prominently (Chandler 2008: 273). Alongside VCP forces, the KUFNS engaged with RAK forces during the Vietnamese counterattack that toppled the CPK in 1979. 'Now, walking across the Pochentong tarmac four days after the fall of Phnom Penh,' Strangio (2014: 24) writes, 'Hun Sen stepped onto a new battlefield—politics.'

Indeed, the political arena was new terrain for Hun Sen. Because of his dubious past as a ranking Battalion Commander, any return to politics required that he re-invent himself not as a Khmer Rouge, but as someone who was not a *true* believer in the Communist cause. From his CPK exit in 1977 to his VCP-backed 1985 appointment atop the PRK government in the role of Foreign Minister, Hun Sen gradually repackaged himself as someone who played a vital hand in the CPK's removal from power and as *the* leader, who through personal example, would usher in a new era for Cambodia

(Human Rights Watch 2015).

Autocrat Rising: Hun Sen as Prime Minister

As he ascended to political leadership, Hun Sen began to emphasize the all-important claims of qualification to rule, of which the lone one that he actually had—participation in struggle—he sought to downplay since, in his case, it was the wrong political struggle. His aim, then, was to posit himself as one who had technical expertise. Cambodia's economic situation after the CPK-era presented fecund grounds for such an opportunity. After the Vietnamese occupation ended, Hun Sen also sold himself to Cambodians as a 'self-made man' absent ongoing foreign entanglements (Chandler 2008: 293).

In his capacity as PRK Prime Minister from 1985 until 1989 and State of Cambodia Prime Minister from 1989 to 1993, he consolidated political support from elite and rural sectors by encouraging Cambodia's economic transformation. His aim was to end the era of 'two markets and three prices' (state and free markets, prices for provisions, livelihood, and of the free market) and collective agricultural production, a legacy first of the CPK period and then of the Vietnamese occupation. His plan was to usher in a new era of 'one market, one price', with a sophisticated system of individual property rights.

Hun Sen's government has overseen some growth in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Foreign Direct Investment. As of 2021, per World Bank figures, the country's GDP has risen steadily from 2.53 billion USD in 1993 to 26.96 billion USD, and its FDI sits at 3.62 billion USD (World Bank Group 2022a and 2022b). These are not relatively huge numbers, but certainly do represent significant growth in these two metrics. However, not all of the Hun Sen government's designs panned out. The rural credit program launched in the 1980s, for one, was an abject disaster by 1988, as many rural families simply could not afford to repay their debts (Slocomb 2010: 182; PRK 1988). Indeed, by 1989, Margaret Slocomb (2010: 223) writes, 'poor villagers were as dependent on the local moneylender as they had ever been.' Since the 1997 coup, Hun Sen's steadfast, almost blind commitment to transforming the Cambodian economy through increased foreign investment, tourism, and garment exports, among others, coincided with his unwillingness to curtail pervasive corruption. At the expense of investing in education or the agricultural sector, Hun Sen and the CPP have instead doubled-down on financial pledges to the Cambodian military, rewarded political loyalists with near-exclusive access to Cambodia's resources, and opened the floodgates to the concentration of landholdings in few elite hands (Beban 2021: 13; Strangio 2020: 131–36; Barma 2016: 155; Chandler 2008: 293). The rural sector thus remains in a similar state of socioeconomic disequilibrium and the country as a whole one of the poorest in Asia.

Twenty years of 'Hunsenomics', a synthesis of patronage politics, aggressive capitalism, and elite favoritism, has not resolved the century-old problem of land ownership, namely that large landowners who, under Hun Sen's reign are largely foreign investors, have concentrated their ownership over the majority of farmlands. This concentration of land ownership is quite similar to what Hou Yuon and Hu Nim analyzed exhaustively in their political economy dissertations on Cambodia's rural sector in the 1950s and 1960s (Galway 2022: 109–36). The CPP's land program has hitherto 'failed to benefit most people in rural areas … and [has] left tens of thousands of families homeless.' The wealthiest 10 per cent of Cambodians own as much as 64 per cent of the land, with the highest earners holding somewhere between 20 and 30 per cent. (Strangio 2020: 183–84).

