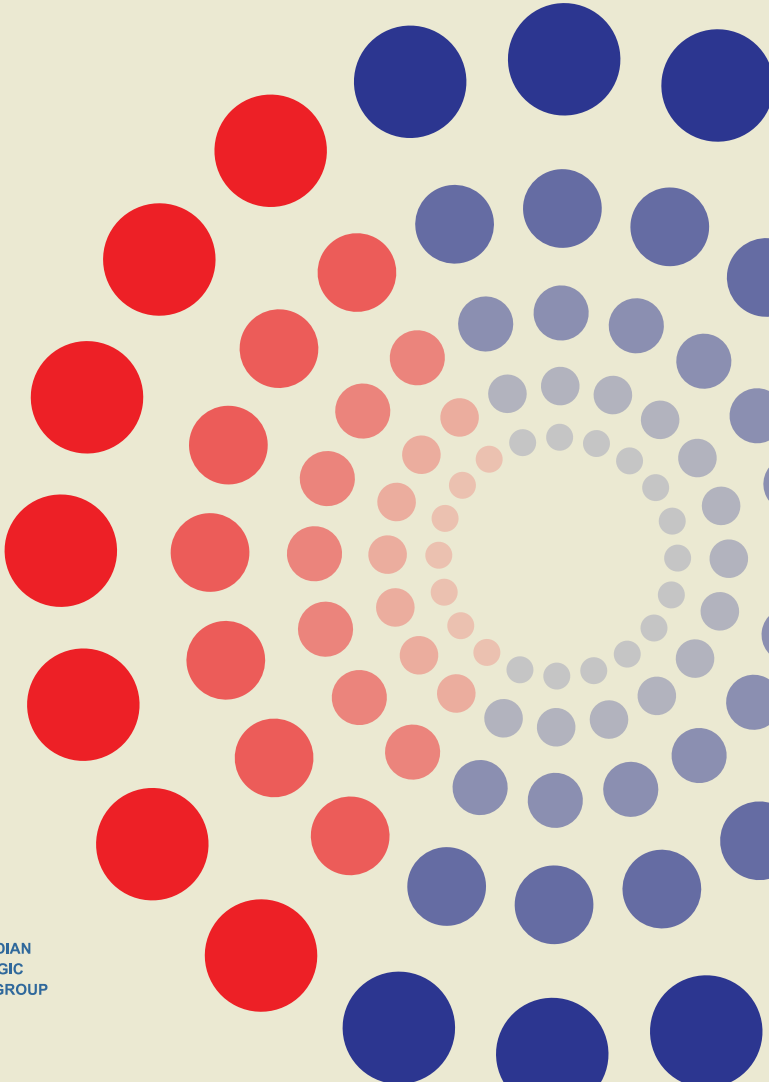


# Selected Works

Contemporary Perspectives on  
Cambodia and the Asia Pacific

Volume I

Vannarith Chheang  
Phoak Kung





# **Selected Works**

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Cambodia and the Asia Pacific

Volume I

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Phoak Kung



Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Volume I

In Memory Of  
You Seantho And Sonayany



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# Forward by Silas Everett

It is hard to find analysis of current events and critique of public policy written by Cambodian scholars, particularly on Cambodia and the Asia Pacific region. This book, written by Chheang Vannarith and Phoak Kung, is just that. The book is a compilation of selected articles which provide fresh perspectives on contemporary issues in Cambodia and the Asia Pacific region. The book is provocative in its discussion of the unfolding political and social developments in the country and insightful in its treatment of emerging regional dynamics. Refreshingly, the authors do this while steering clear of the trap of national and regional exceptionalism.

Chheang and Phoak have been working on this project together for almost two years. The book provides readers, whether policy-maker or general enthusiast, entry into a series of conversations, many taking place now in Phnom Penh and echoed in the region. The authors selected these particular works because they wanted to offer a platform for critical debate and exchange of ideas. In their entirety, these articles demonstrate the increasing importance of Cambodia's role in the Asia and Pacific region, and add further evidence of the increasing importance of Asia and Pacific region in transforming the global order.

Chheang and Phoak are emerging thought leaders in Cambodia in their own right, and increasingly recognized more widely as policy specialists in the region. Chheang is a lecturer of Asia Pacific studies at the University of Leeds, a non-resident fellow at the Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace, and co-founder of the Cambodia Strategic Study Group. He has published widely on regional economic integration and security issues in Southeast Asia, and political and economic development of Cambodia. Chheang earned his PhD in Asia Pacific Studies from the Ritsumeikan Asia

Pacific University in Japan in 2009. Phoak is Vice President for Academic Affairs at Mengly J. Quach University in Cambodia. He is also co-founder of the Cambodian Strategic Study Group (CSSG) and a Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). He was working on his PhD in Political Science at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom. He obtained his Master in Public Policy and Graduate Diploma in Public Administration from the Australian National University.

While the opinions and the entirety of the content of the book represent the views of the authors alone, the Foundation was delighted to support the publication of this important work as part of our efforts to promote dialogue and understanding on important policy issues in the region. The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise, our programs address critical issues affecting Asia in the 21st century—governance and law, economic development, women's empowerment, environment, and regional cooperation.

Silas Everett  
Country Representative  
The Asia Foundation  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

# **DOMESTIC**

## **ISSUES**



# Cambodia's Politics in an Age of Social Media

By Phoak Kung

**P**rior to the 2013 election, social media was hardly thought of as having a role in transforming Cambodia's political landscape. Suddenly, social media – most notably Facebook and YouTube – became the talk of the town. And this started after the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) suffered a huge drop in popular support, obtaining only 68 out of 123 seats.

The result surprised many people, and the emerging consensus is that social media is clearly one of the most important factors that attributes to the stunning performance of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

For a long time, the ruling elites have relied heavily on traditional media outlets as a means to communicate with voters, and they only began to embrace social media in recent years. It has been a slow and careful process. Only a handful of party members – especially the young ones – have been actively using social media to defend the CPP's achievements and legacy, attack the CNRP's policies and respond to criticism.

Given that the opposition has little access to traditional media outlets, social media become the backbone of its campaign strategy. The CNRP's leaders have been very effective in using the new medium to mobilize tens of thousands of people to take to the street to protest against the ruling elites. Moreover, they use social media to criticize the government, present their policies and inform the public about their political activities.

Furthermore, social media has also been extensively used by a large number of non-partisan civil society groups to campaign for a wide range

of issues such as deforestation, land eviction, corruption, human right violations, economic inequality and social injustice. Although it is very hard to measure their impact on reforms, such efforts clearly produce some positive results in terms of raising public awareness and keeping the government in check.

### **The Dominance of Social Media**

In fact, the emergence of social media as one of the dominant forces in Cambodia's politics does not come as a big surprise. According to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, the number of phone subscribers and Internet users reached 20 million and 3.8 million respectively in 2013. Moreover, there are nearly one million Facebook users, most of whom are youths. And the number is expected to rise much faster in the coming years.

This clearly suggests that the era of government monopoly on information is gradually coming to an end. People can use social media for a very low cost, and in just a click, their words can spread like wildfire. For instance, videos of clashes between riot police and protesters are often made available online, allowing people to form their own opinion on who should be held accountable for the violence.

### **The Politics of Social Media**

However, while social media is seen as being used primarily for political purposes, it can also make a positive impact on some of the most critical issues facing Cambodia at the moment. Around 70 percent of the population is under the age of 35. Youth are becoming the most potent (demographic) in Cambodia's politics. Political parties can take advantage of the new medium to reach out to this young cohort by providing them a platform to debate policy, voice opinions, give feedback and offer solutions.

In addition, social media can also help improve the delivery of public goods and services. Facing serious resource constraints, there is no way



that the government can have complete control over the implementation of its programs across the country. False reports and cover-ups are bound to happen. Thus, allowing people to report issues directly on social media might assist the government in responding to people's complaints and demands in a much more effective and timely manner.

### **The Benefits of Social Media**

This will likely discourage government officials and public servants from engaging in corruption and malpractices, for they are afraid that their activities will be exposed to the public. Tellingly, there have been several cases already where officials were caught breaking the laws, and members of the public recorded and posted their transgressions online. With the abundance of cheap smartphones that come with a video camera, everyone can be a citizen-journalist.

People can also use social media to mobilize public support for a wide range of issues. In the past, they had to get help from either formal political channel or civil society groups in order to have their voice heard. Now, they can easily attract hundreds of thousands of people to support their cause through social media.

More importantly, information obtained from this process will give political parties a sense of perspective on what matters to voters the most and how they can design policy in such a way to reflect those demands.

### **The Problems of Social Media**

Despite the advantages, social media has come under severe criticism in recent months. There are many cases in which people used this new medium to spread false information and rumors in attempts to incite violence or create chaos.

Another major concern is that discriminatory remarks and hate speech are sometimes used by political factions to undermine one another, which could engender enmity.

Solving this problem requires the creation of laws to regulate the use of social media. Yet, the government cannot use this as a pretext to prohibit Cambodians from exercising their fundamental constitutional rights.

There is no turning back. Politicians have to adapt very quickly or become out-of-touch. Of course, they have a legitimate reason to be skeptical with the rise of social media.

But using draconian measures to suppress freedom of speech on social media is not an answer either. And it will only fuel domestic protest and draw international condemnation.

Thus, they should find a better way to tap into the potentials of this new medium in order to make Cambodia a more inclusive society, both politically and economically.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on September 04, 2014)*

# Cambodia Breaks Political Deadlock, At Last

By Vannarith Chheang

**A**fter a year of political deadlock the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) and the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have agreed to settle their differences. The CNRP, established in July 2012 by merging the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party, challenged the predominant role of the ruling CPP in the July 2013 election. On 22 July, both parties reached a historical agreement and on 8 August, 55 CNRP members of parliament took their seats at the National Assembly to bring to an end a year-long boycott over alleged CPP vote-rigging.

The recently concluded power-sharing arrangement between the two parties involves reform of the National Election Committee and the National Assembly. Each party will elect four members to the National Election Committee and one independent member will be selected based on the consensus of both parties. The position of vice-president and chairperson of five commissions out of ten in the National Assembly will now go to CNRP. This institutional arrangement provides the CNRP with a roughly equal playing field in the National Assembly, although the CPP still holds the majority of seats with 68.

Still, the CNRP faces huge challenges. It needs to find effective ways to manage the expectations of its supporters and constituents and implement its election policy platform.

This is easier said than done. It is impossible for the CNRP to root out corruption and restructure complex state institutions overnight. It

needs time. And the leadership and institutional capacity of the CNRP are not yet up to the task.

The CNRP needs to put much more effort into building up its leadership capacity and management structures, especially at the local level. It also needs to strengthen democratic and transparent decision-making processes within the party and enhance the central–local relationship.

So, what does the future hold for the CNRP?

There are at least three scenarios for the future development of the CNRP. First, if the Sam Rainsy and Human Rights Party factions can maintain a united approach, the CNRP will be able to pursue its agenda of national rescue mission and nation building more effectively. And, if it performs well in the legislature and other independent state institutions, it has the chance of garnering popularity and expanding its political power base in time for the next election.

Second, the internal unity of the party might face severe pressure as long as the Human Rights Party and Sam Rainsy Party factions are active. Imbalanced and competitive power-sharing arrangements could implode the party. It must also deal with the different demands of relevant interest groups.

Third, although the popularity of the CNRP has increased since the last election, it must now prove that it can be an effective leader — this will determine its future. If it fails to deliver on expected results then it will lose public support and confidence.

The majority of CNRP voters at the last election expressed their dissatisfaction with the performance of the CPP, who have enjoyed largely unobstructed rule over Cambodia for more than two decades. Voters wish to see a stronger role for the opposition and more effective checks and balances on the CPP's power.

Fighting corruption, providing decent wages for factory workers and resolving chronic and widespread land disputes are the most urgent tasks. The CNRP alone cannot address these structural complexities. It requires a close working relationship and partnership with the ruling CPP, development partners, civil society groups and private corporations. The

ruling CPP, however, will have more to gain politically from achieving these reforms. CPP executives are more prominent in the eyes of the general public. But the opposition CNRP, through the national assembly, will also get some credit for its efforts in shaping the path to reform.

At the same time, significant steps need to be taken by the ruling CPP to restore the public's trust and confidence in the party. These steps include changing the party leadership, revitalising public institutions and improving public communication — especially at the grassroots level. CPP members are already taking steps to present themselves differently — such as not showcasing their wealth and opulent lifestyle when travelling to meet the masses, especially in rural areas. Another important step for the CPP will be to promote capable and promising young leaders, giving them more responsibility within the party.

But what if efforts to implement reform fail to produce results?

If the situation does not improve and reform efforts do not produce good results, the opposition will then have a high chance of winning the next election — as long as the CNRP is able to blame the ruling CPP. What 'good results' are will be determined by citizens' demands and expectations.

It is more likely, however, that both the CPP and CNRP will be blamed for failed efforts at reform. Their political support bases would shrink. And, in such a scenario, small parties (especially the FUNCINPEC party and other emerging political parties) are likely to have a greater opportunity to win parliamentary seats in the next election. This would also increase the likelihood of a coalition government in the future.

Change is urgently needed. Cambodia's political outlook will depend on the ability of the CPP and CNRP to cooperate and bring structural reform to the nation. The ideal scenario would be both the CPP and CNRP working together — developing effective checks and balances, strengthening democracy and good governance, promoting inclusive, sustainable and rights-based development and improving the justice system.

*(This article was first published in East Asia Forum on August 23, 2014)*

# Rethinking Cambodia's Reconciliation Process

By Phoak Kung

**T**here is much Cambodia can learn from the current crisis in Thailand about how political polarization can plunge the country into chaos. Despite the junta's initiatives, politicians, scholars and the Thai public remain pessimistic about the chances of people of all political stripes living harmoniously under the one roof again.

Divisive politics are used by political parties around the world to advance their ambitions. It is a dangerous approach. If fragmentation becomes entrenched to the point where a majority of people can no longer tolerate differences in values, beliefs or opinions, restoring unity to the country becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Since the return of multiparty elections in 1993, Cambodia's politics has been characterized by political deadlock. The one exception was the 2008 election, in which the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won a landslide victory. It normally takes months before the winning parties are able to hammer out a deal and end the usual postelection crisis. And politicians usually cite national reconciliation and unity as the main reason behind their decisions.

What is interesting about this reconciliation process is that it almost exclusively involves the political parties, with voters often left out of the talks. There may be good reason for this – after all, engaging too many people will delay the process or even make a deal impossible. But the downside of this process is that it attracts widespread public scepticism.

Every decision that the parties make comes under scrutiny. And if there is any sign that politicians will personally benefit from the deal, the whole reconciliation process is thrown into doubt.

This raises an important question as to whether the top-down approach is still relevant to Cambodia's current political landscape. Of course, ending the deadlock remains essential, but it should be seen as the beginning of a long road to resolving the problem of political polarization. Politicians have to understand that simply reconciling their differences won't necessarily bring their respective supporters together. In many cases, even if they are able to seal a deal, voters remain deeply suspicious of the opposing side.

The growing public discontent directed at Cambodia's political parties clearly reflects this view. To achieve true reconciliation, then, the process must be extended to include everyone, regardless of political affiliation. This does not necessarily suggest that the public needs to be involved in every step of the deadlock negotiation, but Cambodians should have more say in deciding the future direction of the country.

This is no easy task. The parties need to go beyond their narrow definition of political reconciliation and embrace a long-term, nationwide solution. The most urgent task for the government right now is to rebuild public trust in political institutions, which is worryingly lacking in Cambodia. Violence will ensue if people no longer believe that they can solve their problems through formal political channels.

The latest bloody clash between riot police and opposition supporters on July 15, 2014 was a stark reminder of why it is so important for the government to address the problem of the deficit of trust if it is to prevent the country from becoming more politically polarized. Political leaders must work together to reduce tensions instead of playing the blame game over who is responsible for this violent incident.

For a long time, the ruling elites were convinced that Cambodia's unprecedented economic growth over the past decade, which helped lift millions of people out of extreme poverty, would be enough to gain the trust and confidence from voters. Their disappointing result in the 2013

election, winning only 68 out of 123 seats, was a shocking wake-up call. What they fail to understand is that economic growth comes at a cost.

Staggering economic inequality is perhaps the single most important culprit here. Many voters end up believing that what the government is doing is only to protect the interests of a small group of elites, who controls much of the economy, while the poor and vulnerable have to bear the brunt of economic modernization. And the trickle-down effect does not seem to work as expected, or not as much as the government would like to see.

Economic inequality is a major factor in the string of violent protests that have occurred since last year. Perhaps the most serious of them was the deadly clash between security forces and garment workers on January 3 this year, which left four people dead and many injured. Several development projects are also controversial, most notably the eviction of Boeung Kak Lake residents. Of course, what was really happening on the ground may well be more complex than the headlines suggest, but these incidents seriously undermine public trust in the government.

However, economic inequality is not the only factor behind the government's declining popularity. Another frequently cited reason is the lack of social justice. This concept is normally related to fair distribution of resources, respect for fundamental human rights, and a fair system of law and due process. The ruling elites have often been accused by opposition supporters and the international community of not doing enough in these areas.

In response to this criticism, during the first post-election cabinet meeting on September 23, 2013, Prime Minister Hun Sen issued a stern warning to senior party members that they will face serious punishment if they are found to be involved in corruption or any other crime. He also outlined a number of reforms that the government will carry out in its fifth mandate. Echoing this view, in a speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Commerce Minister Sun Chanthol also suggested that the CPP needed to go "all out" to reform if it wanted to win the 2018 election.



It is too early to judge whether they really mean what they say, but the rhetoric at least offers a hopeful sign that some fundamental changes are under way. Cambodia's politicians must understand that everyone wants to be treated equally before the law regardless of their social status, position or wealth. Cambodians seek a fair and equitable share of benefits and responsibility. To achieve this, the government has to make sure that the rule of law is upheld and the judicial system is independent. Only then will the people be able to coexist with the government.

It is clear now that a reconciliation process limited to the country's elites will not be enough to maintain stability and peace in Cambodia. All parties need to work together to restore public trust and confidence in the political system, and to make the public part of the solution. It is now time for political leaders to take their election pledges seriously and cease using the rhetoric of political polarization for personal gains.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on August 01, 2014)*

# Revisit Security Sector Reform in Cambodia

By Vannarith Chheang

**S**ecurity, development, the rule of law, justice, and human rights are essential preconditions for sustainable peace. After more than three decades of civil war and armed conflict, Cambodia has confronted a number of security challenges related to its security sector ranging from demobilization and reintegration to modernization and professionalization. Security Sector Reform (SSR) is more than just a military reform. It needs to be addressed in a comprehensive manner in the context of a broader national reform effort. It aims to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of the armed forces, the police and the other security services.

The security sector includes both state and non-state actors. Among the state actors are the security providing institutions, such as the armed forces, paramilitary forces, police and gendarmerie, intelligence services, border/coast guards, criminal courts, and prisons.

Security management and oversight institutions consist of the relevant government ministries, the parliament, the judicial authorities, and independent oversight bodies. The non-state actors include armed groups, private military and security firms, customary or informal justice providers.

So far, the government of Cambodia has shown its political will to pursue security reforms. At the first Phnom Penh Strategic Forum in 2012, Defense Minister Tea Banh, stated; “In fact, the transformation and development of a country’s security must be done in a broad context in the socio-economic and political reform. The security reform can’t be separated from other priorities and strategies of a nation.”

## **Military and Police**

Reform measures largely concentrated on the military and police as the two main institutions charged with the provision of security. Institutions of oversight, such as the judiciary and the National Assembly, have attracted less attention.

Reform of the armed forces is emphasized by the Cambodian government, in light of the country's history of conflict and the desire to avoid any relapse. A comprehensive approach to SSR would link military and defense reform with judicial reform, police reform and intelligence reform in order to make all reforms coherent and mutually reinforcing. Also, it would enhance civilian control and democratic accountability of the armed and other security forces.

It is therefore necessary for the international community to actively engage with the Royal Government of Cambodia in promoting dialogue and discussion on SSR in order to reach a wider public consensus on the issues and proceed with more inclusive implementation based on a multi-stakeholder approach.

Reforms in the security sector have so far not been embedded in overarching national reform policies such as a national development policy or a national security policy. SSR should be viewed as an integral part of the national development strategy, and therefore addressed in a coherent and comprehensive manner based on a broad and inclusive assessment of national security needs. SSR should be at the heart of the development of a national security policy, as such a policy articulates the priorities for national and human security and the capacities required to meet them. The recent establishment of the Supreme National Defense Council augurs well in this regard and could provide an institutional home for Cambodia's approach to SSR.

## **Private Security Companies**

Private security companies have emerged as important actors in the security sector. While creating additional job opportunities for many

unemployed people, some of these companies also seek to employ personnel of the Cambodian armed and other security forces on a for-profit basis. This practice, whereby officers and soldiers may be using their weapons for the sake of private companies, has further contributed to the increase in armed crime.

Finally, one ought to keep in mind that the security sector has unique characteristics given its central role in guaranteeing the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Reforms in this sector touch upon the traditional core function of the state and thus the most sensitive area of state sovereignty. SSR projects are not only technically very complex; they are above all highly political undertakings, implying decisions relating to the political system, societal values and national identity.

Properly implemented SSR will provide the security forces with capacity commensurate with security needs and available resources; it will enhance their effectiveness and efficiency through external scrutiny; and it provides the security forces the legitimacy and societal acceptance, which they may not enjoy, were they not under democratic, civilian control.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on July 17, 2014)*

# The Cambodian People's Party: A Deficit of Leadership

By Phoak Kung

**S**ince the disappointing result for the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in last year's election, when it won only 68 out of 123 seats, there has been little discussion about how it will be able to win back support in the next national polls in 2018. Instead, some political observers and opposition supporters argue that there is nothing the CPP can do to restore public trust, and that its days in the government are numbered.

As a consequence, the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) appears determined to keep the pressure on the ruling elites in the hope that the CPP will fall apart or at least produce cracks sufficient to lead to a change in leadership. However, this view seems to ignore the complexity of Cambodia's tumultuous politics. Moreover, the ruling elites fully understand that the stakes are extremely high this time, and are convinced that they need to stay united.

Although the CPP is not in immediate danger, the party rank and file are surely pondering the future of their party. Speaking during the first cabinet meeting on September 26, 2013, Prime Minister Hun Sen outlined a number of reforms that will be the priority for the government in its fifth mandate. Whether it will be able to live up to its promises remains to be seen.

Following his speech, Cambodian government ministries have been busy rolling out a laundry list of policies to address the problems that cost the CPP public support. The hope is that positive results can enable the party to avoid further decline. For its part, the opposition argues that

the attempt is just a façade designed to get public attention, and that the government will renege on its promises when the threats fade.

The problem with this argument is that if reforms are for public consumption only, then what can explain Cambodia's economic success? Since the early 2000s, the economy has been growing at an unprecedented rate. Many human indicators such as education, health, life expectancy, and literacy are improving. In addition, the number of people living below the poverty line has been significantly reduced since the early 1990s.

