

# Portrait of a pragmatist

*Hun Sen's Cambodia.* By Sebastian Strangio. Yale University Press, 2014. 322pp.



By Jonathan Bogais

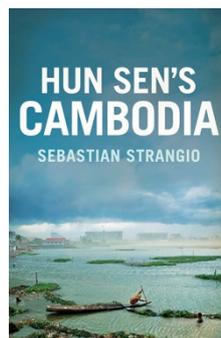
During a recent conversation, a foreign affairs official confided to me his views on the remarkable development experienced by Cambodia in the last 30 years but, as I listened to him, it struck me as amazing that he knew so little about the recent history of this country.

Like many others, he was an unconscious victim of constant propaganda on how better life has been for Cambodian people since the end of the Khmer Rouge era, since the signature of the 1991 Paris Agreements that led to the deployment of UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia), and since international development aid started to flow in 1992.

Little did he know that what started out as an investment in Cambodia's future in the early 1990s evolved into an entrenched development complex that eroded democracy, undermined the livelihoods of the poor, and gave powerful elites a free hand to keep plundering the nation's resources for their on gain.

Against this backdrop, the new book by Sebastian Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, sheds considerable light on Prime Minister Hun Sen's rise to power, his grip on the country, and his long-lasting turbulent relationship with international donors. How did this man, whose political journey started when he left school in 1969 (aged 17) to join the Communist rebellion, and who was appointed foreign minister at 27—when he had never been outside Cambodia or Vietnam—become one of the longest serving leaders in the world?

Most of the people who have met Hun Sen admit that he does not believe in any ideology, and he acts out of pragmatism only. I have met him three times on different occasions and observed his uncanny ability to bend



with the political wind and manipulate the best of his interlocutors. His faith in himself is remarkable and, as far as he is concerned, the past actions of foreign powers indemnify him from criticism of any kind.

He said, in 1995: 'Let me say this to the world: whether or not you want to give aid to Cambodia is up to you, but do not discuss Cambodia's affairs too much.' In response to US criticisms, Hun Sen threatened anti-American demonstrations and called for US\$20 billion reparation for the B-52 bombings of the 1960s and 70s.

Strangio lifts the veil from Pol Pot (Saloth Sar)'s Faustian partners in the West, without whom he would never have seized power, and who later restored and sustained him in exile, in the service of their own imperial imperatives. In September 1979, the UN



Hun Sen—remarkable faith in himself.

General Assembly refused to recognise Hun Sen's Vietnamese-backed government and voted instead to continue recognising the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) as Cambodia's legitimate

government—despite evidence of genocide committed under its ruling between 1975 and 1979. DK was the first government in exile to be accorded that privilege. Washington's overriding strategic interest was the isolation of the Soviet Bloc and Vietnam. Cambodia and its suffering was of secondary importance.

With Hun Sen's rise over the past two decades comes 'Hunsenomics', a blend of old-style patronage, elite charity and predatory market economics. Hunsenomics has succeeded in forging a stable pact among Cambodia's ruling elites, but has done little to tackle poverty. It evolved in reaction to outside

pressures and the demands of foreign aid donors, resulting in 'reforms à la carte' to appease donors while resisting any change that would throw light on opaque operations. The effect has been to concentrate Cambodia's wealth in relatively few hands selected by Hun Sen himself.

Western governments accept Hun Sen because nothing can be done without him, either for Cambodia or for themselves. Working with him, however, means accepting his terms of engagement and that's where it ends up: not with democracy and human rights, but with partnership—and paralysis, as Strangio rightly points out.

Meanwhile, with each passing year, more international corporations are moving into the country, and the World Bank and Asian Development Bank continue to apply their neoliberal economic models in apparent disregard for Cambodia's political and social context. As in many other developing countries, free market templates have fuelled economic growth, yielding an impressive annual crop of GDP growth figures, but they have also produced a typhoon capitalism that has empowered a predatory elite, opened up a massive gap between rich and poor, and undercut one of their supposedly central priorities: poverty reduction.

When the UN pitched its blue tents in 1992, hundreds of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) sprang up overnight. With millions in foreign aid, foreign advisers and consultants arrived by the plane-load bringing development chaos. The result—according to Strangio—is more than an aid economy, it is an aid society, marked by relationships of dependence at every level between donors, government officials, NGOs and ordinary people.

Decisions about aid are not made in Phnom Penh, but in faraway capitals, each pursuing its own institutional and foreign policy agenda. Calls for more 'coordination', more 'capacity-building', and more consultants to write more reports that will end up collecting dust on a shelf in an NGO office somewhere abound.

From the perspectives of the Cambodian villagers, one NGO treats the people as a subject of charity; the other as a subject of capacity-building. Both see the rural population as a malleable entity, traumatised by years of conflict, and so in desperate need of guidance from the outside.

There is no intent in Strangio's account to polemicise or debate, but rather to bring to life a persona, an interpretation of the biographical and political career of a man who is now part of Southeast Asian history. I shall strongly recommend *Hun Sen's Cambodia* to the foreign affairs official I referred to early, as to anyone interested in Southeast Asia.

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