Yet Hun Sen has maintained political relevancy and weathered such storms unscathed. His CPP fostered 'elite and military patronage systems', Neil Loughlin (2020: 499) writes, in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s to establish a 'strong organizational capacity, channeling state power in the form of coercion and facilitating the extraction of resources to its core members, particularly in the security forces.' As Norén-Nilsson (2016: 7) notes, Hun Sen achieved such his political feat via 'the CPP's monopoly of force, control of the courts, performance legitimacy, and patronage resources, as well as Hun Sen's benefactions to society.' The vestiges of Hun Sen's elite-centric policies and glad-handing remain in effect today at the expense of Cambodia's poorest strata. As Strangio (2020: 226) describes:

> Today, Cambodia is stuck in a dependency spiral, in which a stubborn lack of government 'capacity' is matched by continuing aid disbursals. [That which] started out as an investment in Cambodia's future in the early 1990s has evolved into an entrenched development complex that has eroded democracy, undermined the livelihoods of the poor, and given powerful elites a free hand to keep plundering the nation's resources for their own gain.

Hun Sen remained unperturbed by this wealth gap and increasingly entrenched functional corruption. In fact, he channeled it and joined it with his political perceptiveness, personal drive, and acuity to tap into rural Cambodians' biggest aspirations and worst nightmares, drawing in some of those groups who have gained the least from his time in power. This combination of functional political corruption *par excellence* and grandiose promises is a feature of his political lexicon to this day.

Although he was working to obtain the right to claim technocratic expertise, Hun Sen was also maneuvering to obtain the legitimacy that comes from royal lineage. To reach this goal, in the early 1990s he cemented a collaboration with the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC, from the French acronym) led by Sihanouk's son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh (1944–2021). Cambodia's first democratic elections after the Paris Peace Accords occurred in 1993 under the aegis of the United Nations. The results displeased Hun Sen, who, after threatening to secede from Cambodia after FUNCINPEC won a slight majority, met with Ranariddh and the two agreed on a co-premiership of Cambodia to avoid further political disunity. This alliance was uneven from the get-go, as Ranariddh's power and influence over decision-making waned rapidly (Chandler 2008: 290; Ang 175).

Figure 3: Co-Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh at a press conference in 1993, 2014, Public Domain.

Neither Hun Sen nor Ranariddh desired to usher in an era of unprecedented democracy in Cambodia (or any democracy for that matter), but Ranariddh's ouster in the wake of a coup by Hun Sen on 5–6 July 1997 effectively ended any hopes for a democratic Cambodia. More than

one hundred FUNCINPEC officials and supporters perished in the coup, many after arrest and torture (Chandler 2008: 290). As Chandler (2008: 293) describes:

> Hun Sen relished the title of strong man [as he] astutely consolidated himself in power. He was heavily guarded and could count on the support of the army, most of the CPP, and local business interests buttressed by unconditional aid from China. He was popular in the countryside where patronage networks were largely controlled by the CPP and where his alleged personal largesse (often financed by foreign donors), like Sihanouk's in the past, produced short-term waves of adulation. So did his marathon speeches and his robust, often brutal use of language. His disdain for parliamentary procedures was as intense as Sihanouk's had been, and so was his indifference to the rule of law. Under Hun Sen, no officials have ever been convicted of corruption, and no one suspected of political assassinations has ever come to trial.

In the following years, political murders of trade unionists, activists, and opposition politicians remained common in Cambodia. The latest high-profile assassination—that of public intellectual Kem Ley, a staunch critic of Hun Sen and his family—occurred in 2016 (Norén-Nilsson 2017b). Yet, corruption and repression notwithstanding, many Cambodians welcomed the stability and security that the CPP had brought the country after enduring the PRK and CPK years. Hun Sen's almost blind commitment to drawing in foreign investment in Cambodia also initiated the emergence of a *nouveau riche* class of elites and made those few urbanite Cambodians who were already wealthy even more prosperous. But underneath the glossy veneer of the Hun Sen era one finds a CPP, led by its talisman who governs, per Strangio (2020: xv-xvi) 'in the old way, through guile and force, through gifts and threats, through an intricate hierarchy of status and power.'