Yet this progress has not come without a cost, especially for the poor and vulnerable. Inequality is staggering, and shows no sign of improving anytime soon. Moreover, the problems of governance continue to hinder the country's economic and political development. Despite tough words and frequent promises, the government has often been accused of not being honest or serious about democratic reforms.

According to the opposition, the main culprit is the lack or absence of political will, so ending the current crisis requires swift and dramatic changes in both policies and leadership. But this explanation is incomplete. Given public sentiment, the ruling elites no doubt understand that they will pay a heavy price if they fail to take action to address voters' concerns. So why aren't reforms moving forward with greater alacrity?

Despite the fact that the CPP's top brass have acknowledged some of the problems that led to the loss of votes, on the rungs below them officials seem to be in denial about the growing public discontent and skepticism. And this denial can be largely explained by the structure of incentives that have been put in place and that have evolved over the years within the party.

For many CPP party members, loyalty is best expressed through actions that defend their leaders' credibility and reputation, even if that requires denying the obvious. This phenomenon is so entrenched that it has become one of the most important factors in deciding who will get what and when in the party. Anyone who seeks to defy the status quo faces isolation or even punishment.

So even if they know that the government has made mistakes, party

officials are reluctant to acknowledge them, for fear of being accused of lacking loyalty or being labeled as opposition sympathizers. Instead of speaking the truth, they attempt to cover up the bad news, and hope that they can fix the problem before their superiors find out. The result is that leaders are not in touch with the situation on the ground, especially if they rely entirely on subordinates' feel-good reports.

This problem has deep and serious implications. It seriously undermines the party's ability to accurately assess Cambodia's changing political landscape. Moreover, if public servants are not happy with their ministers, and there is no way for them to get their message across within the party, they are left with no choice but to denounce their own party. It is no coincidence that anonymous letters accusing some ministers of corruption and nepotism have circulated in social media. Of course, it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to verify the authenticity of these letters. Still, they suggest that discontent toward the government is real.

Pointing out the government's mistakes or failures should not be equated with an attack on the government. The CPP must be open to the good faith expression of genuine concerns. Draconian measures to silence party members are counterproductive, and could even backfire. It demoralizes those whose intentions are good and risks creating a party of incompetents whose purpose is only to enrich themselves.

The CPP needs to address this problem now if it wants to survive future elections. Its leaders should incentivize government officials to speak out for the benefit of Cambodia and its people. Information must be allowed to reach the top.

Breaking this tradition would also allow the ruling elites to encourage the emergence of future leaders within the CPP. For a long time, party members have depended heavily on their leaders to give them direction. Those capable of bringing new ideas and solutions to their workplaces have often been discouraged by the lack of incentives. Many have unsurprisingly opted for the safest course, which is to always endorse their leaders' ideas. They end up becoming yes-men.

The CPP's leaders should encourage party members to take the initiative and reward them for results. Public servants in the middle and lower ranks should be granted some authority to make decisions, so that they need not always wait for their leaders' approval. These changes would significantly accelerate the reform process and reduce unnecessary delays.

The successful adoption of these reforms would benefit everyone. The CPP's leadership will have a better chance restoring public trust and winning back the support. Public servants will have more authority and freedom to do their work and will be fairly rewarded if they produce results. And the people of Cambodia will benefit from a more effective public sector.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on June 22, 2014)*



# Cambodia's Gov't Should Promote Political Participation

By Phoak Kung

**P**olitics is one of the most controversial terms in the Cambodian context, where it is often linked to manipulation, corruption, violence and worse. Citizens are often warned to stay away from politics if they do not want to put themselves in danger or in an unpleasant situation. As a result, Cambodia has long faced a low level of political participation.

Negative views of politics are not surprising given Cambodia's past. Many people have suffered from political turbulence and civil wars over the past four decades. Doubtless the most tragic period of Cambodia's history was the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, in which millions of lives were lost and many had to endure unfathomable suffering for nearly four years. Subsequent political development after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, which was supposed to be a watershed moment for Cambodia's future, turned out to further demoralize the public.

The impact of this history is deep and dramatic. Although it is hard to measure how much they affect people psychologically, these incidents without a doubt play a role in shaping public opinion and attitude toward politics.

Major political parties have always been locked in fierce and sometimes deadly competition. Each side is eager to destroy the other if given the opportunity. Their fighting and bickering are often featured in news headlines. Furthermore, many voters are also fed up with politicians making and breaking promises in every election. In short, Cambodia's political situation faces a severe lack of public trust.

Another problem is that many people strongly stick to a traditional view of politics, which is that government affairs should only be conducted by those in positions of power and wealth. Such a view is so entrenched that many believe even if they want to be involved in political activities, the impact would be minimal or nonexistent.

What happened during and after the July 2013 election offers a hopeful sign. A large number of voters now see the need to engage in politics in order to get the reforms they desire. The sheer number of people participating in the election campaign was unprecedented, and they also actively mobilized public support for their preferred political parties.

Despite such progress, the public understanding of political participation seems to be limited to just the election, political rallies and other party activities, while their input in the policy-making process remains limited. What many fail to notice is that policies and laws enacted by politicians affect almost every aspect of their life.

This is a typical problem not just in Cambodia but in other well-established democracies, and the most-cited reason is the lack of trust and confidence in politicians. Yet, it should be these very same reasons that encourage people to get more involved in politics; in order to keep their leaders in check. More importantly, their contributions should go beyond the political sphere to include economic, social and cultural activities.

For a country to develop, its people must do their share. They have the role and responsibility to respect the laws and help implement policies. Moreover, an engaged populace can also offer their solutions and ask the government to seriously consider them. If people want to improve the delivery of public goods and services, they have to demand it. Wishful thinking or ignoring the facts will not help them get what they want.

Strong civic engagement is good for the government. Indeed, many countries are now concentrating their efforts and resources on promoting it. Engaging the citizenry in the political process is not

necessarily a bad thing. The biggest concern for the ruling elites should be when people say nothing at all while their discontent toward the government is growing.

Therefore, the Cambodian government should take this opportunity to support any initiatives that seek to promote political participation. Allowing people to express their concerns and interests will help the leaders design policies in a way that will boost public trust and confidence.

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# How Universities Can Help Improve the Quality of Education

By Phoak Kung

**T**he demand for skilled labor has been rising over the past several years as Cambodia gradually moves from agriculture to industrial and manufacturing sectors. However, skills shortages remain a major obstacle to the country's future economic growth. Echoing this concern, Prime Minister Hun Sen stressed the urgent need to build a quality and competent workforce ahead of the Asean Economic Community in 2015. Yet, achieving this goal requires tremendous efforts to strengthen the education system, which has long suffered from a lack of resources.

Recently, the government has been trying to introduce a range of policies to reform the education system. For instance, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport just suspended issuing licenses to new universities that focus on social studies but not science, technology and engineering. It also seeks to improve the quality of the academic staff, streamline the curriculum and increase teacher-student ratio. In the upcoming high school exam, the Anti-Corruption Unit will join the ministry to make sure that the exam is conducted properly. Whether the ministry can live up to its promises remains to be seen.

However, even if the government commits to solving the problem of skills shortages, it cannot afford to do everything alone. For example, offering science, technology and engineering degrees is extremely expensive. Only a handful of universities manage to teach some of these courses with financial support and technical assistance from the government, partner institutions and foreign countries.

Complicating this problem further, most universities will adopt different sets of policies in order to maximize their profits, and in many cases, those policies conflict with one another. For instance, universities may be competing to attract more students by reducing tuition fees but also lowering the quality and standard of their education services. In short, they are racing to the bottom and the inability of many students to pay higher tuition fees reinforces such practices.

Because many universities do not see the lack of high-quality education as a collective problem, they have been very reluctant to work closely together and contribute whatever they can in order to help the government address the problem of skills shortages and skills mismatch for thousands of students. Without enough incentives, it is very hard if not impossible to expect the universities to solve this problem anytime soon.

Thus, the government must serve as a bridge to connect universities and other relevant agencies in order to jointly develop a roadmap for education reform. For a long time, the ministry has often been in the driver's seat, creating policies for higher education institutions. Although several universities are also involved in the policy-making process, their input remains limited.

To address this issue, the ministry needs to create a working group made of its senior staff and the leadership of both public and private universities. The government should engage them in the decision-making process as much as possible for they are the ones to decide how much they are willing to invest in improving the quality of education. Moreover, they can also have a sense of ownership of the policies, and feel that it is their responsibility to deliver some positive results.

The government can also work with the universities to streamline the curriculum in order to meet international standards. The problem with the ministry dictating curriculum is that it simply ignores different constraints facing each university. The one-size-fits-all approach will not work. If the government does not take such problem into account, its policies will not yield the results as expected.

Understanding the universities' concerns and interests allows the government to design the right policies and implement them in an orderly sequence. For example, the ministry can recommend specific changes to the curriculum, and give the universities some flexibility to decide how many of these changes they can adopt depending on the availability of resources and know-how—but they must at least meet the minimum requirements. The government might consider allocating its funding scheme based on the universities' performance in curriculum development.

The ministry could also use a working group to design appropriate incentives for universities and students who lack strong interest in science, technology and engineering degrees. Suspending the issuance of licenses to new universities is a good start but not a long-term solution. The biggest problem is not that the universities do not want to offer these skills, but that they do not have any incentive to do so given the huge cost involved.

The solution might be giving direct funding to the universities that are willing to invest in those skills. The ministry can also provide other supports such as capacity building for academic and professional staff, joint research projects and lab equipment, among others. A better solution, perhaps, is to provide more full and partial scholarships to students who want to study engineering and similar subjects.

However, the allocation of such resources can also be problematic. Without proper procedures, this scheme could be plagued with widespread corruption given the discretion that the ministry staff might have in deciding which universities should receive the funding. The ministry can also make use of the working group to develop effective checks and balances to ensure that such funding scheme will be conducted in a fair and just manner. Furthermore, the universities can assist the ministry in designing more accurate assessment criteria, so that resources will be put to use in the right place.

Besides the incentives, the ministry also needs to inspire students to study science, technology and engineering. Many people might not know

the importance of these skills in improving their life and society as a whole. There must be a public campaign to raise awareness among students and parents about how scientific discoveries and engineering works can affect everyday life. So the ministry should work with the universities to design science and technology courses that are appropriate for high school students as well.

In addition, the ministry should cooperate with provincial and municipal education departments, universities and other relevant agencies to arrange science and technology exhibitions at least once a year to give students a chance to see, learn and understand the role of the subjects in society.

Another advantage of close cooperation between universities with the ministry acting as a bridge is that they could share the very limited resources they all have. For instance, most universities in Cambodia do not have a library that would meet all their students' needs. Many books are out of date or no longer practical. The problem is even worse for science and technology students since changes in these fields are happening at an unprecedented speed.

Therefore, the ministry should work with all universities to develop an interlibrary loan scheme, in which each university is required to make a large number of their books available for lending to students from other universities. This sharing approach can also be used in other areas such as lab equipment, physical plant, research facilities and technology transfers, among others.

Despite tough words and strong commitment, the ministry cannot solve the problem of low quality education and skills shortages alone. It needs strong cooperation with all stakeholders, especially the universities. With a large hardworking and skilled population, Cambodia will be able to develop its economy and stand a better chance of competing with the rest of the world. Moreover, such diffusion of knowledge can also help solve some of the biggest problems facing the country at the moment, most notably inequality and poverty.

*(This article was first published in The Cambodia Daily on May 12, 2014)*

# The Making of Cambodia's Foreign Policy

By Vannarith Chheang

**W**ithin the context of increasing regional tensions and unpredictability, Cambodia's foreign policy becomes more essential. It even determines the future development of the country. Without having a right decision and direction in foreign policy making, it risks becoming a pawn of geopolitical game between major powers. History informs us that without national unity and neutrality, we fall into war and conflict.

To understand any country's foreign policy, it needs at least to comprehend the basic conditionality and shaping factors. For Cambodia its foreign policy is rooted in geopolitical realities (relations with its neighbours), nationalism, historical memories (anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism), and economic condition. It is shaped by domestic politics, leadership changes, and externalities. The current leadership views foreign policy as a tool to serve Cambodian national economic development. But it needs to be more visionary, robust and strategically calculated. As a small country, Cambodia has to survive in, be part of, and emerge from the complex and unpredictable global security and economic systems. To do that, it has to be totally independent, neutral, self-reliant, and forward-outward looking.

In principle, Cambodia's foreign policy centers on the principles of neutrality, non-alliance, and peaceful co-existence. As stipulated in the constitution, there are six principles. First, Cambodia adopts a policy of permanent neutrality and non-alignment. Second, it follows a policy of peaceful co-existence with its neighbors and with all other



countries throughout the world. Third, it shall not invade any country, nor interfere in any other country's internal affairs, directly or indirectly, and shall solve any problem peacefully with due respect for mutual interest. Fourth, it shall not join in any military alliance or military pact which is incompatible with its policy of neutrality. Fifth, it shall not permit any foreign military base on its territory and shall not have its own military base abroad, except within the framework of a United Nations request. Sixth, it reserves the right to receive foreign assistance in military equipment, armaments, ammunition, in training of its armed forces, and other assistance for self-defense, to maintain public order and security within its territory.

Historically, however, Cambodia failed to uphold these principles due to changing national and international circumstances and complexities. Cambodia fell into the Indochina War in late 1960s. From 1970 to 1991, the power politics of major powers overshadowed and dominated Cambodian domestic politics and foreign policy. It totally lost its independence and neutrality. The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era of conflict settlement and peace building in Cambodia, which led to the signing of Paris Peace accord on 23 October 1991.

After the general election in 1993 under the auspices of the United Nations, national sovereignty and independence were restored. National economic development and poverty reduction became the core objective of foreign policy and international cooperation. From 1999, especially after becoming an official member of ASEAN, Cambodia's foreign policy focuses on ASEAN, major development partners, and international institutions.

There are four core national interests defined in the contemporary Cambodia's foreign policy: sovereignty and territorial integrity, security and political stability, economic development and poverty reduction, and identity-image building. Located between the two big neighbors (Thailand and Vietnam), the question of sovereignty and territorial integrity historically and geopolitically is at the core of both domestic politics and foreign policy. However, after joining ASEAN and the increasing

economic interdependence and cultural exchanges between Cambodia and its neighbors, such threat perception toward its neighbors gradually diminish.

As for the factors shaping Cambodia's foreign policy, internal factor is the most important. Domestic political conditions and dynamics directly affect foreign policy. Different political parties and interest groups have different priorities and approaches in directing foreign policy. The two big political parties (CPP and CNRP) have different interests and objectives in the making of foreign policy. Such trends put Cambodia in a more fragile and vulnerable position especially within the context of increasing geopolitical competition between major powers in the Asia-Pacific.

The most challenging task for Cambodia therefore is to develop and strengthen its domestic core, which consists of national unity, social and political consensus, strong democratic institution, and leadership capacity. Without having a strong core together with pragmatism, Cambodia risks being trapped into major powers' game. The ongoing political deadlock, political polarization, and social fragmentation are weakening the domestic core and damaging national interest. The whole nation is paying a high price for such political crisis.

Cambodia needs to wake up to grasp opportunities and stand up to the challenges. Global economy is recovering from the financial and economic crisis. The world is getting more interconnected and interdependent. Nation states fall or rise depending on their competitiveness. ASEAN community building process and intra-regional connectivity plan are underway. Sub-regional cooperation schemes and frameworks such as growth triangles, greater Mekong sub-region, and other economic corridors in the Mekong sub-region are picking up steam.

In the meantime, new challenges also emerge. Global inequity and development gap, resources insecurity, unsustainable development, and chronic poverty are some of the global issues requiring global cooperation and solutions. In the Asia-Pacific, structural power competition between

major powers (especially between China and the United States and its allies) is threatening regional peace and stability. It creates strategic dilemma for small countries in Southeast Asia particularly Cambodia that is striving to maintain its neutrality and trying to create a regional strategic equilibrium.

What should Cambodia do next? First, it needs to tackle domestic politics through dialogue and negotiation, put national interests ahead of the narrow and short-term interests of the political parties, interest groups, and families. Its foreign policy needs to have a long-term vision with realistic strategic action plans. It needs to promote frequent consultation and debate at the National Assembly on international issues and Cambodian responses. Different political parties should reach a common position on their foreign policy objectives and priority.

Secondly, Cambodia needs to develop a strong research capacity and information analysis related to international complexities, scale up diplomatic professionalism, and cultivate a culture of dialogues among key stakeholders working on international issues. Cambodia needs to develop the quality of research institutes, think tanks, and training programs on international studies. Once capacity and competency are improved, Cambodia has higher chances of transforming the externalities into a source of national development and strength.

Thirdly, Cambodia needs to pursue strategic diversification, support multilateralism, maintain equi-proximate relationships with all major powers, strengthen the centrality role of ASEAN, uphold rules-based international relations, and promote peace through dialogue and negotiation. Cambodia must stay strictly neutral with regard to international sovereignty disputes and conflicts.

Fourthly, Cambodia should explore and develop its own type of soft power. Khmer values are potential sources of soft power projection. It should also explore and develop other diplomatic tools based on humanitarianism such as anti-landmines campaign, humanitarian mine action, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO), and the promotion of responsibility to protect (RtoP). Importantly, to build good

image abroad, Cambodia needs to implant a culture of good governance, respect of human rights, and environmental protection.

The future of Cambodia relies on its strong domestic core and pragmatic foreign policy that can effectively transform the externalities into a source of peace and socio-economic development, turn external challenges into opportunities, and promote Cambodian soft power. To realize its vision to be a middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050, Cambodia has to develop state-of-the-art foreign policy by investing more in building a strong institution with competent leaders, professional diplomats, and strategic thinkers.

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# The Future of Cambodia

By Vannarith Chheang

**E**conomic performance in Cambodia over the last decade has been remarkable with an average annual growth rate of about 8 percent. However, there are uncertainties and unpredictability in the post-2013 election political crisis and the economic implications of which are still looming. Political polarization is leading to social fragmentation. There is persistent threat from labour disputes and strikes. Reforms have yet delivered concrete results. The supply of qualified skilled-labour is very limited.

The current development path is vulnerable to internal and external shocks. The bases of the economic growth concentrate on only few sectors: construction, garment industry, tourism, and low-value-added agricultural sector. The widening economic development gap between the urban and rural areas and the increasing income disparity between the rich and the poor can potentially lead to social and political instability if there is no timely and appropriate intervening policy and strategy from the state and development partners.

Taking these challenges into account, all political parties have to work together to find solutions to the problems. There is little time left before those multiple crisis and issues reach their difficult-to-reverse peak. Political settlement and agreement between the two winning parties (The CPP and the CNRP) need to be realised based on national interests and mutual concessions. The CNRP has to enter the National Assembly (NA) with the guarantee from the CPP that the National Election Committee (NEC) is going to be concretely reformed and the call for an early date of the next general election is met (the exact date of which is subject

to negotiation). After the CNRP joins the NA, it is expected that full legitimacy (both legal and moral legitimacy) of the government will be restored, complete international recognition and support will be resumed, and inward flow of foreign direct investment will take a full swing.

Hopes and expectations are on the horizon. Both parties are responsible to implement deep and comprehensive reform agenda in order to solve national issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, land disputes, deforestation, social injustice, and human rights violation. Most importantly, both parties have to build and strengthen national unity and social cohesiveness.

Public sector reform is the most urgent task on the list of the agenda. The state institutions are often inefficient, irresponsive, and lack accountability and transparency. It is therefore necessary than ever before to effectively and quickly transform and convert the public institutions into genuine service-oriented institutions for the people. Prime Minister Hun Sen acknowledged such shortcomings and was committed to deepen comprehensive reforms of the state institutions. In his remarks at the first cabinet meeting on 25 September 2013, he urged his newly appointed ministers to practice self-criticism. “Look at yourself in the mirror, take a bath, and rub off dirt from your body, if there is any... We must change or we will fail... We must change our attitude, way of thinking and action in delivering on our election promises.”

Cambodia needs to build a knowledge-based society and invest more in education and human resources development, information flow, and civic engagement. Education and training have to move towards a quality-based education. Transformative and decisive educational leadership is required to implant discipline, ethics, values, critical thinking, and professionalism within the academic institutions and training centers. University-industry innovative partnerships and networks have to be in place in order to narrow and bridge the skill gaps and to better response to the fast-changing labor market forces. Vocational training and skill development should be promoted especially in the field of engineering, manufacturing, apprenticeship, information technology, transport,

logistics, entrepreneurship, and health care.

Diversification of sources or bases of economic growth is also needed. The government, private sector and society should work together to further improve the value chains of products and services, particularly those which Cambodia has comparative and competitive advantages in. An example would be to value-add the supply chains of the agricultural sectors, by investing in technology which allows the processing and packaging of raw materials, instead of outsourcing these processes to other countries.

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) need support from the government in terms of financing, technology, training, market information, business networks, in order to help them integrate into the regional production and service networks. Cambodia has great potential to supply parts and components of electronic, automobile and machinery products to multinational companies in the region.

Addressing inequality is long-term uphill struggle. Mismanagement of natural and state resources, power abuses and corruption, weak state institutions in redistributing wealth, spatial development bias, gender inequality, and geographical disconnections are some of the drivers accelerating inequality. Inequitable access to new technology, investment, and infrastructure magnify inequality. To address the issue, it requires better and more efficient allocation of state budget by investing more in education, health, and other pro-poor sectors; improve urban-rural linkages through infrastructure connectivity; and develop a balanced and friendly employment opportunity and composition between manufacturing, services, agriculture, SMEs, labor market institutions, public employment scheme.

Cambodia needs to continue opening up and deepening regional integration. Through the ASEAN regional integration process, Cambodia will gain more access to regional market and be able to attract more foreign direct investment (FDI). With a market of more than 600 million people, ASEAN is a big market for Cambodia. There are opportunities for investment flows, which also further deepen regional production

networks. And this in turn creates huge opportunities for the Cambodian people. However, it also imposes new challenges for small and medium enterprises in Cambodia, which do not have financial resources and technology to compete with their counterparts in the region. Within such fierce competitive environment, Cambodian entrepreneurs need to be more innovative, the public institutions more efficient, transparent, and accountable, and the whole society more educated and informed. More attention and investment has to focus on knowledge management and institutionalization.

For the reform path to be successful, it requires leadership, partnership, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. Leadership implies the capacity to translate vision into reality, to convince, influence, and empower others, and to make positive changes based on shared values. Partnership aims to ensure that key actors are empowered to collectively articulate development agenda, encourage learning and sharing of information and knowledge in promoting sustainable development, strengthen interconnectedness, and build a resilient network adaptive to fast-paced changes and transformation. Entrepreneurship refers to the ability and willingness to pursuit, enlarge opportunities beyond resource constraints through continued innovation and risks taking. Sustainability means the balance and harmony between economy, society, and environment.

