

Cambodians continue to struggle in an inequitable society

Corruption and social injustice underlie the recent violent demonstrations in Cambodia.

By Jonathan Bogais

Nineteen governments gathered to sign the Paris Peace Agreements on 23 October 1991, promising a comprehensive political settlement to end the tragic conflict and continuing bloodshed in Cambodia. There was a general consensus that Cambodia was at the end of an historical era marked by three decades of war and genocide, the magnitude of which had not been seen since the Second World War.

The 1991 agreements not only laid out the process for ending the conflict, but for the building of a 'just and democratic Cambodia, anchored in human rights and the rule of law'. Under the terms of the Agreements, the United Nations (UN) would keep a mission to Cambodia (UNTAC) until 1993 to supervise the ceasefire, prepare the country for a new constitution and facilitate free and fair elections. Importantly, the UN mission was mandated to create an environment in which respect for human rights would be ensured so that the policies and practices of the past should not return.

Following the 1993 UN-sponsored elections and the adoption of a new national constitution in September of that year, economic liberalisation in Cambodia led to extremely rapid economic growth, hitting 9.8 per cent per annum between 1999 and 2007.

Much of this growth, however, failed to deliver results for the poor. The newly installed democracy soon became plagued with things to be legitimately concerned about. Looking at the 2013 elections, Cambodia today can only be described as a de facto one-party state in which socioeconomic inequality is rampant.

According to the UN Development Programme's 2013 *Human development report on Cambodia*, the ASEAN nation is an example of a post-conflict, fast-growing economy in which growth did not translate into human development progress. Of a population of nearly 15 million, 45.9 per cent live in multidimensional poverty, while an additional 21.4 per cent are vulnerable to multiple deprivations. Around 75 per cent of rural households depend on agriculture and its related subsectors.

Despite recent diversification, agriculture still represents around 31 per cent of GDP, making Cambodia a largely subsistence-based economy. Although natural resources were abundant, persistent exploitation of forests, fisheries and gems has resulted in rapid resource depletion.

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Today, the majority of Cambodians live in a country rife with inequality of wealth, income, power and influence—elements that combine to maintain and strengthen the powerful elite ruling the country. The inequitable use and distribution of land, water, food and minerals is the underlying cause of deep-seated social tensions and political divisions.

From a tough international realpolitik viewpoint, the Cambodian crisis in the 1980s had to be resolved on regional strategic and security grounds. One of the most complex, and intractable of all the security problems of the time, it involved not only four factions warring among

themselves, but also their international protectors. In the case of the Khmer Rouge: China; in the case of Hun Sen: Vietnam (with the Soviet Union standing behind); and in the case of the other factions, the West. It involved acute continuing regional tensions: between China and Vietnam, between Vietnam and ASEAN, and between all the countries in the region which had a stake in the outcome of that particular internal conflict.

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In 2001—25 years after the end of the war in Indochina—Bill Clinton became the first US president since Richard Nixon to visit Vietnam. As a humanitarian gesture, Clinton released extensive Air Force data on all American bombings of Indochina between 1964 and 1975. The database reveals that from 4 October 1965 to 15 August 1973, the United States dropped far more ordnance on Cambodia than was previously believed. It also shows that the bombing of Cambodia began four years earlier than is widely believed—not under Richard Nixon, but under Lyndon Johnson.

The impact of this secret bombing is now clearer than ever. Civilian casualties and land devastation drove a traumatised population into the arms of an insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began, setting into motion the expansion of the Vietnam War deeper into Cambodia.

This was followed by a US-orchestrated coup d'état in 1970, an extensive and indiscriminate carpet-bombing campaign by the United States to eradicate insurgents, the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately the Cambodian genocide.

From 1975 to 1979, the country suffered a vastly destructive Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot. The cities were emptied of their

populations and masses of people were subjected to harsh labour and political re-education. It is estimated that nearly 2 million people died in a brutal process of asocial reconstruction. Pol Pot's regime was overturned by the intervention of Vietnamese troops in late 1978 and the installation of a new government in Phnom Penh.

During the Khmer Rouge regime all private ownership was dissolved, documentation destroyed and land became property of the state. The results are still being felt today. Millions of Cambodians still lack documentation, and the full recognition of their ownership rights that come with a land title.

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The 1997 coup led by current prime minister Hun Sen has been the most important event in Cambodia since the 1993 UNTAC elections. It shattered all illusions that the country was on the path to democracy, showing that violence remained an acceptable political choice for the country's leaders. It disregarded the lingering trauma and fear that so many Cambodians retained after the US bombing, the Khmer Rouge period and the bloody civil war that followed.

The coup and Hun Sen's successful control of the ensuing domestic and international political fallout has to this day set the country on the course to Hun Sen's almost total dominion over political, economic and military power in Cambodia.

A 2013 report co-funded by the European Union—*Bittersweet harvest*—reveals widespread land confiscations and forced evictions of rural populations for government-controlled sugarcane plantations. It also shows that children as young as

nine are working on these plantations.

The abolition of private deeds by the Khmer Rouge left subsistence farmers vulnerable to recent surges in land-grabs for mining, agricultural, infrastructure and property developments. The 2001 land attribution program, instigated by the government to allot land to indigenous and non-indigenous Cambodians, has been fraught by allegations of corruption at all levels of government and local authorities since its inception.

Cambodian authorities regularly disperse opposition protesters from their rally base in the capital Phnom Penh. In January 2014, a day after police launched a violent crackdown on striking garment workers, supported by Sam Rainsy's opposition party, that left at least three demonstrators dead, a military police spokesman said: 'They won't be allowed to rally, to protest, or to hold any political activities at the park anymore.'

The extreme dichotomy between poverty and wealth inevitably creates the vulnerable and the powerful, the abused and the abuser. A consequence of this social division is the denial of democracy. With money comes power and with power comes political influence, making it inevitable that inequality reinforces itself by corroding the political system and democratic governance.

Cambodia in its current autocratic and corrupt state is a soft target for unscrupulous investors, and governments focused on geostrategic positioning or just eager to relocate their 'can-of-worms' away from home.

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