Not a Kingmaker, but a Maker-King

Even though the 1997 coup severed the important link between him and Ranariddh (and therefore Khmer royalty), and in spite of credible allegations of corruption, the CPP won subsequent elections. How has Hun Sen held on to power despite widening inequality in the rural areas, where his electoral base lives, yet where some of his government's policies failed? How has he won support in a countryside where residents maintain an especially deep reverence for the royal family with no royal connection of his own since his 1997 coup? Patronage politics, widespread political corruption, coercion, and decimating the only opposition challenge to his rule are undoubtedly the answer. But another aspect to Hun Sen's hold onto power may lie in how he managed to recast his own narrative within the longer trajectory of charismatic rulership and political authority in Khmer history. Here, we explore two facets of Hun's self-legitimation effort to establish and secure his own foundational dynasty. The first is Hun Sen's strategic invocation of Sdech Kan/Preah Srei Chettha II (ca. 1483–1529, r. 1512–25), a commoner who in the early sixteenth century usurped King Srey Sokonthor Bât (r.1504–12), to deracinate 'the idea of kingship itself—accommodating his claim to personally embody the nation' (Norén-Nilsson 2016: 39). The second is Hun's strategic use of royal symbolism to link him to great rulers, past and present, and to connect his person to kingship even in the absence of true royal lineage.

First, ever since Hun Sen severed his lone royal connection and, in so doing, cut himself off

from one of the 'claims of qualification to rule', he has grafted his own life experiences and image onto the Sdech Kan narrative of a commoner rising up to unseat an unjust monarch, redrawing the lines between royal authority and his own. He is hardly the first Cambodian politician to invoke past Khmer rulers for political points in recent times. For one, Sihanouk often invoked the narrative of Khmer builder-king Jayavarman VII (1122–1218) investing in popular welfare to justify his policies as Cambodian head of state before the 1970 coup (Royaume du Cambodge 1960: 75). The CPK did the same by invoking the story of Khmer king Chey Chetha II (r. 1618-1628). The early seventeenth century Khmer ruler's cooperation with neighboring Nguyễn Lords in central Vietnam led to the Vietnamese annexation of the Mekong Delta, including the precursor to Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City. CPK propagandists, possibly Pol Pot himself, cast this event in a Party publication as a cautionary tale about Vietnamese duplicity and drew upon many people's familiarity with it to justify war with Vietnam in the name of safeguarding against duplicitous Vietnamese designs on annexing Cambodia (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères du Kampuchéa Démocratique 1978: 6–7; Galway 2022: 267n132). Official CPK slogans also claimed that because Khmers built Angkor, present-day Cambodians could accomplish great feats under the Party's clear-sighted program (Galway 2022: 183–88). In fact, as Penny Edwards (2007: 5) observes, every Cambodian government has 'sought legitimacy in imagery of Angkor Vat … [which] has come to signify Cambodian sovereignty,' Hun Sen inclusive.

So why does Hun Sen call upon the Sdech Kan story, specifically? The Sdech Kan narrative, Astrid Norén-Nilsson (2016: 39) writes, represents Hun Sen's self-legitimating effort to 'remold the relationship between the nation, religion, and the monarchy in his favor [by] using a potent cultural legend that invokes a deeply ingrained tension between inherited and non-inherited leadership within Khmer Buddhist kingship.' Sdech Kan is a hallmark example of 'one who has merits,' a charismatic man who rose to power through personal aptitude and just struggle against an unjust monarch. Hun Sen invokes this story selectively and strategically to cast his own person and image in the same light. As Hun Sen (2006: 2; quoted in Norén-Nilsson 2016: 48) describes in *his* version of the Sdech Kan story: 'Sdech Kân or Preah Srey Chettha did wonderful work in what should be termed a democratic revolution, because he liberated all outcasts under his area of control. Because of this, he became the strongest commander and King in his own right.' This retelling is important because Hun Sen clearly grafts his own interpretation, let alone his own revisionist take on such events, onto the Sdech Kan narrative.