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# Losing the People: Government Legitimacy Stumbles in Cambodia

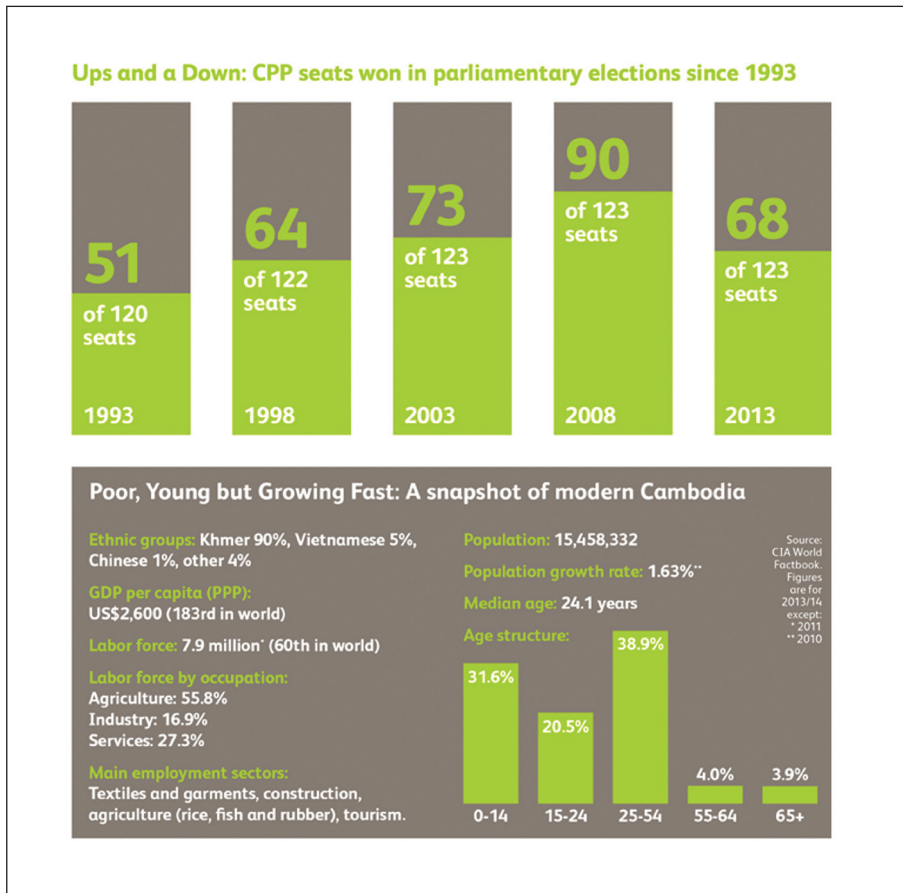
By Phoak Kung

Cambodia's political landscape has been undergoing a dramatic transformation in recent years, and along with this have come changes in public perceptions of government legitimacy. Almost a year ago, huge crowds of protesters poured out onto the streets to demand that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) step down in order to make way for what they call genuine democracy. The "change or no change, change" slogan of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) has become the talk of Phnom Penh.

Although the CPP might not be under immediate threat given the fact that it still won 68 out of 123 seats in the July 2013 parliamentary election, its stunning decline is forcing the ruling elites to come to terms with the cruel reality that they aren't as invincible or unbeatable as they once believed. While Cambodia is enjoying greater stability and peace, and the economy is growing rapidly, the CPP has fallen victim to its own achievements. The most pressing question is how did voters suddenly fall out of love with the CPP?

## **The Collapse of the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia in the 1980s**

History can be useful in explaining this conundrum. In January 1979, the CPP, with Vietnamese military support, toppled the Khmer Rouge regime that murdered millions of its own people and destroyed every aspect



of society. Shortly afterward, though, Cambodia became embroiled in another prolonged civil war between the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (the precursor of the CPP) and resistance movements including the Khmer Rouge, Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPRLF), and the royalist party, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC).

The country was also facing other overwhelming challenges such as famine in the early 1980s, international sanctions, crippled infrastructure, a severe shortage of educated people as a result of the Khmer Rouge genocide and widespread poverty. In short, it was a failed state. Despite such tremendous difficulties, Cambodia was slowly recovering from the

tragedy of the past, and most people were eager to get back to normal life after years of unspeakable suffering. Throughout the 1980s, the source of legitimacy for the CPP came from its victory over the Khmer Rouge and its ability to provide some degree of stability and peace. However, the presence of Vietnamese soldiers on Cambodian soil had gradually become a liability for the CPP.

### **The Paris Peace Agreements: A Turning Point?**

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on October 23, 1991, marked an important turning point in Cambodian politics. The return of King Norodom Sihanouk after many years in exile brought great hope to his people that he would be able to transform Cambodia into a strong and prosperous country again, like the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community) of the 1950s. There is no doubt that many people were still grateful to the CPP for saving their lives from the murderous Khmer Rouge, however, they were also desperate for a better future, and they strongly believed that King Sihanouk would be able to deliver it.

Moreover, the deployment of tens of thousands of peacekeepers by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992 reassured people that the democratic transition would be smooth and peaceful. But what was even more crucial was that voters didn't have to worry about another civil war breaking out if they voted for political parties other than the CPP, because they had UNTAC to safeguard peace and stability. The results of the 1993 election, which saw FUNCINPEC emerge victorious, clearly confirmed that view.

The CPP, however, vehemently rejected the election results, claiming massive irregularities. The brief threat of secession emerged among the provinces in the eastern part of the country, but never materialized. After several painful rounds of negotiations between the CPP and FUNCINPEC, a coalition government was finally created with Prince Norodom Rannaridh becoming the first Prime Minister and Hun Sen the second Prime Minister, with cabinet posts split equally between the two

major parties. The secessionist incident and the subsequent power-sharing deal made many people realize that UNTAC didn't have as much power as they once thought, and that the CPP remained the most powerful force in the country.

The CPP's leaders quickly learned a bitter lesson from their stunning defeat in the 1993 election: that they had to go beyond the rhetoric of their revolutionary legacy and the mere existence of peace if they wanted to win the next election, scheduled for July 1998. More importantly, the CPP also had to compete with FUNCINPEC, which could bank on King Sihanouk's tremendous popularity. Learning from the success of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the CPP's leaders rolled out a range of popular policies and spent hundreds of millions of dollars on pet projects such as schools, health centers, pagodas, roads and bridges, many of which bore the name of second Prime Minister Hun Sen.

There was also a massive public campaign to refashion the image of the CPP and its leaders, and to promote their achievements to the public. Songs, films and narratives were used to tell the stories of the second prime minister's humble background and his revolutionary struggles in an attempt to transform him into a charismatic leader like King Sihanouk. The strategy paid off. In just a few years, Hun Sen had become even more popular than his own party. It is also important to point out that the CPP's leaders were keen to embrace some key reforms that subsequently led to economic growth and poverty reduction. Their strong economic performance helped them restore faith and confidence among voters.

Fear of civil war and instability took center stage again, however, when a deadly clash between the CPP and FUNCINPEC broke out in the heart of the nation's capital July 5-6, 1997. The royalist armed forces were defeated and captured. Prince Ranariddh and his entourage fled the country even before the fighting began. The incident was a brutal reminder that peace remained fragile, and Cambodia could easily slide back into civil war. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge was still fiercely fighting with the Phnom Penh government from their strongholds along the Cambodian-Thai border. Although its capacity had been greatly reduced since the signing of the Paris

Peace Agreements in 1991, it was still a great concern for many Cambodians.

Under tremendous pressure from the international community, Prince Ranariddh was allowed to return to Cambodia in order to stand in the 1998 election. Not surprisingly, the issues of peace and stability were the main themes of the CPP's campaign strategy. The ruling elites repeatedly reminded voters that they couldn't guarantee peace if the opposition were elected. There was no doubt that many people still had fresh memories of the earlier deadly clash, so they took the CPP's warning very seriously. Moreover, in the late 1990s, Cambodia's economy was also taking off, finally lifting millions out of extreme poverty.

The ability of the ruling elites to project themselves as a symbol of continuity, stability and peace, coupled with their strong economic record, propelled the CPP to victory in the 1998 election, with 64 seats captured out of 122. Despite the fact that there were also many other factors at play, the election results clearly suggested that both the quality and the performance of the leadership was becoming important for voters in deciding which candidate and party to choose. In the CPP's case, it was not just the party's revolutionary legacy and victory over the Khmer Rouge that returned it to political domination, but also the growing popularity of Hun Sen as a charismatic and strong leader.

In 1999, the Khmer Rouge were finally brought to heel. For the first time, many people came to believe that peace was within reach, and the chances of another civil war were slim, since none of the various political factions had any military capabilities to fight one another, with the exception of the CPP, and infighting among CPP leaders was highly unlikely, at least in the eyes of the citizenry.

Despite the collapse of the Khmer Rouge and the decline of FUNCINPEC, the threat of war and social unrest weren't gone entirely from Cambodian politics. People were still very careful not to do anything that might put their hard-won peace in danger. Yet, it was also clear that many Cambodians began to shift their focus away from peace and stability to other problems that might have a direct impact on their living conditions. Thus, the public perception of what constitutes a good leader

was also changing. In the past, leaders were measured based on their ability to prevent war and instability, but now the public also looked at other qualities including the ability to create jobs, improve the plight of the poor and provide public goods and services.

In 2003, the CPP won the national election by a large margin, capturing 74 of 123 seats. The result also reflected the change in Cambodian views on what constitutes a legitimate government or a strong leader. While it is true to say that some voters supported the CPP because they were grateful for what it had done for them and the country in the past, other factors were also at play.

Starting in the early 2000s, the national economy began growing at an astounding rate of around 10 percent annually, substantially improving the living conditions for millions of Cambodians. Farmers could now find markets for their products. A new generation of entrepreneurs sprung up in search of opportunities from the economic boom. The property sector was also growing at an unprecedented rate, giving rise to many satellite cities around the nation's capital and other provinces. Land prices were also skyrocketing. Tall buildings, shopping malls and high-tech companies began to crowd the main streets of Phnom Penh. Furthermore, other human development indicators such as child mortality, life expectancy, education and health were also improving.

For most people, the country was surely on the right track to prosperity. Cambodia was nothing short of an economic miracle, given all the constraints it faced in past decades, and the CPP rightly deserved credit for these achievements. As a result, the CPP won an overwhelming victory in the 2008 election, winning 90 out of 123 seats. At this point, it seemed, the ruling elites of the CPP had become invincible and unbeatable.

### **Post-2008: What Went Wrong?**

The rise of the CPP as a hegemonic party also sowed the seeds of its current problems. After crushing their opponents at the polls, the party's

leaders didn't seem to feel the need to reform and modernize the party any faster, while demographic, socio-economic and technological changes have greatly transformed Cambodian politics since the 2008 election.

In 2012, it was estimated that more than 50 percent of Cambodians were under 24, and up to 70 percent under 35. They have emerged as the country's most powerful political force. More importantly, these younger voters are usually critical and vocal when it comes to government affairs. They are also concerned with issues such as corruption, nepotism, the rule of law, social justice and inequality, among others.

But what makes their voice louder is the widespread use of information technology. In 2012, there were nearly one million Facebook users in Cambodia and more than 14 million mobile phone subscribers. Now information can be easily spread to all corners of the country in just a click. Social media provides young people with a platform to express their political views without fear and also allows them to co-ordinate various activities in response to any abuses of power or government policies.

Furthermore, the CPP's victory over the Khmer Rouge in early 1979, which has been bedrock of its appeal for public support, has become deeply politicized and controversial over time. Since 1993, opposition parties have run massive campaigns against the CPP, describing the victory on January 7, 1979, as the beginning of Vietnamese occupation over Cambodia. They also accuse the CPP's leaders of selling out to Vietnam on border demarcation. In every election, opposition leaders have repeatedly reminded voters how Vietnamese people come to live in the country freely, taking jobs and other benefits from ordinary Cambodians. Hatred against the Vietnamese reached a fatal level in the 2013 election.

During the campaign for the July 28 election, issues related to Vietnam were among the most hotly debated. On polling day itself, these racial issues turned violent when police clashed with opposition supporters, because the latter accused the authorities of allowing Vietnamese people to vote even without proper documents, while real Cambodians couldn't find their names on the voting lists or were denied their right to vote due

to insufficient documents. There is no doubt that these issues will remain a thorn in the side of the CPP for years to come.

Despite sustained, rapid economic growth for over a decade, many poor people don't feel the so-called trickle-down effects yet, and some even complain of being worse off as a result of economic modernization. It would be unfair to ignore the fact that the ruling elites have done a good job in improving the living conditions of millions of people and steadily reducing poverty. However, the government doesn't seem to understand that the poor and vulnerable are usually the ones who also bear the brunt of economic reforms. For instance, the inequality gap remains staggering. Traditional businesses are making way for bigger private firms and multinational corporations. Wage rates and working conditions haven't improved as much as people would wish. For many opposition supporters, the government has failed them big time.

The implications of the changes in public perception toward government legitimacy in Cambodia are deep and dramatic. Yet, the CPP can't seem to grasp the full extent of these changes on domestic politics. Its election campaign strategies overly focused on its victory over the Khmer Rouge and the threat of war and social instability, which no longer seem to resonate with many voters. The lack of interest among the ruling elites in engaging youth in the decision-making process and the party's development is perhaps the CPP's biggest misstep. The sheer number of young voters who turned up to welcome the return of Sam Rainsy, the CNRP's president, when he came back to Cambodia from exile was astonishing. More importantly, they didn't just vote for the CNRP, they were also fiercely active in mobilizing more support for the opposition.

While there is plenty of grand talk within the CPP about major governance reforms, the realities don't seem to live up to expectations. The government usually sweeps the details under the rug. While Hun Sen surely recognizes the growing public discontent over the misconduct of politicians and civil servants, he repeatedly asked voters not to punish him and the CPP for mistakes he had nothing to do with. The CPP's campaign slogan carried the same message, but in a subtle way: that if



people still love and sympathize with Hun Sen, they should vote for the CPP. However, opposition supporters believe that the buck stops at the prime minister's desk, and they are holding him accountable for mistakes. The CPP's disappointing result in the 2013 election, with only 68 out of 123 seats, strongly suggests that voters agree.

## **Conclusion**

It is time for Cambodia's ruling elites to revise their election strategies if they want to reconnect with voters and get re-elected in the next general election. The rhetoric of war and instability is not enough to scare people into voting for the CPP; it might, instead, force them to take a more dangerous route to challenging the government, as the current political impasse and deadly clashes between authorities and protesters in recent months have clearly shown. Complicating matters further, the use of violence to crack down on peaceful protesters will only bring the country to the brink of chaos. That's not what the CPP elites want to see either.

To be sure, the CPP can boast a strong economic record, but its leaders seem to have lost touch on these issues when they bitterly complain that the public doesn't give them enough credit. They fail to realize that not everyone has received the benefits of double-digit economic growth, and some are even worse off. The government needs to do more to protect the poor, or at least to ease the pain of economic reforms by addressing some of the binding constraints facing the poor such as a skills shortage, low productivity, slow technological changes, widening inequality gap, lack of healthcare and so on.

A growing number of people in Cambodia are also concerned about non-economic issues, and really want to see genuine democracy take root. The problems of governance — rule of law, social justice, arbitrary use of power, human rights violations, corruption and nepotism, among others — will remain the top priority for many voters in the next election. Moreover, it will be an uphill battle for the CPP to offer good solutions that can put the racially and historically charged Vietnamese issues to

rest. Although the CPP has been trying to convince voters that Cambodia hasn't lost any territory to Vietnam, the result is rather disappointing. The best solution is perhaps to have public debates on these issues, so that people can judge them based on real evidence, not just political propaganda

The changes in public perceptions toward government legitimacy in Cambodia are real and unprecedented. Cambodia's politicians need to take steps to reform and modernize their parties now, if they want to survive electorally. The changes also underscore the diminishing role of the CPP's revolutionary background as the sole factor in voters' choices. There is little doubt that people will still look for a strong and capable leader to steer the country towards peace and prosperity. However, they also want a leader who will respect the rights of minorities, improve the plight of the poor, promote democratic governance and protect the country from foreign ambitions.

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# Solving the Skills Shortage

By Phoak Kung

**D**espite tens of thousands of students graduating each year, Cambodia still faces a lack of skilled workers, especially in industrial and manufacturing sectors. There is little doubt that this problem will negatively affect the country's future economic development.

Echoing this concern, Prime Minister Hun Sen stressed the need to build a quality and competent workforce ahead of the ASEAN Economic Community's launch at the end of 2015.

Recently, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has taken important steps to address the skills shortage, such as by putting a cap on the issuance of licences to new universities in an attempt to strengthen the quality of higher education. According to Yok Ngov, secretary of state at the ministry, this restriction will only be applied to universities focusing on social studies; promoting science, technology and engineering skills will remain the ministry's top priority.

In addition, the ministry has also been looking at a range of policies to improve the quality of professors, streamline the curriculum and increase teacher-student ratios, among other things. Achieving all these goals may be challenging, but with the right policies and a strong commitment, the government will definitely be able to reform the education system to meet the needs of the labour market.

Despite these positive initiatives, the lack of incentives for Cambodia's universities and students is yet to be sufficiently discussed.

Offering science and technology courses is very expensive, and many universities cannot afford to do so. Only a handful of universities manage to teach related skills, generally with some kind of financial support or

technical assistance from the government, partner universities overseas, foreign countries or private individuals. However, such funding is very volatile and cannot provide a long-term solution to resource scarcity in the education system.

One way to solve this problem is by having the government play an active role in providing universities with resources, such as funding for research, lab equipment and capacity-building for academic staff. Because these resources are very limited, the government should allocate them on a competitive basis.

Therefore, there must be clear assessment guidelines and policies for the Education Ministry to determine whether a university qualifies for funding and other support measures. The criteria might include a university's academic standing, research achievements, positive social impact and contribution to skills development.

Of course, the government cannot support these universities indefinitely. The private sector has an important role to play here because it also greatly benefits from Cambodia having a large pool of skilled workers. Thus, what the government should do is create enough incentives to attract the private sector to take part in solving the skills shortage.

For instance, the government can create friendly policies that encourage both foreign and local companies to substantially contribute to the teaching of skills that are vital but not widely enough known. Moreover, the government can also help increase cooperation between universities and private companies in joint research programs or develop skills that will match the companies' needs.

More importantly, the government must work closely with foreign partners, especially advanced industrialised nations, to facilitate technology transfers and the exchange of ideas.

Another major concern is the lack of interest of many students in science and technology. Cambodia is not an exception here – many countries face the same problem. The government should create incentives to encourage students to learn these skills in these fields. There are several ways of going about this, such as providing more full and

partial scholarships, increasing work placements, creating more jobs, raising public awareness and inspiring students by showing them how scientific discoveries substantially change the way people live.

Cambodia really needs a future generation that is passionate and skilled in science, technology and engineering in order to compete with the rest of the world and grow the national economy.

The skills shortage problem presents a unique opportunity for the government to take a bold decision to rigorously reform the education system and improve the living conditions of millions of people.

*(This article was first published in The Phnom Penh Post on May 01, 2014)*

# Cambodia: A Dangerous Game of Brinkmanship

By Phoak Kung

**W**ill the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) or the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) blink first? It's a question that has been asked frequently since tens of thousands of people poured onto the streets of Phnom Penh to protest the July 28 election, which opposition leaders claim was plagued with massive irregularities. Talks between the two major parties have continued intermittently, without result. With no solution in sight, Cambodia is facing its most serious crisis in decades.

Leaders from both political parties have in the meantime ramped up their rhetoric, and there is no sign that they will tone things down any time soon. For the last five months, the CNRP has been demanding an independent investigation into last year's elections, to vehement opposition from the CPP. More recently, the CNRP's leaders have insisted on holding fresh elections while calling on Prime Minister Hun Sen to resign. They plan to hold longer and larger protests nationwide until the CPP concedes.

However, the presence of hundreds of riot police, barbed wire and heavily armed vehicles in Phnom Penh clearly indicate that the government is ready to face down opposition supporters. Certainly the ruling elites understand that violent crackdowns will only exacerbate the crisis and draw international condemnation. The experience of the Arab Spring suggests that peace can best be achieved through dialogue. Yet in recent weeks the demonstrations in Cambodia took another turn after garment factory workers in several parts of the country began striking

over demands that their minimum wage be increased to 160 USD. The CNRP's leaders quickly joined the chorus and blamed the government for failing to provide poor workers a living wage. Other groups sought to capitalize on the momentum to voice their discontent and pressure the CPP to give people more freedom. For example, Beehive Radio Director Mam Sonando, a vocal critic of government, joined the protest in hopes of expanding his station's coverage and obtaining a TV license. The protests prompted a crackdown by the government, which left a number of people dead.

It's not the first time that Cambodia's politicians have engaged in brinkmanship. What makes this time different is that the CPP and the CNRP have jointly undermined the very institutions that formerly helped them mediate the conflicts and reconcile their differences. Without these institutions, confrontations, violent or not, between the authorities and protesters will only push the country to the brink of chaos. If the situation deteriorates to the point where neither party has an exit option, the country may be unable to return to peace and stability.

In past political deadlocks, King Norodom Sihanouk played an extremely important role in bringing the parties to the negotiating table under the banner of national unity and reconciliation. After months of painful talks, a deal would be hammered out and a coalition government formed. The monarch was such a towering figure in Cambodia's politics, regardless of controversial decisions in the past, politicians could not afford to ignore or publicly defy him. With his death, the monarchy has faced an uphill battle to win that kind of popular support.

Rather than putting the institution of the monarchy beyond politics, King Norodom Sihamoni has been drawn into the middle of the mud-slinging. Politicians might have forgotten that whenever the monarch is seen to be taking sides, he risks losing the credibility and trust he needs to independently arbitrate political conflicts. Although the extent to which the monarchy has been politicized is not yet clear, what is clear is that the King's independence will be closely scrutinized. Whether he can overcome such obstacles remains to be seen.

Another possible mediator is the business community. As an integral part of the national economy, both parties need to heed their advice. Moreover, many business elites are also major financial contributors to political parties, given them leverage to force a compromise. Their businesses will suffer if the current crisis drags on too long. The dispute over the minimum wage between the Garment Factories Association in Cambodia (GMAC) and workers has caused massive disruptions in the sector.

However, the involvement of business elites can also be problematic, since some of them are at the heart of the current crisis. Many protestors are extremely unhappy with being left out of the rapid economic growth Cambodia has enjoyed, and squarely blame the CPP and private companies for ignoring their plight. Protestors at Freedom Park often speak of land evictions, low wages, deforestation and a lack of jobs.

Mobilizing mass protests against the business community could have disastrous economic consequences. Cambodia needs to avoid a class war, and opposition leaders must avoid marginalizing business.

In addition, Cambodia is no stranger to seeking interventions from foreign nations when it comes to political deadlock. The Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 and the deal after the deadly clash in 1997 are just some of the successful examples. Now come reports that Hun Sen has asked a UN special envoy to pressure opposition leaders to rejoin parliament and agree to talks. The opposition itself also relies on support from the West to keep pressure on the ruling elites. However, instead of calling for sanctions and military interventions, they can engage these countries in a broader discussion as to how the current crisis can be solved without having to compromise democratic values or lose the opportunity for deeper reforms in the future.