To Hun Sen, *he* is a modern Sdech Kan, for *he* struggled against an unjust government, the CPK, and it is by dint of *his* expertise that Cambodia's economic sector has grown, albeit with profits largely not streaming down to the countryside or working class. The narrative, importantly, also helps Hun Sen to shroud the all-important royal lineage 'claim of qualification to rule' by inserting himself as *the* technocrat, *the* expert ruler, and *the* only man who is poised uniquely to usher in an era of prosperity for Cambodia. 'By standing in for kingship,' Norén-Nilsson (2016: 40) intimates, 'Hun Sen stands in for the nation itself.' His prosperity, then, is the nation's prosperity.

Second, Hun Sen deploys regal legitimations to justify, at least rhetorically, his autocratic political turn and claim to authority, all while establishing his family as a political dynasty. His 'regal references' elevate his person to the level of a Khmer king, a charismatic, august, and legitimate ruler whose autocratic turn is entirely justifiable to maintain peace and prosperity. Hun Sen draws upon royal semiotics equally to cast himself as the people's revolutionary: a politically and historically

necessary person for Cambodia's current moment (Norén-Nilsson 2022: 715–23).

A clear example of this effort was Hun Sen's peace ceremony at Angkor Wat 2–3 December 2017, a mere two weeks after the CNRP ceased to exist. No members of the Cambodian royal family were present at the ceremony. The choice of location at the iconic Angkor Wat meant that this ceremony represented Hun Sen's most brazen and, as Norén-Nilsson (2021: 8) characterizes, 'strongest attempt yet to project himself not as the self-made rebel king, but as the inheritor of Cambodia's historical monarchy so as to tap into the legitimacy of the line of Angkorean kings.' He also used this peace ceremony to wrest the title of father of peace and reconciliation away from Norodom Sihanouk. Indeed, the 31 December 2018 unveiling of the Win-Win monument, a 33-metre tall monolith that the CPP commissioned to mark the end of civil wars in Cambodia, represents a material manifestation of Hun Sen's claim to the title of peace-giver and a hallmark example of his historical revisionism. The peace ceremony shows how Hun Sen drew upon regal legitimations to render his person inseparable from a heroic lineage of Khmer rulers and Cambodian peace and stability, respectively. His autocratic turn is thus justifiable in the name of royal continuity, which he has co-opted, and the continuance of a war-free Cambodia.

Regardless of whether the majority of Cambodians buy the narrative and historical revisionism that Hun Sen is selling, Hun's ultimate plan of establishing his own familial dynasty to govern over an autocratic Cambodia appears to be working. His eldest son, Hun Manet, is a ranking lieutenant general in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, heads his father's bodyguard corps, and is his father's successor-in-waiting (Khmer Times 2021). Hun Mana, his daughter, is director of *Bayon Radio*, a huge outlet for favorable CPP media, and has ties to more than twenty companies, including chairperson roles for Star Airline and Helistar in the transportation industry (Galway 2019a). Hun Sen's nephew, Hun To, has been linked to petrol providers LHR Asean Investment Co., and was for a time implicated in a one billion USD drug smuggling operation (Rice 2022; Turton and Phak 2016; Global Witness 2016; McKenzie and Baker 2012; Phorn and Lewis 2012). The seeds of a political dynasty have been sown.

Concluding Remarks

Pessimism comes far too easily to the Cambodia observer. As a scholar of twentieth-century Cambodian history, it is remarkable to observe what Hun Sen's autocracy has accomplished. Absent a royal link, Hun Sen is quite happy to invent one, whether through uneven coalitions, charismatic appeals and oration, or historical revisionism. Despite his spotty economic record, his party has been able to 'sell' one of the poorest countries in Asia a tale of prosperity and promise. A former CPK military man, Hun Sen has all but buried his past history as a full believer in the Communist cause and participant in the Cambodian genocide until 1977, to reinvent himself as a modern leader with mystical qualities. For all these reasons, the future looks ever bleak for Cambodia's democracy. The Hun dynasty, so it seems, is here to stay.

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