This might sound simplistic. The decision to invite countries to be part of the negotiation process can also be controversial. For a long time, the government has been skeptical about the intentions of Western nations. Are they engaging Cambodia to promote democracy or are they advocating for regime change? The Chinese position is also unclear. While



a Chinese state-run news agency has recently criticized the Cambodian government, China's leaders have thrown their support behind those in power. Japan, France and Australia could be good candidates, since they have mediated past stalemates. More importantly, ASEAN should take this opportunity to play a more active role in preventing conflict within its region. A peaceful Cambodia is in the bloc's interest, after all.

Although one or all of these options might work, the ball is in the court of the CPP and the CNRP. They have to want the dialogue to happen before anything can be agreed. If the parties are not willing to step back and compromise to get talks started, it will be almost impossible to prevent violence from exploding.

It is understandable that the CNRP's leaders are trying to use the power of mass protests to force the CPP to concede. But they should recognize that the current movement could easily spiral out of control. Threats to block roads or occupy government buildings will only fuel the violence and put more lives in danger. The authorities can also use their threats as an excuse to crack down on protesters.

Violence can't end the current crisis. The CPP's decision to show some restraint in dealing with the opposition protesters since the July 28 election shows it understands the risks to its legitimacy that violence posts. Certainly, when authorities have clashed with protestors, as in November and then again two weeks ago, it has done little to weaken the determination of the opposition. Worse, the brutality has fed growing public resentment towards the government.

There is little doubt that the government can use coercive measures to crack down on opposition protesters, but it cannot keep the armed forces and riot police on the streets indefinitely. Without a solution that is acceptable to the opposition, the CPP will never be able to resolve the current crisis. Opposition movements might be temporarily crushed, but they can regroup and challenge the government again.

Rather than wasting time on personal attacks, leaders from both parties need to work on their differences and pave the way for long-term democratic reforms. The CPP and the CNRP must dial down their rhetoric

and build momentum towards peace talks. The game of brinkmanship is far too dangerous to play, especially at a time when people are losing trust in the very institutions that traditionally help mediate conflicts.

The latest news now reports rumors of secret talks between the CPP and the CNRP about resolving the current crisis, although Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha have denied this. If the rumors turn out to be true, the opposition leaders will have questions to answer. Of course, dialogue is needed to end the deadlock, but Cambodia's people also expect their leaders to do this in a transparent way, not sealing a deal behind closed doors and leaving the public in the dark.

National reconciliation is not something to be achieved only between the major political parties; it must also be between the government and its people. Arguably, the problems of widening inequality and social injustice are at the core of the current crisis. The fact that demonstrations have turned violent in the last few years is a clear sign that people don't trust their leaders and government institutions to solve their problems and protect them from abuses of power. It is time for government and opposition leaders to improve the plight of the poor and put the country on track to genuine democracy. Cambodia's people deserve better than this.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on January 17, 2014)*

# The Cambodia National Rescue Party: What's Next?

By Phoak Kung

**P**rior to the 2013 election, Cambodia's opposition parties were often characterized as divided, weak and poor. For the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), they were simply a subject of ridicule. In the aftermath of the CPP's landslide victory in the 2008 election, opposition supporters had cause to wonder whether it was the beginning of the end for the opposition in Cambodia, let alone expect them to achieve a surge in popular support.

Thus, the stunning performance by the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in the July 28 election came as a huge shock to most people. For the first time, the opposition had emerged as a real alternative to the dominant party. After capturing 55 out of 123 seats, the CNRP insisted that in fact they had won the election given the massive irregularities that had been involved. Talks have been on and off between the CPP and the CNRP in an attempt to end the political impasse, but to date there has been no progress. Each party has blamed the other for failing to make the necessary compromise.

The opposition has demanded an independent investigation into election irregularities, while the ruling elites have insisted that the National Election Committee (NEC) is the only legitimate institution to resolve electoral disputes. With no resolution in sight, the CNRP has issued an ultimatum: reach a deal by late December, or it will hold larger and longer demonstrations nationwide until the CPP caves. The opposition has also been using mass protests as leverage to force the ruling elites to relinquish

more power, although this has yet to be successful. The most pressing question for the CNRP's leaders probably relates to the nature of their strategies to end the current deadlock and to win the next election.

After many rounds of painful talks, the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) finally merged with the Human Rights Party (HRP) to establish the CNRP in July 2012. The merger excited many opposition supporters, and ended years of bickering and infighting among Cambodia's opposition groups. Although the merger significantly boosted popular support for the opposition, it would be an overstatement to suggest that it was the only factor responsible for the CNRP's substantial gains in the July 28 election. Over the past few years, Cambodia's political landscape has undergone rapid transformation, and its implications are both deep and dramatic.

The opposition has benefited greatly from demographic changes. In 2012 it is estimated that around 70 per cent of Cambodians were under the age of 35. Many of these young voters didn't just vote for the CNRP; they were also fiercely mobilizing public support for the opposition. Yet among these younger cohorts, some are hardliners who have been insisting that the opposition accept nothing less than a victory or the removal of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his close associates.

In an added complication, the CNRP depends heavily on this group to mobilize people to join their mass demonstrations nationwide. It is no coincidence that opposition leaders often consult their strongest supporters at Freedom Park before negotiating a deal to end the current political impasse, because these younger voters have been risking all to help them challenge the CPP's domination. Further, they are very vocal about government affairs, both in public and on social media such as Facebook and YouTube. During the election campaigns, given CNRP's severe resource constraints, many of them financially supported themselves, with little help from their leaders.

Although these hardliners play an extremely important role in the CNRP's current election gains, opposition leaders must strike a delicate balance here. They need to know that many of their supporters are moderate or at least less extreme than their counterparts. Of course,

they also want to see the CNRP being elected to power, so that some of its policies can be implemented for the benefit of Cambodia's ordinary people, especially the poor. Yet they also want the process of change to happen without endangering peace and stability in the country and without seriously affecting everyday Cambodian life.

It is also reasonable to say that the moderate opposition supporters might tolerate the ongoing political deadlock given the difficult situations that the CNRP leaders are facing, and that it will take time before a good deal can be reached by both political parties. But the opposition leaders cannot take their supporters' patience for granted. If the current situation drags on for too long without any solution in sight and if subsequently begins to hurt the economy, voters will blame not only the CPP but also the opposition for putting ego before the national interest. Thus, the CNRP's leaders need to be very realistic about what they can do to end the current political impasse, rather than simply responding to the demands of the hardliners.

Another problem facing the CNRP's leaders is whether they have the capacity and resources to lead the new government if elected. The current election gains don't necessarily mean that voters fully trust the CNRP's leaders to run the country. In fact, voters are right to be concerned given the opposition's past track record. Prior to the merger, the SRP and the HRP were locked in a war of words, accusing each other of selling out to the ruling elites or having hidden agendas. They dug up any damaging stories they could find to destroy the legitimacy and credibility of their rivals.

In addition, both parties also experienced mass defections of senior party members to the CPP in the past. These defectors would then appear on television to blast their former leaders and provide their own accounts of why they had decided to leave the party that they had helped build for years. The opposition's infighting and bickering usually featured in the headlines of major local media outlets. Worse, opposition leaders were also charged with favoritism and suppression of those who were vocal and critical of their leadership styles.

It is understandable that the CNRP's leaders are concerned that the CPP might penetrate their party rank and file. However, restricting party members from participating in key decisions might inadvertently lead to an over-concentration of power in the hands of a few people at the top. It could also discourage highly qualified people from joining the party who might not see any potential career prospects without having to engage in protracted factional competition. Such infighting and favoritism would also severely undermine the opposition leaders' credibility, their most important political asset.

The CNRP's leaders could take advantage of the party youth movements to address their lack of human resources. They should also nurture their younger supporters by creating various programs that would allow them to take part in the policymaking process where appropriate. The youth will form the backbone of the CNRP's future, and opposition leaders should think of these younger cohorts not merely as the party support base but also as the party's next generation by giving them opportunities to learn and grow.

There is little doubt that social media has played an extremely important role in the CNRP's stunning election gains, and has assisted them in getting their message across to millions of voters. Social media also allows the opposition to freely publish information and facts potentially damaging to the government, and seriously undermine the ruling elites' tight grip over traditional media outlets. Recently, opposition leaders have launched online television programs, but they don't seem to have any concrete plans about how they will use social media to challenge the ruling elites' hegemony and maximize the public interest.

Although many of CNRP's senior members have Facebook accounts, they only use them to make announcements about planned protests and other party activities. There are several opposition Facebook pages that have been fiercely criticizing the CPP and its leaders on a wide range of issues. They are apparently supporting the opposition, but it is not clear to what extent the CNRP might have been involved in the operation of these pages, as they often deny having any connections at all.

The opposition leaders should consider different ways of using social media to enhance the public interest, and not simply to attack their opponents. For example, they can also use social media as an input device that would allow people from any political and social background to contribute to the debate about national policies and to share their aspirations for the advancement of democracy in the Kingdom. They should also turn social media into a news center, allowing people from across the country to report stories and voice their discontent. When people are well informed, they can make the government accountable and responsive, while giving the opposition a greater chance to gain more support.

Another shortcoming is that the opposition doesn't seem to have an effective mechanism to help any supporters who might run afoul of the law as a result of protests. In many cases, these supporters must seek legal aid from non-governmental organizations or from the international community. Only when their cases catch the national attention do prominent members of the opposition step in to help. The opposition should put in place a properly functioning mechanism to assist its supporters in a proactive manner, not just for publicity purposes. They should also work closely with other relevant organizations to offer the accused and their family all necessary support.

It is now time for opposition leaders to get their act together and demonstrate strong leadership. They still have much to do to demonstrate to other voters that they have the qualifications to lead Cambodia to peace and prosperity. Cambodia and its people would be best served if all political parties, both ruling and opposition, were strong and institutionalized, so that voters could have a real choice among a large pool of potential candidates.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on December 13, 2013)*

# Cambodia: Breaking the Deadlock

By Phoak Kung

**T**he July election was a historic moment in Cambodian politics. For the first time since the 1993 election arranged by the United Nations, the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), looks vulnerable. But what is even more astonishing is that voters are not afraid to express their political beliefs and to criticize political parties in public. The sheer number of people who turned up in support of their preferred candidates was also unprecedented, and clearly shows the extent to which democratic values have taken root in the Kingdom.

Despite grabbing 55 out of 123 seats, the opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), vehemently rejects the election results, unless its charge of widespread irregularities are properly addressed by an independent investigating body. But the CPP has flatly ruled out that option, arguing that the National Election Committee (NEC) is the only legitimate institution to resolve any electoral disputes.

Talks have been on and off between the CPP and the CNRP, but thus far there's been no progress. According to the CPP's source, the CNRP wants the post of National Assembly president as a condition of the deal, but the CPP's leaders are only willing to offer the post of the vice president and four chairmanships of the parliamentary commissions. At the same time, both parties have issued multiple threats against each other. The CNRP vows that it will hold mass protests nationwide, while the CPP warns of possible violent clashes and legal consequences.

Without a deal in sight, the CPP asked King Sihamoni to convene the first parliamentary meeting on September 23, which the opposition boycotted. In response, Sam Rainsy, the CNRP's president, rolled up his



sleeves and visited Western capitals to urge their leaders not to recognize the CPP-led government and to cut off all foreign aid to the country. He left his deputy, Kem Sokha, to rally support for mass demonstrations across the country. However, Rainsy's foreign trips might not provide much leverage, given that both the U.S. and the European Union have maintained very diplomatic tones since the July 28 election.

There's no easy answer to the current political stalemate. The CPP cannot afford to give more than what it has already offered the CNRP. As Prime Minister Hun Sen clearly says, giving the position of the National Assembly president to the CNRP would only lead to dysfunctional government, and the CPP doesn't want its fifth mandate to be preoccupied with one deadlock after another. Further, the CPP also needs to make enough positions available to its senior officials in the National Assembly, especially at a time when factional rivalries could bring the party to the brink of complete disarray.

Another concern is that a very generous deal could be seen as a victory for the opposition and, more importantly, could imply that the ruling elites have something to hide in terms of election irregularities. The CPP wants people to see its concession as an act of reconciliation for the sake of the country, not as a sign of weakness. The CPP is also very cautious about the prospect that its opponents might become a potential threat to its survival in the future if given too much power in the decision-making process in parliament.

The CNRP is also under tremendous pressure not to make a quick deal. The downfall of the royalist party, the National United Front for Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), is a constant reminder to opposition leaders that they cannot recklessly rush a deal. They are also concerned that if the CPP reneges on its promises, there's almost nothing they can do to hold the ruling elites accountable. The implications of a failed deal could potentially be damaging to the CNRP, and many voters won't be willing to listen to the opposition complaints again, as they've had enough of the FUNCINPEC party since the 1993 election.

In addition, the CNRP's top brass hope to build on their current gains to challenge the CPP in the 2018 election. Thus, they will relentlessly fight for a deal that would provide enough posts for their senior officials and give them the authority to shape and influence the policy agenda in the National Assembly. Another factor is that they have a lot to explain to their supporters, especially the hardliners, in terms of why such a deal would make the party and the people better off. If they don't do it properly, they might be accused of selling out to the CPP, and that's precisely what the CNRP has been trying to avoid. Complicating the negotiations further, the CPP and the CNRP have a long and antagonistic history. Each side is always ready to destroy the other, given the opportunity. Political parties in Cambodia are suffering from a severe deficit of trust.

Despite all the constraints, the CPP and the CNRP clearly understand the consequences of the no-deal situation. The CPP cannot rule the country alone without risking its legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Taking away the CNRP's parliamentary seats would only be met with a political storm at home and diplomatic headaches with Western countries. The use of armed forces to quell protesters is extremely dangerous, and it could plunge the country into chaos. Worse still, if the crackdown results in mass casualties, and the government loses its legitimacy and credibility with the people, a breakdown in the party rank and file could be imminent.

It would be surprising if Sam Rainsy and his party members really believed that they could use mass demonstrations to force the CPP to relinquish power. Popular pressure won't be enough to divide the ruling elites, because they deeply understand that disunity is political suicide. Therefore, if they find themselves with their backs against the wall, they will sink and swim with the regime. The consequences could be catastrophic. It is possible that the CNRP's leaders could use the threat of mass demonstrations as leverage in negotiating a deal with the CPP, but they cannot change the election outcome. More importantly, if the deadlock drags on for too long, and it hurts the economy, people will surely blame both parties for their inability to end the political impasse.

An attitude of “my way or the highway” is impossible in Cambodian politics. Both parties need to take steps to reconcile their differences and compromise. Moreover, they need to tone down their rhetoric. The CPP’s threat to leak information about its talks with the CNRP is counterproductive, and it doesn’t serve any purpose that could benefit the ruling elites. Moreover, the CPP’s top brass must refrain from attacking the opposition in public, for that would only sour the already strained relationship and hinder the possibility of reaching a deal.

On the other hand, the CNRP’s leaders shouldn’t pledge to their supporters that they won’t make a deal with the CPP, for they might just find themselves in a crisis of credibility if they end up doing otherwise. Although they might wish to use such rhetoric to assure their supporters that they will be tough on their demands for a thorough investigation of election irregularities by an independent body before considering other options to end the deadlock, making such a pledge is unnecessary and dangerous, especially when they have not even been asked to do so.

To kick-start negotiations again, the CPP and the CNRP need to move away from their no-deal position. The CNRP might have to back down on its demand for the post of National Assembly president, and accept in principle the positions offered by the CPP. And the ruling party needs to consider addressing the problems of election irregularities in a way that would be acceptable to voters. More importantly, a concession will allow opposition leaders to make a case to their supporters that since the truth will finally come to light, they can now return to the negotiating table. But the purpose of the investigation should be about fact-finding, which can be used to reform the election process, not to change the results.

Both parties should begin negotiations by finding their common ground. Tellingly, there is a wide range of policy issues on which both parties can work together. In his marathon address on September 25, Hun Sen outlined several key reforms that his government would introduce in the fifth mandate, most notably corruption, judicial independence and the rule of law. These are the kinds of reform that Sam Rainsy has been

advocating for years. Now both parties can sit down and work out how the opposition can play a role in helping to implement these reforms.

An agreement will be a very important step for the CPP and the CNRP to tackle other, much tougher issues such as reforming the NEC and the Constitutional Council, election laws, the internal rules and regulations of parliament and the traditional media outlets. There are also signs that the CPP might commit to deeper and broader reforms in the fifth mandate, as Cheam Yeap, senior CPP lawmaker, has hinted that the reforms, whether to the NEC or electoral laws, will start when the CNRP's members agree to take up their parliamentary posts. It is legitimate for the CNRP's leaders to voice their concerns over the authenticity of the promises given the past record of the CPP, but outright refusing the offer would be a missed opportunity. They should instead work with the CPP and other relevant stakeholders on the mechanisms that would allow these reforms to proceed.

There is reason to hope that the CNRP will have more power to call in members of government, and to question them on a wide range of policy issues. However, opposition members can't effectively perform their roles without knowledge and information about government affairs. Thus, the CNRP needs to propose to establish a research unit within parliament to assist it in collecting data and analyzing government policies. The CNRP's members can hold the ruling elites more accountable only when they are well informed. Moreover, this research unit can also help the CNRP's leaders develop more comprehensive policies to address the problems facing voters and to offer alternative solutions.

The CNRP should also take this opportunity to address the inherent problem of the opposition, namely the lack of authority and resources to implement the policies that it promised to voters during the election campaign. The CNRP's leaders might need to consider attaching some of their popular policies to the deal, for example, a salary increase for public servants, benefits for the elderly and more social programs. They should consult the CPP on how these policies can be carried out in a fiscally sustainable manner. It would be electoral suicide for the CPP to

completely reject policies that benefit millions of voters, especially the poor. And if the CPP agrees, opposition leaders can still take the credit. However, the ruling elites are not necessarily worse off: if they are able to deliver positive results, they can also enjoy more public support. All sides will benefit, including the voters.

The ruling elites and the opposition leaders should make the negotiation process transparent and accountable. Since the 1993 election, all political deadlocks were concluded with a deal between the winning parties, the CPP and the FUNCINPEC, but the talks usually took place behind closed doors, and the public was usually kept out of the process. Only when the CPP didn't fully comply with its promises did the FUNCINPEC come out and in desperation explain to voters that it had been treated unfairly.

Thus, the CNRP's leaders should demand that some parts of the deal be disclosed to the public. First, they can avoid accusations of having a hidden agenda with the CPP. Second, they can hold the ruling elites more accountable, because voters will also know what's inside the deal. Disclosure isn't a bad thing for the CPP either. When the FUNCINPEC accused it of not faithfully honoring the power-sharing deal, the ruling elites took pains to explain to voters that they had fulfilled all their promises. But they struggled to convince, for most people knew nothing about the deal. More importantly, those in power can also use their policy pledges in the deal to increase public awareness of their commitment to reforming government and improving the plight of the poor, and that voters can judge them based on real achievements.

Although the deal is not what some opposition supporters are hoping for, Sam Rainsy and his senior officials might have reckoned that it is the second-best option. At least the deal is able to achieve three important objectives for the opposition: leveling the playing field, delivering certain promises to voters and strengthening the party for the next election. However, the CNRP shouldn't assume that its supporters will eventually understand its decision to cut a deal with the CPP. It needs to engage its supporters, leading them step by step to the conclusion of the deal, so

that they can feel that they are also part of the decision-making process.

For the CPP, the deal might also disappoint some party members, especially those who could subsequently lose their jobs. However, the ruling elites cannot end this game of brinkmanship without making some concessions to the opposition. Despite their strengths, they will try to end the current political stalemate through dialogue, and if possible, avoid using violent measures to crack down on protestors. What's happening in other parts of the world has clearly shown that the presence of the armed forces in the streets doesn't scare people, but may instead make them more determined to sacrifice everything for their causes. Even if the ruling elites do manage to cling to power, that would be at the cost of inflicting substantial damage to the country, and surely that's not what they want to see either.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on October 29, 2013)*

# The Cambodian Monarchy Must Step Back From Politics

By Phoak Kung

**T**he death of King Norodom Sihanouk in October last year was a great loss to Cambodia. To the royal family, the King's tremendous popularity is a double-edged sword. For many years, the monarchy has enjoyed overwhelming support and loyalty from the people without having to establish a new identity or produce any significant achievements. Now, King Sihanouk is gone, and no member of the royal family has anywhere near his stature.

The current King, Norodom Sihamoni, might not even be able to ensure the survival of the monarchy beyond his reign. There are problems he cannot control.

First, some prominent members of the royal family are actively involved in politics — at the expense of the monarchy's reputation. They form political parties to compete for power and often use their royal connections to mobilise public support, as in the case of the Funcinpec Party. This diminishes respect for the monarchy. Politicians break promises, and the people distrust them for it. When people feel betrayed by royalist political parties, they can blame not only individual members of the royal family but the whole institution of the monarchy, including the King.

Second, some members of the Privy Council, which advises the King, want the new King to follow his father and exert control over government affairs. But they expect too much. King Sihamoni needs to establish his own identity as monarch. In any case, the King does not have the kind of power and privileges that his father enjoyed when he ruled the

country in the 1950s and 1960s, and the constraints facing the monarchy are enormous. Worse still, when the King refuses to intervene, some Privy Councillors publicly complain that he lacks the courage to confront the government. It is time for the council to revise its strategy. Instead of picking fights with political parties, the King should focus on the ordinary people. The people, not political parties, will protect the monarchy.

Moreover, some provisions of the Cambodian Constitution make the future of the monarchy uncertain. There is no royal hierarchy in Cambodia; instead, political parties select the new king from a pool of candidates. The Constitution effectively allows the ruling party to choose its preferred candidate. The candidate must be from three royal bloodlines — the descendants of King Ang Duong, King Norodom and King Sisowath. This does not mean there is a large pool of potential candidates, however. And infighting between the three royal families further undermines the monarchy. The Constitution makes it almost impossible to know who will be first in line to the throne.

The decline or collapse of the monarchy is not good for anyone, including the ruling party. For over 20 years, Cambodian politics has been characterised by fierce and often violent competition between government and opposition. Political deadlock is constant. But Cambodia has muddled through, mainly because King Sihanouk — the ‘Father of National Reconciliation’ — helped mediate.

What will happen now he is gone? For example both the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) claimed victory in parliamentary elections in July 2013. In protest against the electoral result, the CNRP vowed to hold massive demonstrations nationwide, while the CPP deployed troops and heavily armoured vehicles into the capital city to prevent any possible clashes. A peaceful solution remains elusive. Both parties and the people still expect King Sihamoni to intervene. It is clear that the monarchy remains an integral part of Cambodia’s conflict resolution mechanism.

Cambodian politics has become a zero-sum game; the public, too, is politically divided. Conflict and stalemate will be the reality of Cambodian



politics for years to come. It is almost impossible to assume that these problems can be sorted out smoothly and peacefully without the help of a strong, popular monarchy. Government institutions are not ready to arbitrate electoral conflicts independently.

The monarchy can help ensure stability, security and peace in Cambodia, but only if the King remains neutral. If he is seen to side with either the CPP or the CNRP, he will lose credibility and legitimacy in the public eyes. Both political parties must refrain from politicising the monarchy. It is possible to convince the people to accept a more passive and ceremonial monarchy as stipulated in the Constitution. Moreover, the King and members of the royal family must reach out to as many people as possible through both traditional media outlets and social media like Facebook and Twitter. The modern monarchy must be more engaging, adaptive and innovative if it wants to survive Cambodia's tumultuous politics. The era of the God King is well and truly over.

*(This article was first published in East Asia Forum on October 23, 2013)*

# Reforming the Cambodian People's Party

By Phoak Kung

**C**ambodian election of July 28 this year shocked many. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won just 68 out of 123 seats, losing 22 seats. The situation quickly became tense as hundreds of soldiers and heavily armored vehicles were deployed in the capital city following a violent clash between police and voters, in which two military police vehicles were attacked and set on fire. Several major roads and districts surrounding Prime Minister Hun Sen's residence were blocked. The nation was beset by confusion and uncertainty.

There has been no shortage of speculation, especially among opposition groups and some foreign observers, that the reign of the CPP is coming to an end, and that its days in government are numbered. That is unrealistic. The CPP is here to stay, and despite setbacks it has again won a majority and can form a new government on its own. What is clear, however, is that the CPP is facing its toughest challenge yet.

The CPP has made comebacks before. In the 1993 election arranged by the United Nations, the CPP lost to the royalist party, the National United Front for Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC). Despite the shock defeat, the CPP's leaders were quick to adopt reforms and modernize. They gradually learned to make democracy work in their favor and splurged hundreds of millions of dollars on pet projects, including roads, schools, health centers and pagodas. Their strategies paid off, and they have won every election since 1998.

However, the rise of the CPP as the hegemonic party has also sown the seeds of its current failings. Following an overwhelming victory in the 2008 election, the party grew complacent. The CPP's leaders did not feel the pressure to reform or modernize. They saw the party as still strong and resilient, capable of achieving further landslide victories with ease.

Even as the ruling elites relaxed, however, Cambodia's political landscape was being transformed at unprecedented speed, reshaping the electoral landscape. The changes have helped create a level playing field, offering new openings for the opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), to advance its policy agenda and undermine the CPP's monopoly over key sectors such as traditional media outlets. Three major factors have played a role here: demography, technology and socio-economics. Their implications for Cambodian politics are deep and dramatic.

Cambodia's youth has emerged as its most potent political force. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of Cambodians are under the age of 24, and up to 70 percent are under 35. Unlike their parents, these younger voters have no memories of the Khmer Rouge, and most have very little interest in that history. They tend to be more vocal on a wide range of issues, such as social injustice, inequality and corruption. Both the CPP and the CNRP are working tirelessly to woo this youth cohort, which has played a pivotal role in the CNRP's success. Younger Cambodians don't just vote for the CNRP; they often work vigorously to mobilize support.

Meanwhile, Cambodians have been adopting technology at an unprecedented rate. In 2011 the number of cell phones in use was roughly equivalent to the entire population. Further, according to social media marketing and advertising agency Social Media Plus, 2.46 million Cambodians were using the Internet in 2012, and almost one million had Facebook accounts. With just one click, information can be shared, in a way that makes it impossible for the government to censor news it doesn't like. Not only does social media facilitate the free flow of information and facts, it also provides youth with a platform to express their views and coordinate activities, and CNRP supporters have taken advantage of this.

Finally, after a decade of impressive economic growth, it is estimated that around 20 percent of Cambodia's population was living in urban areas in 2011, and urbanization will continue at a rate of more than 2 percent per year. Many people have enjoyed income growth, although the inequality gap is staggering. Moreover, literacy among adults aged 15 and above has improved significantly, reaching more than 70 percent of the population in 2009. This emerging middle class is better informed, and usually does not vote based on ideology, but rather on government performance.

This is a dilemma for the ruling party. As the process of economic development continues, the middle class will expand over time. The country needs educated and skilled people to grow its economy, but with greater levels of education comes demand for government accountability and transparency. Whether the CPP likes it or not, these forces are already unstoppable, in that the cost of reversing them would be catastrophic. Further, the CPP's leadership cannot continue to stay in power simply by cracking skulls. They must play by the rules of the game they helped set over the last two decades: reasonably competitive elections, a vibrant and meaningful civil society, expanding social media, a growing middle class and a free market economy.

Although the challenges are tremendous, the CPP has avenues by which it can win back what it lost in the recent election. The good news for the party is that some of those who have switched their allegiance to the CNRP simply want to punish the CPP for its failure to deliver on its past promises. They are less interested in an actual change of government. People are outraged by the fact that many are struggling to live even at a subsistence level, while party elites enjoy glamorous lifestyles. They just don't see the benefits of the so-called double-digit economic growth trickling down to them; what they see instead is growing inequality. Worse, the CPP seems to have lost touch on this issue: its leaders frustratingly argue that they have achieved much during their time in government, contrary to the evidence in front of many voters.

The leadership has just five years to turn things around. The party must take advantage of this critical moment to introduce rigorous

reforms, both within the party and within government, especially changes that might normally be a hard sell. It is no use defending the government when the public is not listening, and justifying the unjustifiable is absurd.

Nonetheless, the CPP does have strengths, as a mature and highly institutionalized party with more than three decades of governing experience through turbulent times, and a large pool of human and capital resources. It should call on these strengths to overhaul the party.

After the electoral defeat of 1993, the CPP's leaders moved swiftly to reform and modernize. They rebuilt a massive grass-roots structure of party activists. The key responsibility of the activists is to explain party policy, monitor voter behavior, mobilize turnout and toe the party line. The CPP's leaders rely heavily on them to collect information from every constituency, so that they can keep track of popular support and tailor policies accordingly. So what went wrong this year?

The main culprits are corruption and nepotism, which have demoralized activists at village and district levels. Since the decision to appoint party members to government posts takes into account their involvement in strengthening the constituencies assigned to them by the party leadership, many senior party members rush to put family and friends on the list of party activists. These lucky people then make brief appearances in their constituencies, but leave the hard work to local activists, whose discontent grows by the day.

The CPP's leaders must fix this problem now. They cannot allow senior party members to recklessly pursue personal gain at the expense of the party. More importantly, the CPP should provide adequate incentive for hardworking party activists. Moreover, it must urgently address the problem of nepotism, which has destroyed the party's moral foundation. The CPP should also embrace new methods that might enhance the capacity of its members, such as improving their communication skills, keeping them informed about current events, and embracing new technologies. Finally, the CPP's leaders must communicate directly with the party's grass roots, rather than relying on reports from immediate subordinates who might have their own agendas.

Despite the reshuffling of the new cabinet, the changes don't go far enough to reinvigorate the party. As Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng argues, changes must go beyond new names. The problem with the CPP is that it does not go outside its inner circle to fill leadership positions, to the detriment of reform. The CPP would do well to learn from the People's Action Party of Singapore or the United Malays National Organisation of Malaysia. One of the greatest strengths of these organizations is that they boast a large number of competent senior officials, because they recruit the best people wherever they find them. By breaking its outdated tradition, the CPP can recruit candidates who will bring with them fresh ideas.

Restoring trust is probably the most challenging task for Cambodia's ruling elites. After many years in power, the CPP has not delivered on its promises. The country's leaders may believe they have been doing what they can to bring peace and prosperity, and clearly Cambodia has made strides. But what the CPP fails to grasp is that the economy is undergoing a major transformation, a process that is leaving many of its poorer people struggling. Inequality is skyrocketing, traditional businesses are making way for large corporations, and many rural people – especially the young – are migrating to the city or even abroad where they are forced to take low-paying jobs.

The CPP might tell people that they will be better off in the long term, but many people cannot wait. Acknowledging the problem, Sar Kheng created a charitable foundation to help the poor, but this was too little, too late. Voters want something more substantial. The government has a wide range of policies it could adopt to lessen the pain, such as an affordable safety net, vocational training, microfinance, social insurance, new technologies, or improving agricultural productivity.

A few months prior to the election, the CPP circulated an internal memo advising its members to deal with corruption and incompetence at the local government level. The CPP's leaders clearly realize that a growing number of people are unhappy with local officialdom. Hun Sen once asked people not to vote against him just because they didn't like the party bureaucrats, since he had nothing to do with those problems.

But voters are no longer buying that argument. Most CNRP supporters hold the prime minister accountable. The only way to restore public trust is to introduce painful reforms to local government. Although there will be resistance from local party members, for the sake of the party's future, the ruling elites need to be tough and decisive. Reform should begin by legalizing some informal payments for the provision of basic goods and services, cutting back on red tape, simplifying or removing unnecessary regulations, and appointing more competent people to the local councils.

In his marathon address on September 16 during the new cabinet meeting, Hun Sen outlined the reforms that his government would introduce in the fifth mandate. Steps will apparently be taken to address corruption and nepotism, judicial independence, the rule of law, accountability and other issues. This is surely a positive sign, but voters are becoming very wary of such grand talk, having heard the promises before. This time, voters will need real progress. In addition, reforms of the type the prime minister described typically take a long time to produce meaningful results, and the CPP cannot afford to wait. It needs to deliver change to voters soon, well before the 2018 elections.

For that reason, the party should also undertake more immediate reforms, to build confidence and trust. There is much low-hanging fruit to choose from, such as reducing exam corruption, swiftly punishing party members involved in mismanagement or criminal activities, and becoming more responsive to public complaints.

However, the CPP's leaders should not lose sight of the need for broader and deeper reforms if they want to continue to stay in power and remain relevant to the majority of Cambodian people. Reform will also have the added benefit of underpinning economic growth and good governance. Although it will be difficult, reform can be achieved if the CPP commits to a prosperous and democratic Cambodia. The time to act is now.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on October 14, 2013)*

# Hun Sen Stands Firm on Election Results

By Vannarith Chheang

**A**fter 25 years of experimenting with general elections, the Cambodian people have come to embrace a more democratic value set, and they are demanding greater respect for human rights and dignity.

The general election that took place on 28 July 2013 was a critical turning point in this process of democratisation. Three interrelated factors help to explain the political dynamics of the election: the country's demographics; the prevalence of communications technology; and the shortcomings of the serving prime minister, Hun Sen, and his ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

About 3.5 million of Cambodia's 9.6 million registered voters are between the ages of 18 and 30; and of those, around 1.5 million are first-time voters. The majority of these young voters look beyond the country's tragic past and are demanding concrete political and economic reforms, more freedom of expression, justice, inclusiveness, and good governance. Their aspirations are higher than their parents' generation. Thanks to the rapid development of communications technology, especially through social media and smart phones, young voters can also receive updated information and actively exchange their views online.

Such a widespread proliferation of social media has broken down the effectiveness of state media control and propaganda in shaping public opinion on national issues. Although the CPP has been reasonably successful in maintaining peace and stability, economic growth, and infrastructure development, there are still serious shortcomings that are



now more widely acknowledged. Public institutions have not satisfactorily responded to the needs and demands of the people. Systematic and chronic corruption, social injustice, land disputes and forced eviction, human rights violations, deforestation, national resource depletion, lack of transparency and accountability, and widening development gaps are among the key issues facing Cambodian society. Increasing numbers of voters have expressed their dissatisfaction with the ruling CPP by voting for the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). The CNRP focused its campaign on “change”, serious reforms of national institutions in order to have better checks and balances, improving the wellbeing of the people, especially those working in public institutions, factory workers, farmers and the elderly.

The official results of the election, released by the National Election Committee (NEC), show that the CPP won 68 seats and the CNRP won 55, out of the 123 seats in the National Assembly. However, the CNRP has rejected the results and claims to have won 63 seats. It has called for the creation of an independent committee to investigate alleged election fraud. The CNRP has stated that ‘fifteen per cent of voters — about 1.2 to 1.3 million — were unable to vote because of list irregularities. There were also about 1 million ghost names on the voter list and about 200,000 duplicate names ... That’s why we require the technical working group comprising the CNRP, the CPP, the UN, the NEC, local and international NGOs to investigate and make a report about these irregularities’.

However, the CPP has not accepted the proposal and has argued that all political parties must respect the official results issued by the NEC. After the failure of two rounds of negotiations between the two parties, the CPP went ahead to convene the opening of the National Assembly on 23 September — in line with the national constitution, which states that the first national assembly meeting shall be convened within 60 days of the election. The meeting was endorsed by the king, regardless of objections from civil society groups and the CNRP’s boycott.

The national assembly, with only the 68 CPP members sitting, voted to renew the prime minister’s five-year term. The first cabinet meeting was

held on 25 September, with a promise to deepen reforms. Judicial reform, good governance, anti-corruption, and land and forest management are the top priorities for the next five-year reform program. Yet the opposition CNRP has denounced the creation of the new government, saying it was established by a ‘constitutional coup’. It continues to call for more protests and international pressure on the government. The United States and the European Union have both demanded a transparent review of election irregularities and reform of the electoral administration. Japan and Australia have also announced similar positions. But Hun Sen is standing firm.

China is among the few countries that congratulated the victory of the CPP. During a bilateral meeting between Premier Hun Sen and Premier Li Keqiang in Nanning on 2 September, Li confirmed Chinese support for Hun Sen. And in his visit to Cambodia on 21 August, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi stated: ‘We will support Cambodia ruling out external interference to pursue a development path in line with its own national conditions and the interest of the people’.

Thus, the future for Cambodian politics looks grim and highly uncertain. There is a serious lack of trust and confidence between the two political parties, and it will be difficult for both to return to negotiations and find a political breakthrough until there is a serious compromise from both sides. If a sustainable power-sharing arrangement cannot be found, the country could fall into a short-term political crisis. The implications of this would be a serious setback in the country’s economic development and poverty-reduction efforts — two areas that Cambodia has been struggling to improve over the years. In addition, it could also create space for more strategic and political competition among major powers in the region.

*(This article was first published in East Asia Forum on October 04, 2013)*

# Toward Elections in Cambodia: Current Debates and Prospects

By Vannarith Chheang

**I**t has been 20 years since Cambodia held its first general elections back in 1993 with the support of the international community.

While democracy has been one of the key drivers of Cambodia's social, economic and political development, many challenges remain, such as the lack of people's understanding of — and participation in — democratic society, weak state institutions, nepotism, and a culture of patronage system.

In the last decade, Cambodian economic performance has been relatively high with an average of annual GDP growth of about 7 per cent. The poverty rate has been reduced from 22.9 per cent in 2009 to 20 per cent in 2012 and could further drop to 19 per cent in 2013. However, due to weak governance and corruption, the benefits from economic growth have not been evenly shared.

The upcoming fifth parliamentary elections on 28 July will be another significant step in Cambodia's democratic transition, with more than 9 million eligible to cast their votes. Eight political parties will run in the elections, but there are two key candidates: the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CCP) and the opposition party, Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

Elections in Cambodia are often dynamic with strong public expectations and demands for reform and improvement of the public institutions. Since the official start of the election campaign on 27 June, political parties have actively introduced their policies and promises to the

voters. Meanwhile, there have been reports of political intimidation, which is not uncommon in Cambodia's modern political history. Policy debates generally lack substance, since political parties tend to focus on short-term goals and interests rather than a long-term vision for Cambodia's sustainable development.

The upcoming election differs from previous ones, due to a relatively peaceful environment, the increasing interest and active participation of Cambodian youths, and the proliferation of social media. Importantly, Cambodians are increasingly pushing for electoral reforms and more transparency in the electoral process. There are demands for the reform of the National Election Committee, particularly in relation to alleged irregularities concerning the voting list and inequality among the various political parties in getting access to media. There are more than 250 reported cases of election law violations, political intimidation and disturbances.

The two main political parties are focusing on very different policy agendas.

The CPP is focusing on peace, stability and economic development. It is emphasising its achievements in peace building and national reconciliation, political stability, public order, infrastructure development, high economic performance, poverty reduction and increasing its presence on the international stage. Moreover, the CPP has promised to deepen comprehensive reforms in all sectors from security to economic and educational reforms.

The CNRP campaign, on the other hand, is prioritising household economic policies such as the promises to increase the incomes and livelihood of factory workers, farmers, police, the armed forces, civil servants, and the elderly. The CNRP is also concentrating on eradicating corruption; increasing employment opportunities for the youth; providing free healthcare for the poor; eliminating land grabbing, forced eviction and illegal logging; reducing the prices of energy and fertilizers; and lowering interest rates.

In terms of the foreign policy debate, both parties are emphasising

neutrality and non-alliance. The CPP is focusing on the principles of peaceful co-existence and international cooperation especially within the ASEAN framework. Cambodia continues to promote a multipolar world international system and order and pursue strategic diversification.

The CPP will most likely win the elections with an absolute majority due to its financial resources and long-standing relationship with the public especially in the rural areas. However, the CNRP is gaining more ground in challenging and contesting the CPP's dominant standing in parliament. If the political and economic reforms do not deliver satisfactory results as promised during the election campaigns, the CPP may risk losing its predominant role in the future.

The international community and civil society organisations are closely following the upcoming election to ensure that they are administered freely and fairly. If the election is not conducted in a free and fair manner in accordance with standard rules and procedures, the results will likely be contested and the legitimacy of the incumbent's rule may come into question. It is therefore necessary for all political parties to put national interests ahead of their own self-interest and comply with the rules. Cambodia's democratic transition cannot proceed without the support and participation of all political parties and factions.

The new government needs to deepen its public administrative reforms with concrete development policies based on the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability. To realise its vision of becoming a middle-income country by 2030, the new government will need to foster strong and responsive public institutions, a resilient private sector, and an engaged civil society. Partnerships between public, private and civil society need to be strengthened in order to secure a strong foundation for Cambodia's sustainable development.

The outcome of the election, if administered freely and fairly, will undoubtedly contribute to peace, stability and continued development in Cambodia. The CPP is likely to remain in power, but the CPP needs to seriously and continuously implement political, social and economic

reforms in order to maintain credibility and support from the public. Good governance, anti-corruption, environmental protection, rights-based development and inclusive growth are key issues that must be addressed and concretely implemented at all levels.

*(This article was first published in East Asia Forum on July 25, 2013)*

# Narrowed Political Gap in Cambodia

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**here are expectations that Cambodia's July 28 general election will mark another milestone in developing the country's relatively young democratic political system. Eight different political parties will compete for the favor of some nine million eligible voters, though most analysts believe the race will be dominated by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CCP) and the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) led by Sam Rainsy, although on Monday he was barred from running in the election.

Lively political debates and canvassing have been ongoing since the start of the election campaign in late June. Policy debates generally lack substance, since the political parties focus more on short-term goals and interests, rather than long-term visions and sustainable development. The politics of destruction and intimidation, meanwhile, are still commonplace, as exemplified by an anonymous shooting attack on the CNRP's headquarters over the weekend.

However, this election is different from previous polls due to the increased participation of Cambodian youth in shaping future political developments and the use of social media such as Facebook to break the CPP's domination of local mainstream media. Topics covered on social media include demands for electoral reform, such as structural change of the National Election Committee (NEC), alleged irregularities in voting lists, cases of political intimidation, and opposition parties' lack of access to the mass media.

Against the background of these debates, the two main parties cut different political profiles. The ruling CPP is viewed as emphasizing peace, national reconciliation, infrastructure development, high economic performance, poverty reduction and boosting the country's image on the international stage. The NRP, on the other hand, is seen as prioritizing household economic policies such as increasing the incomes and improving the livelihoods of factory workers, farmers and civil servants, reducing energy prices and interest rates, as well as eradicating official corruption.

On Monday, Cambodia's National Election Committee rejected a request by Sam Rainsy to register to vote and contest the country's polls, throwing out a claim that a royal pardon this month for convictions handed down during the opposition leader's four-year exile, allowing him to take part in elections. The NEC said the pardon did not change its earlier decision that his name had been removed from the electoral register after he was sentenced in absentia and that the registration of candidates had long been closed.

Sensitive political issues, including border rows with Vietnam and Vietnamese migration, are frequently raised by the opposition to attack the CPP. On foreign policy, both parties emphasize neutrality and non-alliance. But the CPP has elaborated more on the principles of peaceful co-existence and international cooperation, especially within the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's (ASEAN) frameworks.

With its substantial financial resources and superior public outreach capacity, the CPP is expected to win the election with another absolute majority. (The CPP currently controls 90 of parliament's 123 seats.) The NRP, however, is gaining ground in challenging the CPP's long-held dominant position and is expected to receive an electoral boost from party leader Sam Rainsy's return from exile over the weekend.

If re-elected, prime minister Hun Sen and the CPP will find it difficult to deliver on their campaign promises, which include substantial political and economic reforms. If they fail to deliver, the CPP risks losing its predominant role at future polls.



This year's run-up to the polls has been relatively peaceful compared to past election periods, although there have been some reported cases of violence and a series of disturbances targeting the opposition party. It is a reflection of the increasing levels of maturity and responsibility of the different political parties and their members and supporters.

Before the start of the official election campaigns, Prime Minister Hun Sen strongly condemned the use of violence and called for tolerance, calm and stability. The international community and civil society organizations, meanwhile, are closely following the situation in order to ensure a free and fair election.

However, if the upcoming election is marred by irregularities, Cambodia may face international sanctions, particularly from the United States and Europe. A group of US lawmakers has already called for a halt to aid to Cambodia if the elections are rigged in favor of the CPP.

It is therefore necessary for all political parties to think about national interests and play by the rules. Moreover, the results of the election need to be observed since it is important for political legitimacy, national reconciliation and unity. Cambodia cannot develop without the support and participation of all Cambodians from different political parties and factions.

From the business and investment perspective, there are no signs of reluctance on the part of foreign investors to expand their businesses and investments in the country. Most are confident that peace and stability will be maintained and political and economic reforms will continue to deliver results. The local business community, it is believed, generally prefers to see the maintenance of the political status-quo.

Yet the next government will need to deepen public administrative reforms with concrete development policies based on the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability. To realize its vision to be a middle-income country by 2030, the new government will also need to support strong and responsive public institutions, a resilient private sector, and an engaged civil society.

If held freely and fairly, the election process will contribute to

peace, stability and continued development in Cambodia. The Hun Sen-led political leadership will most likely remain the same, but the next government will need to sincerely and seriously implement political, social and economic reforms to maintain its post-election legitimacy.

*(This article was first published in The Asia Times Online on July 24, 2013)*

# **REGIONAL**

## **ISSUES**



# Cambodia-China Relations: Overcoming the Trust Deficit

By Phoak Kung

**I**t has never been easy to paint a rosy picture of Cambodia-China relations. Despite multiple high-level exchanges and a public display of unwavering friendship, mistrust between the two countries remains deep and pervasive. What is ironic is that even after China has given billions of dollars in aid, loans and investments to its close ally over the years, it does not seem to be able to overcome this deficit of trust and credibility.

History can be useful in explaining this conundrum. Tellingly, although relations between Cambodia and China are centuries old, the two countries only had formal diplomatic relations in 1958. At the apex of the Cold War, Prince Norodom Sihanouk decided to adopt a non-aligned foreign policy, but the West was deeply suspicious of his close relations with the Chinese leadership. Throughout his political career, he continued to play a central role in maintaining strong Cambodia-China relations.

Between 1975 and 1978, China lent its patronage to the notorious Khmer Rouge regime, which was responsible for killing around 1.7 million people and almost destroying the country. Further, China was also among a handful of countries that continued to support the Khmer Rouge after it was ousted from power by the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the precursor of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with the support from the Vietnamese troops in early 1979.

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreement on October 23, 1991 helped put an end to the civil war, but it did not immediately restore

Cambodia-China relations to complete normalcy. Even the victory of the supposedly China-friendly royalist party, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), in the 1993 election didn't fully restore relations.

The CPP still maintained a tight grip on power, and its leaders were wary of China given the troubling relations of the past. Only after 1997 did Cambodia-China relations began to improve. One possible explanation was that in the aftermath of the deadly clash in July 1997, it was clear that the CPP would be the dominant power in Cambodia's politics once it had defeated and captured forces loyal to the royalist FUNCINPEC party.

This shifting balance of internal power may have made China realize that it had to revisit its past strategy and engage with the CPP's leaders if it wanted to reinvigorate its crumbling diplomatic relations with Cambodia. As a result, China quickly emerged as one of Cambodia's most important donors. More importantly, China's long-standing policy of non-interference perfectly aligns with the interests of the ruling elites.

Besides financial support, China has also assisted Cambodia in strengthening its security forces, and has given millions of dollars worth of military equipment to its ally. For instance, in 2010, China agreed to give 257 military trucks and 50,000 uniforms to the Cambodian armed forces. In addition, China also provided 1,000 handguns and 50,000 bullets to the national police. These are just a few highlights of the military cooperation between the two countries.

In the aftermath of the July 2013 election, which the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) claims was plagued with massive irregularities, China was among a handful of countries that endorsed the CPP's victory. During his visit to Cambodia in August 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi promises the ruling elites that "China will firmly support Cambodia to prevent foreign disturbance".

In return, the CPP's leaders strongly support the "One China Policy." As a result, in 1997, the Royal Government of Cambodia shut down the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, accusing it of being responsible for terrorism. In July 2014, Prime Minister Hun Sen reiterated the

government's irreversible position on "One China Policy". Cambodia also angered the West and the international community after deporting 20 Uighur asylum seekers back to China on December 19, 2009.

During the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh in 2012, Cambodia was accused of using its role as chair to prevent the regional body from making a strong statement regarding the South China Sea territorial dispute, in order to please the Chinese leadership. And for the first time in its 45-year existence, ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué. Many people were quick to point their fingers at the ruling elites, blaming them for putting their interests ahead of ASEAN's centrality and unity.

These incidents clearly indicate that Cambodia-China relations are stronger than ever before. Cambodia is probably the ally that China looks to first, to maintain its influence in Southeast Asia. There is thus reason for both countries to work together.

Yet, Cambodia-China relations hang by a thread. Of course, from the perspective of the ruling elites and the Chinese leadership, good ties seem to be obvious, since both sides get what they want. But that assumes that their governments have a firm grasp on power. Given its changing political landscape, that assumption no longer holds in Cambodia.

It would not be unreasonable for China to think that it ought not have do more for Cambodia than it already has done, given the billions of dollars it has sent to the country's elites. Yet if Beijing wants to maintain strong and lasting relations with Cambodia, it will need to go beyond its current approach in favor of largesse than benefits Cambodia and its people.

Unlike its Western counterparts, China can hardly advocate for democracy, human rights, and other governance issues, but this does not necessarily mean that its hands are tied. In fact, there are a wide range of policies that China could use to build trust and confidence among ordinary Cambodians, and which would have the additional benefit of winning greater support from the young cohort, who are emerging as the most potent force in Cambodian politics.

Over the past decade, Cambodia's economy has been growing at a

rapid rate, lifting millions of people out of extreme poverty. Yet the country still faces serious skills shortages. Here, China could help, by providing more funding for vocational training programs and scholarships. The resulting increase in productivity would benefit the hundreds of Chinese companies in Cambodia that are struggling to recruit skilled workers.

Another factor hindering Cambodia's economic growth is the lack of technology. Despite the government's efforts to promote science, technology and engineering, results are minimal because of resource scarcity. China could play a crucial role. For instance, agriculture accounts for around 70 percent of employment in Cambodia, with a large majority of farmers still depend on traditional methods. A technology transfer would boost productivity, enabling farmers to enjoy better living standards.

Although Chinese investments in Cambodia have increased significantly in recent years, the money has mostly gone to energy or labor-intensive sectors. That model is working for now, but if Cambodia really wants to achieve Prime Minister Hun Sen's vision of becoming an upper middle income country, it will need to strengthen its industrial and manufacturing sector. And China could again play a pivotal role in encouraging more investments from Chinese companies in this area.

Chinese aid to Cambodia has often come in for heavy criticism. Many Western countries accuse China of giving money to developing countries without regard to their poor democratic and human rights records. Given China's non-interference policy, it will not seek to control how the money it gives is used by the recipient countries. However, attaching conditions to aid is not necessarily a bad thing.

Perhaps the most widely cited problem of Chinese aid to Cambodia is the quality of the projects that it has funded. There have, for instance, been widespread complaints that the bridges and roads that have been built by Chinese companies are of poor quality. This exacerbates the lack of credibility in Chinese aid. For instance, the first public reaction to the crash of a military helicopter on July 14, 2014 in Phnom Penh was that it must have been made by China. It was a cruel reminder to China that it really does need to rethink its approach to aid.



China is also seen as less interested in supporting social issues, in contrast to the many Western countries that concentrate much of their funding on the poor and vulnerable, which partly explains why they enjoy a high level of trust among ordinary Cambodians. To improve its image, China should actively engage in a wide range of social programs such as health, sanitation and education, among others. These activities will not just improve the plight of those most in need; they will also assist Cambodia's government in realizing its development goals.

A lack of insight into Cambodian realities is another major impediment for China. Resolving it will require broad and open dialogue, not just at the government level but between other stakeholders such as academics, civil society organizations, private companies, and citizens. In fact, there are signs that China is trying to get these sorts of dialogues underway, but it will have to do more in the form of research, workshops, conferences, cultural activities, and the like.

Stronger diplomatic relations would doubtless be in the best interests of both Cambodia and China. To get there, Beijing will need to go beyond its current approach and consider the concerns and interests of ordinary Cambodians. Only then will China be able to overcome its trust deficit. A good first step would be helping Cambodia prepare for ASEAN economic integration in 2015. Because surely a strong and prosperous Cambodia is good for China.

*(This article was first published in The Diplomat on October 07, 2014)*

# The Rise of China and Cambodia

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he rise of China generates both opportunities and challenges for Southeast Asian countries. China is both a global and regional economic locomotive. It drives regional economic development through the flows of trade, investment, and development assistance. But, meanwhile, it also creates a region-wide intense economic competition and a dependent-on-China economic development model.

During the Asian financial crisis in 1997, China significantly contributed to the regional bailout packages. Again, in the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008, China provided economic assistance and loans to restore economic conditions of the crisis-hit countries and regions.

Foreign economic policy is the main pillar of China's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. In 2010, China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) came into force, paving the way for deepening institutionalized trade ties between China and ASEAN member states. China is now ASEAN's largest trading partner, while ASEAN is China's third largest trading partner.

Bilateral trade volume reached US\$350.5 billion in 2013 – accounting for 14 percent of ASEAN's total trade. It is expected that the trade volume will reach US\$500 billion by the end of 2015. In 2013, ASEAN received US\$8.6 billion of foreign direct investment flow from China, accounting for 7.1 percent of total inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) to ASEAN.

In October 2013 – during his state visits to several Southeast Asian countries – Chinese President Xi Jinping initiated the 21st century

Maritime Silk Road to promote marine economy, maritime connectivity and trade relations. However, such increasing common economic interests are insufficient to building regional common public good, which includes strategic trust, confidence, peace and stability. China has to promote other fields of cooperation as well.

On the security and strategic front, China is struggling to build its image as a peaceful-development-oriented rising power. In 2002, China and ASEAN signed a Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and adopted a Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the field of non-traditional security issues.

China has been arguably socialized by ASEAN norms. These norms include multilateralism, equal partnership, comprehensive security cooperation, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference, consensus-based, and collective identity building.

“Security in Asia should be maintained by Asians themselves,” stated Chinese President Xi Jinping at the fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai on May 21, 2014.

For Cambodia, China is one of the most important development and strategic partners. China is the top provider of development assistance and soft loans to Cambodia. China has provided about US\$3 billion to mainly develop infrastructure without many conditions attached. However, the quality of the development assistance is relatively low. It lacks transparency and effectiveness.

China is also the main source of inflow of foreign direct investment to Cambodia. The cumulative Chinese investment in the Kingdom accounted for US\$9.6 billion from 1994 to 2013. The investment projects focus on labor-intensive industry, particularly the garment sector and natural resource extraction.

China is Cambodia’s main trading partner. In 2013, the bilateral trade volume accounted for more than US\$3 billion.

At the bilateral meeting between Sun Chanthol, Cambodian Minister of Commerce, and his Chinese counterpart in Beijing last August, he

requested Chinese government to provide duty and quota free to Cambodian. Cambodia hopes to see an increase of duty-free rice export to China from 100,000 to 500,000 tons.

Although China is the main development partner of Cambodia, the Chinese image among the Cambodian general public is not that good. Some may argue that China fails to project its soft power in Cambodia. China only focuses on the government, political parties, and business community. It does not pay enough attention to the people, especially those at the grassroots.

Therefore, China needs to invest much more in building its image abroad. Economic instrument alone does not help China to project its global power status. China needs to improve its transparency and effectiveness of its development assistance. In addition to building roads and bridges, it should also consider building schools and hospitals.

Chinese investment in Cambodia should closely link with poverty reduction, sustainable development, and inclusive growth. The Chinese companies must develop a culture of corporate social responsibility. Otherwise, it is hard for China to win the hearts of the local people.

Moreover, China needs to further accelerate people-to-people ties through cultural and educational exchanges. China-Cambodia young leadership programs should be developed to nurture and connect the future leaders of the two countries.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on September 04, 2014)*

# Cambodia and ASEAN: Building an Identity

By Vannarith Chheang

**A**SEAN identity is an abstract concept. It is socially and politically constructed under the three pillars of the ASEAN Community.

Unity in diversity, regional solidarity, developing a sharing and caring society, are important peaceful settlements of disputes, cohesiveness, inclusiveness, and regional harmony and resilience constitute the core elements of an ASEAN identity.

For Cambodia, ASEAN awareness among its citizens is very low. The majority of people are unable to feel a sense of belonging to the ASEAN community.

Educated youth and public intellectuals are generally skeptics and critics of ASEAN. They view ASEAN as a club for the “more advanced economies” and “elite groups”, ignoring the interests of the other poor member states and the grassroots.

The failure of ASEAN in preventing and solving the border armed conflict between two members - Cambodia and Thailand - disappointed both the Cambodian general public and the elites.

With regard to the exodus of Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand in June, ASEAN did not take any measure to mitigate such a humanitarian disaster, although the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers was adopted in 2007.

## **Development Gap**

The development gap is the main stumbling block of ASEAN community building.

Economic inequality between old and new members remains large. The development gap is widening, especially at the national level.

The poor and the marginalized are further left behind. Gradually, they no longer feel a sense of belonging to the community.

Landlessness, indebtedness, and lack of opportunities force Cambodian rural workforces to immigrate to the urban areas or take risks crossing the border to neighboring countries. Those migrants especially women and children are vulnerable to labor exploitation and human trafficking and they cannot escape from poverty trap.

## **Sustainability and Inclusiveness**

The regional development path is not sustainable and inclusive. Environmental degradation, – especially region wide deforestation, water pollution, coastal pollution, industrial waste, and overfishing – is threatening human security in the region.

ASEAN connectivity plans and economic corridors mainly benefit those living in the urban areas. It, therefore, further deepens the existing rural-urban divide. Urban-rural connectivity especially infrastructure and logistics needs more improvement and investment.

## **Damming the Mekong River**

Construction of hydropower dams along the Mekong River threaten the livelihoods of tens of millions of people downstream -- and the whole ecosystem in the Mekong sub-region.

There are 11 proposed hydropower dams along the main channel of the lower Mekong River. There are two dams in Cambodia. Nationalism and sovereignty disputes

Symptoms of intra-regional conflicts and tensions are omnipresent. Nationalism and territorial sovereignty disputes, especially between Cambodia and Thailand, remain critical threats to regional peace and stability.

The dynamics of domestic politics and nationalism continue to shape the foreign policy of many Southeast Asian countries. In Cambodia, a resurgent wave of nationalism, – together with the threat perception against its neighbors, – is counterproductive to the ASEAN community building process.

### **Democratic deficit**

Democratization in the region remains at a crossroad. The military coup in Thailand turned democracy upside down and it generated a spillover effect on democratic development in the whole region.

Democratic trends in Cambodia and Myanmar remain uncertain although there are certain positive steps to consolidate electoral reforms in Cambodia, and a more inclusive political representation and reform in Myanmar. Without having a strong and resilient democratic culture, people-centered ASEAN is just a dream.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on August 21, 2014)*

# Agenda for the Post-2015 ASEAN Governance, Inclusiveness, Innovation and Global Engagement

By Vannarith Chheang

**A**SEAN turned 47 on August 8. Time is running out for ASEAN to realize its community by December next year. Till date, about eighty percent of the blueprints have been implemented, although some areas have lots of room for improvement. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) blueprint has received more attention and is better implemented than the ASEAN Political Security and Socio-Cultural Community ones.

The main issues ASEAN is facing are people's awareness and participation, widening development gap, slow implementation of policy, environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources.

The majority of ASEAN people do not feel a sense of belonging to ASEAN. The poor people in the region are left behind or excluded from benefits of regional integration process. Some are even confronted with more challenges stemming from regional integration.

The development gap between member states remains wide. For instance, the average per capita income in Cambodia is about 20 times less than that of Singapore. Rural-urban divide within the country and region generate domestic migration and social tensions.

The Bali Concord III Plan of Action (2013-2017), adopted in Phnom Penh in 2012, provides certain policy guidelines for ASEAN to implement in the post-2015 period. The political security cooperation includes the principle norms to ensure peace, security and stability in the region;



democratic and rules-cum-rights based political development.

Economic cooperation reasserts the importance of economic integration and further links ASEAN economies with the global supply chain and production network, enhance macroeconomic coordination and financial cooperation, and promote higher level of economic dynamism, sustained prosperity, and inclusive growth.

Socio-cultural cooperation emphasizes on disaster management, sustainable development, environment, climate change, health, science, technology, education, human resources, cultures, and the quality of life.

However, the Bali Concord III does not provide concrete measures to strengthen the institutions and capacity of the ASEAN and the Member States in implementing the action plans.

The agenda for the post-2015 ASEAN therefore should focus on four elements: good governance, inclusiveness, innovation, and global engagement.

Governance is the foundation of development and regional integration. It defines and enforces the rules for political behavior. It involves the formulation and observance of rules and norms to ensure effective regulation and identifies those rules that are conducive for development and regional integration.

There are three elements of governance: participation of different stakeholders especially the local community; predictability with a legal framework and effective regulation; and transparency and clarity with the rules and availability of information.

Inclusiveness is the key to building a socially responsible and people-centered ASEAN. No one should be left behind in the ASEAN community building process. Everyone should benefit from the process regardless of gender and ethnicity.

Inclusive growth should be the ultimate goal of development. Without this, Southeast Asia will face more complicated multiple social and political tensions and conflicts deriving from widening development gap and socio-political exclusion.

Technological innovation can make a big difference in addressing

developmental challenges such as hunger and poverty, environmental degradation, food security and safety, access to drinking water and energy, and treatment of diseases.

Institutional innovation for an inclusive growth and regional integration and community building need more attention. ASEAN must keep innovating to be competitive and ready to overcome challenges. ASEAN must develop institutional frameworks for innovation policy. It needs to invest more in education reforms, skills development, information technology, and human capital advancement.

Global engagement is a long-term vision. ASEAN needs to strengthen its role and image on the global stage. To do that, the ten member states have to be transformed into a single unit or actor based on a single identity. ASEAN needs to strengthen its capacity to work in partnership with the global community in collectively addressing global issues and challenges.

ASEAN's unity and centrality in shaping regional order is a matter of survival for the future of ASEAN. The communiqué of the 47th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on August 8, 2014 stresses: "Recognizing the rapidly changing regional strategic landscape, we underscore the importance of strengthening ASEAN's unity and regional interests in order to preserve ASEAN's centrality in the regional architecture."

A multipolar world is in the making. The world will be taken care of by many actors. ASEAN will be one the global actors in shaping a new global order.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on August 14, 2014)*

# Cambodia and Thailand Warm Ties

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he quick and remarkable steps taken by the Thai Junta and Cambodian government to stabilize bilateral relations come as a surprise to many casual observers.

After carrying out a bloodless coup d'état on 22 May 2014, the Thai Junta is confronted with multiple challenges from restoring stability and order, to building legitimacy at home and abroad, and also dealing with the economic downturn caused by a chronic political crisis.

Facing the soft sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe, the Thai Junta looked to China and its neighbors for strategic breathing space. So far China, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia have shown their support for the Junta at different levels.

The Cambodian-Thai relations faces more challenges especially after the border conflict in 2008. Recent expulsion en masse of Cambodian illegal migrant workers from Thailand further worsened such fragile bilateral ties.

After assuming power, the chief of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) Prayuth Chan-ocha approached Prime Minister Hun Sen to build mutual understanding and strategic trust. It is part of a confidence building measures.

During his visit to Cambodia in early July, the Thai acting foreign minister Sihasak Phuanketkeow reached out to Cambodian leaders and tried to convince them that NCPO had good intentions to maintain relations with Cambodia and that they do not actually have any policy to crackdown on migrant workers but instead properly regulated those foreign migrant workers in order to protect their benefits and rights under Thai law.

Upon Thailand's request, Cambodia released Veera Somkwakid who faced a jail term of six years for illegally trespassing into Cambodian territory and espionage in 2010.

Veera is a Thai nationalist and one of the leaders of the yellow shirt movement, which stirred up a wave of nationalism to support its political agenda and Cambodia became the victim of Thai domestic political game.

Such acts heralded in bilateral relations an improvement between the two neighbors. In return, Thailand also released four Cambodian illegal migrants who were accused of holding fake identity documents. It also demonstrated goodwill and diplomatic gestures between the two countries in stabilizing their relations.

To further warm up relations between the two neighbors, Cambodian Defence Minister Tea Banh visited Thailand on July 28 to 29 to exchange views on the border issues, migrant workers, transnational crimes, and ASEAN Community building 2015.

Cambodia signaled that it understood the commitment and resolution of the NCPO in restoring order and democracy in Thailand.

The border dispute remains the most complicated issue. Due to Thai domestic political crisis, the implementation of the ICJ's ruling has been stalled since November 2013 and bilateral talks have been shelved as well.

The acting Thai Defence Minister Surasak Karnchanarat sidestepped any talks on the border dispute and requested Cambodia to delay implementing the ICJ's ruling.

As quoted in the Bangkok Post, "It is not the right time to discuss Preah Vihear. Any issue which could spark conflict will not be raised at the moment," said Surasak. "Based on the International Court of Justice's ruling, we have to talk, but not right now.

Let's live together happily like before. We can talk about it later," added Surasak.

At the meeting with the NCPO Chief Prayuth, Tea Banh reassured his Thai counterpart that Cambodia would never allow any groups to use its territory to operate against Thailand or any other countries.

He also reasserted Cambodia's commitment to build stable and good

ties between the two countries. Both sides agreed to promote trade and tourism cooperation along the border and work together to build an ASEAN community.

Stabilizing bilateral relations between the two countries is the priority for both parties. However, the bilateral ties are still in a testing period as shuttle diplomacy is being undertaken to build mutual understanding and trust. More communication and interactions – especially among the military leaders are needed to prevent future misunderstanding.

If an ultra-nationalist group is allowed to whip up a new wave of nationalism, border tensions between the two countries will reemerge and the bilateral ties will face a new turn of turbulences.

For long-term peace between the two countries and people, both countries have to respect the international laws and start implementing the ICJ's ruling as soon as possible.

Cambodia has exercised diplomatic flexibility and tolerance by waiting for Thailand to get its house in order first before implementing the court's ruling.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on July 31, 2014)*

# A Cambodian Perspective on the Mekong River

By Vannarith Chheang

**W**ater scarcity is getting more serious in the region, as it is driven by population growth, urbanization, industrialization, energy demand and climate change. It is noted that as the economic and strategic value of water is increasing so does competition to get access to this scarce resource.

In our Mekong region, competition to get access to and, in theory, optimize the use of the common river is accelerating. Four of the six countries sharing the Mekong River-Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam-have created the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission (MRC) to manage this trans boundary water resource in a sustainable and fair manner. However, national sovereignty remains a challenge for this inter-governmental organization to agree on any binding policy or principle to guide the management of the river.

## **Hydropower Dams and Human Security**

Recently there have been ongoing dialogues and discussions on the impacts of hydropower dams on human security in the region. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on this.

It is crystal clear that any hydropower dam along the mainstream of the Mekong River will have serious negative impact on fishery sector, sediment flows, and environment in general.

When we talk about the linkages between hydropower dams and human security, it is no longer a technical issue but a political one. The

reasons are simple: there is clear scientific evidence agreed by most experts that the impacts of hydropower dams along the main stream are huge that we must find the political will to either postpone or stop them.

The Cambodian Prime Minister, Samdech Techo Hun Sen, once said the management of the Mekong River is a matter of life and death. This can be regarded as a strong statement with a long-term vision.

Political leadership is required to drive the course of Mekong River development. Long-termism should dominate over short-termism. Regional and national interests should be carefully and responsibly balanced.

Mekong River development has to be inclusive, meaning equitably taking into consideration the voices of the majority of the key stakeholders, especially the people who continue to rely on the river and its tributary system for their food security and livelihoods. Mekong River development needs harmonization among the environment-development-people nexus.

### **Risks Posed by Laos' Planned Xayaburi Dam**

The Lao PDR's planned construction of Xayaburi hydropower dam will seriously cause negative impacts on the lower Mekong basin countries. Specifically, the dam will not only involve the resettlement of about 2,100 people; the means of subsistence, income and food security of 202,000 people living around Xayaburi dam will be affected due to the reduction of farmland and decimation of fisheries.

As the downstream country, the impact on Cambodia will be even greater. When the dam is constructed on the main stream of Mekong river, the food source of 80% of the population will be affected. The Tonle Sap lake area will face most serious problems due to the impact on its wild fish resources, which currently constitute the primary source of food and livelihoods for 1.6 million people and approximately 10% of current national GDP. The reduction of alluvium caused by the stagnancy of water in the dam's reservoir will also negatively affect Cambodia food security.

Thailand will likewise experience serious environmental impact on

fisheries, alluvium and aquatic products, as well as social issues such as the destruction of subsistence-based livelihoods for people living along Mekong River and increased migration to urban areas, both internal and trans boundary.

Located in the lowest part of Mekong basin, Vietnam will suffer the most from the negative impacts of dam on main stream of Mekong river. The Xayaburi dam and other proposed main stream dams on the Lower Mekong would add significantly to the projected impact of China's massive dams in Yunnan on the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, where 18 million people are living as well as to regional and even international food security. Vietnam is the world's second largest rice exporter and the Mekong Delta-already one of the areas most vulnerable to sea level rise--produces nearly half of its rice crop.

In December 2011 the government of the Lao PDR agreed under pressure from Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand to postpone the Xayaburi dam construction project until further studies could be carried out on sustainably developing the Mekong's water resources. Ultimately, the final decision needs to take the principles of human security into consideration with the development philosophy of long-termism, inclusiveness, harmonization, people-orientation, and regional cooperation and friendship.

If we allow Xayaburi dam to be constructed, it means we allow the other proposed 10 dams along the mainstream Mekong River to be constructed as well. Such scenario is very dangerous. We need to do something to prevent that from happening.

The Cambodian government has clear and firm position that the Xayaburi dam needs to be suspended and further scientific study and assessment need to be conducted. Civil society organizations in Cambodia are mobilizing their voices to fight against the dam construction along the mainstream of the Mekong River.

## **How to manage the Mekong River for All**

Managing the river for the benefit of those who depend on it for



their livelihoods and human security must be done with four principles in mind:

### **1) Openness and Transparency**

Transparency is one of the most important principles and measures to build trust and confidence among the countries sharing the Mekong River. Data sharing especially in the dry season is crucial for equitable water resources management and disaster prevention and management. Recently, our region has been faced with disastrous flooding. The lesson from such experiences is that an early warning system needs to be effectively implemented based on information and data gathering regarding rainfall in the mountainous areas and water flow patterns of the upper half of the Mekong River.

Exchanges of experts and engineers among the countries sharing the Mekong River needs to be improved and further promoted, particularly visits to the hydropower dams construction sites. Scientific data sharing needs to be promoted based on the full sharing of data and information. Upper and Lower Mekong countries need to create an open channel of information sharing. The institutionalization of data sharing can be a tool promoting transparency.

### **2) Preventive diplomacy**

Since its adoption at the 8th ASEAN Regional Forum in 2001 the principle of 'Preventive Diplomacy' (PD) has been officially accepted to be one of the cornerstones of regional relations and security cooperation. PD aims at consensual diplomatic and political actions to prevent conflicts either from arising or from escalating, or to minimize the impact of existing conflicts. In order to prevent water conflict along the Mekong River, it is necessary to strengthen the existing dialogues and negotiation with more openness, transparency, and participation from relevant stakeholders. China, an important ASEAN Dialogue Partner and MRC

observer, needs to be a part of that process, as does Myanmar, which is now negotiating membership in the MRC. Voluntary briefings on water resources development and usage should be further encouraged. An early warning system based on existing mechanisms needs to be developed to prevent the occurrence and escalation of conflicts.

### **3) Strengthening regional institutions**

The four-country MRC and the ten-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are the two main regional institutions in managing differences in the region. However, these two institutions are good at facilitating consultation but cannot effectively cope with the conflicts when it arises due to the strict principle of non-interference. We need to establish an effective conflict resolution mechanism in the region with these institutions. Good office should be created to response to emerging water conflict and other human security issues such as natural disaster and climate change. ASEAN-MRC partnership needs to be strengthened.

### **4). Stakeholder collaboration and partnership**

Collaboration and partnership among different stakeholders (public, private, and civil society organizations) are critically important to sustainable water resources management. Cooperation and negotiation among these different stakeholders for the sustainable use of water resources and leadership are desperately needed. An effective cooperation strategy framework is needed for guaranteeing water resources security. Several frameworks are available and the Mekong region needs to find a suitable one that encourages participation of all actors and helps achieve agreements that are sustainable, equitable to all users and based on long term commitments.

*( In Stimson Center, <http://www.stimson.org/summaries/a-cambodian-on-mekong-river-water-security/>, accessed on July 16, 2014. )*

# Sino-US Relations Fundamental to Regional Peace

By Vannarith Chheang

**A**t the sixth round of China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue held earlier this week in Beijing, leaders from both countries vowed to strengthen cooperation to address global issues and maintain regional peace and stability. A stable Sino-US relationship is the foundation of regional peace and stability. But, realities on the ground seems otherwise, with structural competition becoming more serious.

The rise of China is regarded as a challenge to the US-centric regional security order. The alliance systems established and led by the US are claimed to be the cornerstone of regional peace and stability. But China seeks to strengthen its Asian security concept based on the five principles of peaceful co-existence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non- interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

Realities and power structures have changed rapidly over the last decade especially in the post-global economic crisis in 2008. Then, China could maintain its rapid economic growth while the US was facing economic decline and recession. It was a significant pattern of global power restructuring. The rise and fall of empires and superpowers are common in our human history. However, currently it is more complicated as the world becomes much more interconnected and interdependent.

The ongoing global power restructuring and transition are taking place within the context of a global great convergence in which nation-states become more integrated in almost every dimension. A new global

order is in the making as it is a process shaped by changing actors and factors. The world is moving towards a multipolar world in which there are at least four powers (US, China, Russia, India) and two regional actors (EU and ASEAN) interacting and shaping a new global order.

Economic power determines the pattern of global and regional order. Particularly in the Asia-Pacific, the rising economic power of China leads to the changes of regional power structure and dynamics. China has invested robustly in defense modernization and maritime power projection. Economic power definitely leads to military power. As its power is growing, China becomes more assertive in protecting its core national interests and claiming its sovereignty.

Within such context, the US deployed its rebalancing strategy to Asia with the aim to strengthen its alliance system to keep China in check. Approaching the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas are the two most complicated and confrontational issues between the two countries in addition to the prevailing economic issues such as currency policy, trade, investment, and industrial espionage.

China accuses the US of intervening and complicating the disputes while the US keeps assuring China that it takes a neutral stand on the disputes. Regardless of those differences, China and the US both acknowledge the significance of their bilateral ties. A model of major-power relationship between China and the US are being constructed although concrete action plans have not been laid out yet.

At the Dialogue, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned “China-US confrontation, to the two countries and the world, would definitely be a disaster.” China seeks win-win cooperation with the US and tries to avoid direct confrontation as it hurts both countries and the whole region. “China and the United States’ interests are deeply interconnected. Cooperation will lead to win-win results while confrontation will hurt both,” Xi added.

China sent a clear signal to the US that both China and the US could share power and together build the Asia-Pacific region. New type of power relationship is required in order to avoid future conflicts. “We

should mutually respect and treat each other equally, and respect the others sovereignty and territorial integrity and respect each other's choice on the path of development," Xi suggested.

In response, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, stated, "We welcome the emergence of a peaceful, stable, prosperous China that contributes to the stability and development of the region, and chooses to play a responsible role in world affairs."

Power competition cannot be avoided but it should not lead to conflict. "I can tell you that we are determined to choose the path of peace and prosperity and co-operation, and yes, even competition, but not conflict," claimed Kerry. He added, "Strategic rivalry between rising and established powers is not inevitable. It's a choice."

The ASEAN member countries welcome such rhetoric as they are striving to get support from both countries to build its community. However, it depends on their acts. Sino-US rivalry hurts regional integration process and progress. Stable and healthy bilateral ties between these two powers benefit global and regional peace and development.

China and the US need to further deepen their strategic trust and confidence and find a common way and method to accommodate each other's interests. Both countries are responsible for regional peace and stability.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on July 11, 2014)*

# Cambodia and Japan Consolidate Ties

By Vannarith Chheang

Cambodia and Japan established diplomatic relations in 1953 and sixty years later, the bilateral ties were upgraded to a “strategic partnership” in December 2013. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated at that time: “We would like to strengthen tie-ups in addressing issues in the region and the international community.” The visit of Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida early this week was a significant step towards the implementation and consolidation of such strategic partnership.

The strategic partnership between the two countries covers a wide range of issues. The new elements of which focus on security cooperation. The signing of the memorandum of cooperation on defense cooperation and exchanges is regarded as one of the most important instruments to demonstrate such partnership, as Japan is seeking its regional security role and willing to exert an equal partner of the US in the alliance system.

With regards the electoral reform assistance, upon request made by Prime Minister Hun Sen in November last year, Japan sent its study team to discuss the issue with relevant stakeholders in Cambodia in May this year. But concrete support can only be provided after political agreement between the parties is reached. In its press release dated on 28 May, the Japanese embassy to Phnom Penh stated: “Japan considers that our assistance will be useful only when it is based on the good political agreement on the issue between the major political parties in Cambodia. In this regard, we strongly hope that the on-going discussion between CPP and CNRP will come to a successful conclusion at the earliest possible time.”

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has played an important role in peace building, national reconstruction, and nation building in a war-torn Cambodia. Japan did win Cambodian hearts in many respects by sending its civilian peacekeeping forces, representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and volunteers to help local communities develop. In the post-conflict peace building efforts, Japan assisted Cambodia in small arms management and control. The Japan's Assistance Team for Small Arms Management in Cambodia (JSAC) did a great job in collecting and destroying illegal weapons, building safe storage for weapons, and constructing local infrastructures in former conflict-ridden regions.

Japan is now Cambodia's second largest aid donor country after China. Japan's Development Assistance (ODA) focuses on infrastructure development, human resources development, institutional building, and human security projects. Since 1992, Japan has provided more than US\$ 2.3 billion of development assistance to Cambodia. Japan is also one of the biggest financial contributors to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

For Japan, Cambodia is becoming an important partner in the region. Cambodia is one of the new destinations for Japanese investors. More Japanese companies are interested in setting up their factories in Cambodia to produce parts and components supplying its main production bases in Bangkok (Thailand), Hochiminh City (Vietnam), and beyond. As Japanese corporations are diversifying or even relocating their factories and business establishments from China – due to both rising cost and political tensions – Cambodia can attract more Japanese investments.

In terms of security and strategic interests, Japan is interested in neutralizing Cambodia from the Chinese sphere of influence. Assisting Cambodia to build its institutions, develop economically independent, and consolidate democratic values would help the country to play a more significant role in the region and especially to counterbalance the increasing influence of China.

Building a closer strategic partnership with Cambodia is also part of Japan's interests. Japan has sufficient resources and military capability to

do so, if its pacifist constitution is reinterpreted. However, implementing such collective self-defense may cause Japan serious tensions with China and Korea, because their relations are very much shaped by historical aggression, territorial disputes, and nationalism.

In the bilateral meeting between Cambodian foreign minister Hor Nam Hong and his counterpart Fumio Kishida, both sides agreed to hold regular meetings between the foreign and defense officials. Perhaps in the future it will be upgraded to a two-two model similar to the one that Japan recently conducted with other countries such as Australia, Russia, and the United States.

Japan also provided US\$ 140 million of development assistance to Cambodia in order to build and renovate physical infrastructure including the construction of roads and drainage systems. To improve people-to-people ties, both governments agreed to start running direct flights as of this September and waiving visa requirements to diplomatic and official passport holders. It is expected that more Japanese tourists will come to visit Cambodia and more business networks will be established.

The potential benefits from deepening bilateral relations between to the two countries are considerable, particularly in the economic sector. However, it depends on whether or not Cambodia can reform quickly enough to attract more Japanese investors by eliminating corruption, building a transparent and accountable public institutions and services, and providing qualified manpower.

In addition to infrastructure development, to reduce the development disparity, Japan should support connecting Cambodian small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with Japanese firms. Providing technical and financing support to the local SMEs – especially in the provinces and regions – would greatly help to reduce poverty and support the local peoples to build resilient communities.

In the security cooperation sector, Japan should also provide capacity support to implement security sector governance and security reform in Cambodia. It involves multi-stakeholders including the military, police, parliament, judiciary, private security firms, and civil society organizations.



Democratic control of the armed forces is the foundation of maintaining long-term peace and stability in the Kingdom and Japan can share its experiences and expertise.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on July 3, 2014)*

# Cambodia and Thai Crisis

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**hailand, the land of smiles, has fallen into crisis since the military coup in 2006. The political upheaval led to a weakened economy and fractured society. The 12th military coup since 1932 on May 22 led by Army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha worsened the situation. The international community condemned the act and called for restoration of stability and full respect of democratic principles. The US government reacted by suspending the USD 3.5 million military aid to Thailand. The United Kingdom is also reviewing its military ties with Thailand.

Southeast Asian neighbors also raised their concern. Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated, "Singapore expresses grave concern over the latest developments in Thailand. We hope that all parties involved will exercise restraint and work towards a positive outcome, and avoid violence and bloodshed...Thailand is an important regional country and a key member of ASEAN. Prolonged uncertainties will set back Thailand and the region as a whole."

As the second largest economy in Southeast Asia after Indonesia, Thailand, the hub of regional trade, investment, and tourism, plays a significant role in regional development and integration. As one of the founding fathers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) back in 1967, Thailand by all indicators is the de facto regional leader in mainland Southeast Asia. It is also an attractive destination for millions of migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

However, that international position and role began to wane as the crisis loomed large. The crisis disrupts ASEAN regional community

building process and delays regional physical connectivity projects. It disturbs regional peace and stability and may lead to another regional economic crisis if there are no quick realistic solutions and appropriate crisis-exit strategy.

Cambodia is greatly affected by the Thai crisis since it is closely interconnected and interdependent with Thailand. Its bilateral trade with Thailand accounted for USD 4.5 billion last year. Every year, about one million international tourists who visit Cambodia enter through Thailand. There are about 250,000 Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. The crisis put their safety at greater risk. After the coup, Thailand unilaterally closed some border channels and restricted some Cambodian vehicles from entering Thailand.

Cambodia-Thai border disputes have not been completely solved. Due to the Thai crisis, the implementation of the judgement by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 11 November 2013 was shelved. No significant progress has been made. The opposition group in Thailand opposed the court's judgement. If this group comes to power after the military coup, it may stir border tensions and conflicts with Cambodia similar to that experienced from 2008 to 2011.

Cambodia's government took measures to avoid misunderstanding between the two countries. Minister of Interior SarKheng requested local authorities and armed forces to "promote better cooperation and relationship with their Thai counterparts and not to conduct any movement of forces." Prime Minister Hun Sen also clarified Cambodia's position with regard to the Thai crisis by standing firm on the principle of non-interference and peaceful co-existence with its neighbours. On May 27, he stated, "Cambodia's Constitution does not allow any foreigners to use its territory as a base for armed forces to attack the government of another state."

### **How has the crisis evolved?**

The crisis is rooted in a ferocious power struggle between the old elites (the military, the monarchy, judiciary, and Bangkok oligarchs)

and the rising populist group (Thaksin's network). Under his populist policies, telecom mogul Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party won the elections in 2001 and 2005. His overwhelming popularity threatened the power base of the old elites. Without much surprise, he was ousted in 2006 by a military coup; later in 2008, he was charged for corruption and sentenced to two years in absentia. That sparked the beginning of the Thai crisis.

Contemporarily, there are multiple crises in Thailand: political, economic, social, and institutional. Political polarisation generated by power competition between the two groups has reached its peak. Eight years after the 2006 coup, Thaksin lives his life in self-exile but his networks in Thailand are still active. He has become the most divisive figure in Thai politics. In 2011, his younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra assumed the premiership after her Pheu Thai Party won the general election. However, the opposition accused her of working under the sway of Thaksin.

The unwise attempt by Yingluck's government to push for the controversial amnesty bill facilitating the return of Thaksin triggered anti-government protests in November 2013. The opposition cried foul. A big wave of anti-government protests in coordination with the elites led to the collapse of the democratically elected government. The ill-fated Yingluck was forced to dissolve the parliament in December 2013. She later assumed care-taker premiership status before she was forced to resign by the Constitutional Court in May 2014 for abuse of power.

The Thai economic has faltered after months of political crisis. Recession is on the cards. Growth rate is expected to hit a low of about 2.5 percent this year. To avert economic crisis, the junta government prioritized the rice payment scheme, which has been hanging from last December, and also the fiscal policy planning for 2015. Such policy, if that is any indication, is politically motivated. It aims to lure rural farmers who are strong supporters of the Pheu Thai Party. Business confidence remains low and the investment environment highly unpredictable. It

depends on how resilient these bureaucratic institutions are.

In most aspects, the Thai political society is deeply divided. Social harmony which has been built and promoted over the past centuries is now at stake. People started to define their intolerable political boundary. The political dynamics of “red shirt vs. yellow shirts” remain the core of Thai societal chasm. Singapore’s foreign minister Shanmugam observed, “There is deep polarisation and Thailand has to find a way of bridging that polarisation and find a structure for society that is workable for itself, and only the Thais can do it.”

The perceived impartiality of the constitutional court regarding its judgement on May 7 to dismiss Yingluck and her nine cabinet ministers is negative to the role and image of the Thai judiciary. It leads to the loss of public trust in this institution. The decision naturally is in favour of the old elites and the opposition group. According to a Thai prominent scholar PavinChachavalpongpun, it was part of “coordinated acts” against Yingluck government. Some call it a “judicial coup.”

### **What is the outlook?**

It would be a quixotic effort to pressure the junta to quickly restore civilian administration. The military will be holding on to power for quite some time. It will try to consolidate its power and may create an unelected reform council or peoples’ council, as demanded by the anti-government protest leader SuthepThaugsuban, to appoint new leaders. This is by any standard against democratic principles.

The political trend remains murky and fuzzy. Political crisis dents the economic prospects and may eventually lead to a full-scale economic crisis in the coming years if political reconciliation and accommodation are not possible by the end of this year.

To wend its way out of the crisis, Thailand must restore political stability and national unity through democratic consolidation and good governance. Majority rule with the respect of minority rights is key. It needs to regain public trust and confidence in order to shore up fast-sliding growth.

It needs to develop both formal and informal institutions and mechanisms to heal the past, reconcile the differences, and align the interests of the conflicting parties.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on June 29, 2014)*

# Thai Junta Puts Cambodian Migrants at Risk

By Vannarith Chheang

**M**ore than 200,000 Cambodian migrant workers have been deported or fled Thailand amid fear of military raids on illegal labour after the Thai junta publicly announced earlier last week its policy to harshly deal with illegal migration issues. Such an unprecedented exodus of migrant workers creates huge troubles for Cambodia as it is striving to restore public trust and confidence, find a political breakthrough and steam up socio-economic development.

This was believed to be triggered by the perceived hostile rhetoric of the junta and the rumours spread quickly among the Cambodian workers, and even their employers, that the junta would use all measures including detaining and physical punishments on them. Such rumours came after the junta outlined their policy “to prevent [an] illegal work force from entering into the country and give more work opportunities to Thai nationals.”

According to a spokeswoman for the Thai Army, illegal migrants “will be arrested and deported.” Illegal migration is a threat to national security. “We see illegal workers as a threat because there were a lot of them and no clear measures to handle them, which could lead to social problems,” she added.

Those returning migrant workers were reportedly very much worried about their safety and security in Thailand after the military coup on May 22. Some said that the Thai military accused them of having a political link with the pro-Thaksin red-shirt movement in Thailand and were afraid of being arrested, detained or even shot.

The Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately denied expelling or deporting those undocumented migrant workers. It stated that it was the “cleanup process” to reduce illegal activities. On 17 June, Thai Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs SihasakPhuangketkeow met with Cambodian Ambassador Ms. Eat Sophea to clarify that Thailand did not have any policy to arrest or deport Cambodian migrant workers.

In response, Cambodia would encourage its migrant workers to return to Thailand through legal means. Moreover, telephone hotlines were set up to provide information and necessary measures to have an orderly deportation and to minimize the spread of rumours.

Such an event brings about many problems and challenges for the Cambodian government in many ways. The Cambodian government raised concerns, but restrained from lodging diplomatic protest. Minister of Interior SarKheng stated, “The army has rushed to deport workers who are considered illegal without prior notice or discussion with Cambodia, or at least making contact with provinces along the borders.”

“I think the current Thai army leadership must be held responsible for all the problems that have occurred, including the loss of life,” he added. At least nine Cambodian workers were reportedly killed on their way from Thailand.

International and local civil society groups strongly blamed the junta for not respecting the rights and dignity of migrant workers. The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), “calls on the Thai authorities to immediately investigate allegations of killings of Cambodians and ensure that the repatriation of Cambodians is carried out with respect to their inherent human dignity.”

Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific of the International Migration Organisation (IOM), Andrew Bruce said, “This rapid movement of people is unprecedented in this region in recent years, outside of conflict and natural disasters.”

The opposition party took the opportunity to attack the ruling party for failing to provide employment opportunities to its people. The opposition also tries to play its part in helping restore the chaotic



situation. In his letter to General Prayuth Chan-ocha, president of the Cambodian National Rescue Party Sam Rainsy requested the junta to “help ensure the safety and the dignity of all Cambodians still living on Thai soil.”

To deal with such a chaotic situation, the Cambodian government and civil society groups quickly offered support to the returning migrants through the provision of transport, health care, food, water, and other basic needs. However, the impacts and challenges are huge. The migrants need regular income to support their livelihoods and family, but now they are facing difficulties and uncertainty. It is estimated that these migrants remit about US\$ 230 millions annually to support their families back home.

The government has a huge task ahead. It needs to provide skill-development training programs to those returning migrant workers and assist them to enter the job market. Other measures may include more investments in rural infrastructure, urban-rural connectivity, and rural economic sector development.

A short-term solution would require the government to identify and map out the skills of those returned migrants and find them opportunities. Social security funds and social safety net programs must be expanded to outreach those migrants.

As for a long-term solution, more vocational training centres and schools must be established in different regions and provinces across the country, so that it would be affordable and accessible to many more people, particularly in the rural and remote areas. This will result in the creation of a pool of workforces to supply the increasing demand of a semi-skilled and high-skilled labour market.

The main push factors of Cambodians migrating to work in Thailand are poverty, lack of employment opportunities, indebtedness and landlessness. The pull factors are wage gaps between Cambodia and Thailand and better working conditions. The majority of Cambodian migrant workers crossed the border by informal and social networks, often ending up in illegal migration.

There is an increasing number of Cambodian women and children migrating to Thailand over the years. They are much more vulnerable to labour exploitation, human trafficking, and human right abuses than men are.

Most Cambodian migrants work in construction, fishery, agriculture, and other labour intensive sectors. They concentrate in metropolitan areas such as Bangkok.

Migration becomes one of the hot topics of bilateral relations, as well as regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. Without appropriately addressing the issue, it harms bilateral and multilateral cooperation. It is difficult to concretize the ASEAN community if there is no effective migration governance system and people-centred policy in place.

In 2003, Cambodia and Thailand signed a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to facilitate proper procedures for employment, effective repatriation, and due protection of workers, and prevention of illegal migration. However, both governments failed to prevent illegal migration and human trafficking. There are around 200,000 undocumented Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand, which resulted in such deportation en mass.

At the regional level, in the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers adopted in 2007, the framework and responsibility of the sending and receiving states of migrant workers was provided. For the receiving states, they were obliged to “intensify efforts to protect the fundamental human rights, promote the welfare and uphold human dignity of migrant workers.”

The rights and dignity of the undocumented migrant workers are not legally protected under these two documents. However, regardless of immigration status, all migrants are entitled to basic human rights as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights setting forth the basic civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights and fundamental freedoms that all human beings in every country should enjoy.

Both bilateral and regional agreements on migrant workers should include rights protection for the undocumented migrant workers, since

it is important for the wellbeing and inclusiveness of society. It needs to acknowledge the social and economic presence of undocumented migrants and assist them to integrate with the local community.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on June 19, 2014)*

# Can the South China Sea Disputes Be Resolved?

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**here are various attempts, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to solve the disputes in the South China Sea. But the nature of the disputes is too complicated. It has become the strategic playground for China and the US to challenge and test each other. Miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation between the parties concerned can lead to regional armed conflicts. The disputes cannot be solved but can be managed.

There are five claimant states in the disputed South China Sea: Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The ongoing tensions are mainly driven by Chinese assertiveness in claiming its sovereignty, the US's rebalancing towards Asia with the aim to check the rising power of China, incidents at sea, and prevailing mistrust between claimant states.

To counterbalance China, both the Philippines and Vietnam have proactively approached United States and Japan. It creates a strategic opportunity for the US to intervene and claim its regional leadership role. For Vietnam, it is trying to diversify its strategic partnerships by deepening bilateral relations with India and Russia. In the eyes of Vietnam, Russia is the most important strategic partner and balancer. Russia poses neither real nor intentional threat to the Asia-Pacific.

Although strategic convergence between China and Russia has been on the rise since the Ukraine crisis, a Sino-Russian security alliance will never take place. These two powers are always skeptical of each other. But the possibility of having a united frontline between the two against the United States and its allies is high. The multi-billion dollars gas deal and naval

exercise between China and Russia last month significantly reshaped global and regional security order.

Such increasing strategic power competition between major powers puts regional security at greater risk. It even challenges the centrality role of ASEAN in its efforts to construct an ASEAN-centric security architecture. Small and weak states like Cambodia and Laos are encountering a strategic dilemma although they are trying to exercise balancing and hedging foreign policy towards major powers, they may, however, be forced to choose sides indefinitely.

The South China Sea dispute is the dividing factor between the claimant and non-claimant states as well as between the major powers. It generates a new wave of regional strategic deficit and distrust. For the non-claimants, Indonesia and Singapore are the two most vocal while Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar are taking strategic pacifism with regard to the disputes.

Domestic politics determine foreign policy. National interests are above regional interests. Economic development and prosperity are the foundation of political legitimacy. Foreign policy is regarded as tool to serve national economic development. Therefore, they are interested and determined to build closer relations with China, a locomotive of regional economy.

The failure of the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in July 2012 in issuing a joint statement clearly reflected on such differences of national interest calculation among the ASEAN member states. It was also a wake-up call for ASEAN to effectively and quickly reform their institutions to fully serve the economic and security interests of its members. By staying united amid regional and global turbulences, ASEAN can realize its potential.

The nature of sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea cannot be solved without having mutual strategic trust and common interests. It is a long-term issue; therefore it needs to have a long-term solution and vision. It requires both bilateral and multilateral approaches. Bilateral negotiation is necessary to build trust and confidence. International laws and norms ideally

are the guiding principles of international relations and dispute settlements. Claimant states should strictly adhere to 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties over the South China Sea (DOC) adopted in Phnom Penh in 2002 is the most important regional instrument in promoting cooperation, as well as preventing disputes and tensions from escalating. In 2011, the guideline to implement the declaration was adopted in Indonesia. However, some claimant states violated the declaration.

Such poor implementation of the DOC and the increasing tensions in the South China Sea prompt ASEAN and China to work closer together to strengthen regional norms by developing a code of conduct to inter alia deepen mutual strategic trust and confidence through dialogues, strengthen the rules of law and preventive diplomacy, and manage incidents and crisis.

The formal negotiation process between ASEAN and China on the Code of Conduct (COC) has been conducted since 2012. Although the process is painstakingly slow, it demonstrates certain level of political will and commitment of ASEAN and China in working together to maintain peace and stability in the disputed water. The negotiation process is as important as the outcome. It must produce a meaningful and substantial document.

The code will not be concluded any time soon. Myanmar, the current ASEAN chair, is not so much interested in pushing forward the code for being afraid of harming its good relations with China. The Myanmar chair shows more interest in economic development and poverty reduction, social development, non-traditional security issues, and intra-regional connectivity projects.

The pressures will fall upon Malaysia, one of the claimants, which will chair ASEAN next year. 2015 is a special year for ASEAN since the three community blueprints are expected to be completed by then. COC will be on top of the agenda as well. Without addressing the disputes in the South China Sea peacefully and amicably, the building of an ASEAN community will be just a dream.

ASEAN and China have no other choice but to conclude the COC as soon as possible. It serves the interests of all parties concerned. It will definitely contribute to regional peace and stability. ASEAN should not view China as a threat; China should not view a united ASEAN as a threat.

ASEAN member states should adjust their foreign policy and stay absolutely neutral amid 'powers' rivalry otherwise it cannot build a neutral and relevant ASEAN institution. It starts with the calculation of national interests. Only when they can re-adjust and integrate their national interests with regional interests then ASEAN can be stronger. The South China Sea dispute is a test for ASEAN. The dispute can be managed under the framework of China-ASEAN and the Code of Conduct.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on June 17, 2014)*

# Japan Spreads Its Security Wing in the Asia-Pacific

By Vannarith Chheang

Japan, which exercised a low-profile foreign policy during post-World War II, has recently taken ambitious steps to take up regional and global security roles. Such a move is generated by both domestic political and leadership changes, and also rising regional security complexity and uncertainty.

Regional peace appears to hang in the balance. Regional security order is being challenged by powers rivalries which may lead to a new arm races. The factors of instability seem to outweigh those for stability.

After being re-elected as the Prime Minister of Japan in late December 2012, Mr. Shinzo Abe, seen as a strong nationalist leader, initiated one core security agenda: the reinterpretation of the pacific constitution article 9, to allow for collective self-defence regardless of the opposition by other main political parties and the reservation of the majority of the Japanese people.

Other security policies include the establishment of the National Security Council, the adoption of the National Security Strategy, and the National Defence Program Guidelines. This is a significant development in regional security landscape.

The re-emergence of an assertive security role by Japan largely has brought wariness from China and Korea, which were under Japanese colonialism and imperialism before the end of the Second World War. China bluntly accuses Japan of provoking regional instability and tensions, and trying to divide Asian countries.



For Japan to concretize its ambition, it requires strong and true partnership with all of its Asian neighbours. The key questions therefore are to what extent and how Japan can earn strategic trust from its neighbours and earnestly contribute to strengthening regional peace and stability.

In the meantime, Japan has to effectively solve the remaining sensitive historical issues with its neighbours before it can realize such a security role. Visiting the historically controversial Yasukuni shrine definitely does not serve Japan's foreign policy objectives and interests.

For the Southeast Asian countries, Japan is generally perceived as a benign regional power. Japan's soft power has gained a strong hold in Southeast Asia through the provision of development assistance, trade and investment, human resources development and volunteerism.

Japan is one of the major trading and development partners of ASEAN. Moreover, Japan has always supported ASEAN's centrality role in shaping regional economic and security architectures.

Traditionally, Japan plays a significant role in regional community building through helping to deepen regional production network driven by intra-regional trade and investment flows, human resources development and institution building, and narrowing the development gaps in the region.

Japan initiates and supports various sub-regional cooperation and integration schemes especially the development of growth triangles and the Greater Mekong Sub-regional cooperation. Japan also supports regional countries in connecting infrastructure particularly the East-West Economic Corridor and Southern Economic Corridor.

To realize its community building, ASEAN looks outwards to garner support from all dialogue partners. Japan, one of the key development partners of ASEAN, has played significant role in providing development assistance to Southeast Asian countries, in particular the less developed economies (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam).

Japanese foreign direct investment in the region has contributed to socio-economic development and poverty reduction. Moreover, Japan

has been involved in regional peace building efforts such as sending its peacekeeping forces to Cambodia and Timor-Leste.

Strategically, Japan has been approaching the Southeast Asian countries more aggressively in the last two years. Mr. Abe made his first overseas state visits to the Southeast Asian region in early 2013. In January, he visited Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Later, he visited Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines in July, Brunei in October, and Cambodia and Lao PDR in November.

He was the first Japanese Prime Minister who visited all ten-member states of ASEAN within less than a year. Japan becomes assertive and determined in projecting its regional comprehensive power by linking economic and cultural ties with strategic and security interests.

Although Japan-US security treaty alliance remains the foundation of Japan's defence policy, Japan is trying to diversify its strategic and security partners. Japan-ASEAN security partnership compliments well with the Japan-US alliance. Japan's increasing interests and proactive engagement with the region primarily aims at checking the rising power and influence of China in the region.

The Japan-ASEAN relationship started with the informal forum on synthetic rubber in 1973. Then the dialogue was formalized in 1977 when the first Japan-ASEAN forum was convened. In the same year, Japan, inspired by the Fukuda's doctrine, showed its political will and commitment to build regional peace, stability, and partnership of mutual confidence and trust. A "heart-to-heart" relationship is the guiding principle of Japan-ASEAN cooperation.

Over the last four decades, the foundation of partnership of mutual respect and interests have been constructed and enhanced. In January 2013, Mr. Abe outlined five principles diplomacy towards ASEAN: protect and promote together with ASEAN member states universal values, ensure in cooperation with ASEAN member states that there are free and open seas, further promote trade and investment, protect and nurture Asia's diverse cultural heritages and traditions, and promote exchanges among the young generations to further foster mutual understanding.

At the 16th ASEAN-Japan Summit in October 2013 in Brunei, the leaders acknowledged the achievements and reaffirmed their commitment to maintain peace and development through cooperation and partnership.

They also underlined the importance of maritime security, freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and ensured the resolution of disputes by peaceful means in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN relations, the leaders from Japan and ASEAN also held their commemorative summit in Tokyo in December 2013, to uplift their partnership to a new height.

In their joint statement, the leaders from ASEAN and Japan committed to work together to collectively address regional and global issues. Regional security architecture and maritime security cooperation were the focus of a regional cooperation framework.

At the Shangri-La dialogue in late May 2014, Mr. Abe reaffirmed Japanese interests in playing a larger role in regional security affairs. He said, “Japan intends to play an even greater and more proactive role than it has until now in making peace in Asia and the world something more certain.”

He went on to emphasize that a Japan-US alliance was the cornerstone for regional peace and stability. He added, “Taking our alliance with the United States as the foundation and respecting our partnership with ASEAN, Japan will spare no effort to make regional stability, peace and prosperity into something rock solid.”

On the ground, Japan started providing technical and equipment support to the defence sectors throughout Southeast Asia. For instance, Japan will deliver 10 brand-new multi-patrol boats to the Philippines and a similar amount of boats to Vietnam in 2015. Both the Philippines and Vietnam are locked in a bitter territorial spat and dangerous naval standoff with China.

Japan together with the United States is going to challenge and square off against China in regional and global power projection. Japan stands

together with the US in carrying out the US's rebalancing strategy towards Asia through the introduction of a collective self-defence and strategic partnership with ASEAN.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on June 12, 2014)*

# Major Powers Cross Swords at the Recent Shangri-La Dialogue

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he Shangri-La Dialogue-principally a platform to exchange views to promote mutual understanding, consolidate strategic trust and confidence, and deepen international cooperation to sustain peace and stability- turned out to be a platform for major powers to cross their swords or carry out their rhetoric war last week in Singapore.

The Dialogue concentrated on the increasing assertiveness of China and regional territorial disputes in East and South China Seas. The United States and its allies coordinated their strategic common position to put pressure on China. In response China accused the US and Japan for staging provocations and stirring regional tensions. Really it was a rare contentious and heated debate in the history of Shangri-La Dialogue. Clear position of each major power was revealed; but it is not sure whether these powers would latter re-adjust their position to accommodate each other for the sake of regional peace and stability.

The on-going regional tensions and spats are driven by multiple factors including the changing regional power structure and order, conflicting paths of power projection, resource security, nationalism, and territorial disputes. The rise of China challenges the regional leadership role of the US in the Asia-Pacific; therefore the US issued its rebalancing strategy towards Asia by inter alia reinforcing its alliance system to check and even manage the rise of China. Such move alerts and alarms China. In the eye of China, the US is exercising its containment strategy against China.

In a televised debate right before the official launch of the Shangri-La dialogue, Madame Fu, chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress, raised concern over the US's alliance system in the Asia-Pacific. She said, "For the alliance relationship between the US and its allies, I think for China, the alliance is a left-over from the Cold War. There was a meaning during the Cold War. And now the observing point for China is the nature of the alliance. If the allies of the US take China on the opposing side, then China will be concerned."

Sino-Japan bilateral relations have been going on a downhill since the nationalisation of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Island by the then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in May 2012. It sparked the re-emergence of anti-Japanese riots and increased strong anti-"Japanism" in China. After Shinzo Abe returned to power in December 2013, the bilateral relations got even worse. China and Japan accused each other of violating sovereignty and territorial integrity over the disputed island and its surrounding water. In November 2013, China unilaterally established its Air Identification Zone covering most the East China Sea; such move triggered strong reaction from Japan and the United States.

Abe's visit to the historically controversial Yasukuni Shrine further leads to the erosion of political relations between Tokyo and Beijing. Moreover, his attempts to remove constitutional restraints on Japanese military action abroad further raise suspicion among its neighbours. The majority of the Japanese people also expressed their reservation against such amendment to the pacific constitution Article 9 which renounces war as a means of settling international disputes and limits Japan's self-defense forces to a strictly defensive posture. Regardless of such concern, Abe is determined to move forward with the reinterpretation of the constitution.

It is clear that Japan is seeking an assertive regional and global security role. Japan is taking major steps to strengthen its defence capability and creating collective defence system allowing its armed forces to engage abroad. In his opening keynote address, Shinzo Abe affirmed Japanese position under the so-called "Proactive Contribution to Peace" to support defence capacity of Southeast Asian countries specifically aiming at

challenging and counterbalancing the rise of China. “Japan will offer its utmost support for the efforts of the countries of ASEAN as they work to ensure the security of the seas and the skies, and thoroughly maintain freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight,” said Abe.

The US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel reinforced Abe’s position by stating: “China has undertaken destabilizing, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea. It has restricted access to Scarborough Reef, put pressure on the long-standing Philippine presence at the Second Thomas Shoal, begun land reclamation activities at multiple locations, and moved an oil rig into disputed waters near the Paracel Islands.” He also reaffirmed the US’s rebalancing towards Asia which was “not a goal, not a promise, or a vision – it’s a reality”. However, some regional observers keep asking whether US’s pivot to Asia has any substance if at all.

According to Hagel, the US has four approaches in engaging with Asia. These include encouraging the peaceful settlement of disputes and upholding the principles of freedom of navigation, building a cooperative regional architecture based on international rules and norms, enhancing the capabilities of its allies and partners, and strengthening its own regional defence capacities. The US has encouraged if not forced its allies to share collective defence responsibility by requesting them to increase their defence expenditure and capacity.

In the face of such challenges and pressures, China tried to convince and prove to its Asian neighbors its peaceful development going along with concrete actions. General Wang Guanzhong, Deputy Chief, General Staff Department, People’s Liberation Army, stated, “China will never contend for or seek hegemony and foreign expansion. China adheres to peaceful development, which is its major contribution to security in Asia.”

He also fired back on the remarks made by Abe and Hagel. He said, “Mr. Abe is supposed to promote peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region with his constructive ideas in line with the principles of the Shangri-la Dialogue. Instead, in violation of those principles, he was trying to stir up disputes and trouble. I do not think this is acceptable or in agreement with the spirit of the Dialogue.”

General Wang further stated, “Mr. Hagel was more outspoken than I expected. And I personally believe that his speech is a speech with tastes of hegemony, a speech with expressions of coercion and intimidation, a speech with flaring rhetoric that usher destabilizing factors into the Asia-Pacific to stir up trouble, and a speech with unconstructive attitude.”

Such rhetoric demonstrated that there is no trust between the major powers. Strategic fractures are big. It seems that the major powers view each other as potential threat if not yet an enemy.

Against such backdrop, ASEAN needs to seek greater regional role to shape major powers’ relations. But it becomes more difficult or even impossible for ASEAN to exercise its role given the fact that major powers tend to emphasize more on bilateral relations and alliance system than multilateral mechanisms and institutions.

Without having a stable and healthy major powers’ relations, ASEAN may risk being divided. In no one’s interest, the situation may lead towards a new type of Cold War politics in the Asia-Pacific. It is not driven by ideology but by power and interest. The major powers will establish their own sphere of security and economic influence while smaller countries will potentially become the pawn of major powers’ game.

*(This article was first published in The Khmer Times on June 05, 2014)*



# Thein Sein: ASEAN Is at Critical Juncture

By Vannarith Chheang

**I**n his opening remarks at the 24th ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw on May 11, 2014, President Thein Sein stated, “Today, we are at a critical juncture and we need to make sure that all necessary steps in the community building are taken in a timely manner for realisation of the ASEAN Community.” He stressed the promotion of good governance, protection of migrant workers, narrowing development gap, poverty reduction, promoting inclusive growth, enhancing productivity, competitiveness, and innovation. He called for deepening cooperation and coordination to address both traditional and non-traditional security issues. He urged for stronger partnership among different stakeholders to address the issues of climate change and natural disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

ASEAN has embarked on a long journey full of turbulences, difficulties, opportunities, and potentials. ASEAN will celebrate its 47th birthday on August 8, 2014. The original objectives of ASEAN were to solve regional disputes, build regional peace and stability, and contain the spread of communism in South East Asia. After the end of the Cold War, it has gradually developed into a full-fledged regional institution covering a wide range of issues from security to economic and socio-cultural dimensions.

ASEAN is under time and expectation pressures to complete its community building by the end of 2015. Under the three pillars of its community building, to date, ASEAN has achieved roughly 80 percent of its economic community blueprint. However, there is slow progress

in implementing the other two pillars: political-security and socio-cultural blueprints. Without a simultaneous implementation and progress of these pillars, the ASEAN community is incomplete.

The political-security pillar envisages three characteristics: a rules-based community of shared values and norms, a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security, and a dynamic region and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world. The socio-cultural community focuses on people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN.

It was the first time Myanmar chairs ASEAN since it gained official membership in 1997. This provides a great opportunity for President Thein Sein and his administration to raise and assert the image and role of Myanmar on the international stage after opening up three years ago. Hope and expectations are high that Myanmar can accelerate ASEAN regional integration and community building process. The summit was a significant milestone towards realisation of the ASEAN community.

However, it was also a severe test for ASEAN unity and the neutral and responsible role of Myanmar as the ASEAN chair. Myanmar is under multiple pressures stemming from increasing tensions and complexities in the South China Sea especially after the recent clashes between China and Vietnam following the installation of drilling rig Ocean 981 by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation and between China and the Philippines over the apprehension of Chinese fishing boat. In response to such tension, ASEAN issued a statement urging “all parties concerned... to exercise self-restraint and avoid actions which could undermine peace and stability in the area; and resolve disputes by peaceful means without resorting to threat of use of force.” It also “called on all parties to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) to undertake full and effective implementation of the DOC in order to create an environment of mutual trust and confidence. They emphasised the need to expeditiously work towards an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).”

However, China has its own view. In a press conference on May 12,

the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded, “The issue of South China Sea is not one between China and ASEAN. There is consensus between China and ASEAN countries on jointly safeguarding peace and stability in South China Sea. China stands with ASEAN countries to continue to work for a full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and wants to steadily move forward the negotiation process of COC. China and ASEAN countries are in close communication on this point. At the same time, we hope relevant ASEAN countries can earnestly respect and implement DOC, make positive efforts along with China to safeguard peace, stability and maritime security of South China Sea and create enabling conditions for COC negotiations.”

On another front, domestic political crisis in Thailand is threatening regional peace and stability and this poses multiple challenges to ASEAN. Without quick and comprehensive solutions to the crisis, Thailand and the region will pay a high security and economic price. Under such mounting pressure, ASEAN has to be flexible in its approach towards the internal issues of its member states. Cambodia requested ASEAN intervention during its border conflict with Thailand back in 2011 but it was blocked by Thailand based on the principle of non-interference. Now, ASEAN took a bold step in intervening in Thai domestic politics. It is the beginning of a new ASEAN way. In a separate statement at the 24th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN called for “a peaceful resolution to the ongoing challenge in the country through dialogue and in full respect of democratic principles and rule of law.”

The rising tension and unpredictability in the South China Sea, and protracted political crisis in Thailand dominated the discussions at the ASEAN Summit. These two issues will continue to test ASEAN’s capacity and unity. It puts Myanmar into a difficult position. The tensions are disrupting and derailing other areas of regional cooperation and it slows down the overall performance of the ASEAN community blueprints.

Acknowledging the urgency and importance of regional security and political issues, ASEAN needs to strengthen its centrality in

shaping regional architecture. ASEAN needs to improve the capacity of its secretariat and develop clear road maps to build a rules-based and ASEAN-centric regional security order. The East Asia Summit should serve as a strategic direction forum. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) should play its role to strengthen structured security dialogue, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, and the Extended ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) focus on practical security cooperation.

On the socio-economic development issue, good governance, as highlighted by the Myanmar chair this year, deserves more attention and strategic action plans. It is the linchpin of national development and regional integration. Without efficient, transparent, accountable, and democratic institutions, ASEAN member states cannot realise their potential. Without strong members, the ASEAN family will not be united, peaceful, and prosperous.

ASEAN should consider establishing its own regional governance index to monitor and assess the quality of institutions in each member states and determine ways and means to assist them to improve and develop good governance. ASEAN Institute of Governance should be created in order to promote research and information sharing among the ASEAN Member States.

At such a critical juncture, ASEAN should at least be able to set a concrete and firm foundation conducive for a long-term peace and stability, robust regional integration that is based on the guiding principles of good governance, inclusive growth, people-centered, and knowledge-based. The post-2015 ASEAN needs to focus more on institution building, new security order construction based on the ASEAN centrality, technological and social innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.

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# The Mekong River Is at Risk

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he Mekong River, a major river in Southeast Asia, and the 12th longest in the world, is a lifeline for more than sixty million people living in the Mekong region (Yunnan province of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao, Cambodia and Vietnam). Today, the river faces multiple challenges and risks, and is ranked as one of the five rivers in the world which suffers the most serious reduction of water flow. Climate change, energy demand and construction of hydropower dams, mismanagement of water resources, population growth and urbanization are threatening the ecosystem of the river.

The planning and construction of hydroelectric mainstream dams along the river is a politically and economically complex issue in the region. According to scientific research, the dams have negative impacts on the environment, as the flow of nutrient-rich sediment disrupts fishery and the whole biodiversity in the region. Cambodia and Vietnam, the two countries downstream, are the main victims of such development.

According to research conducted by Oxfam and World Wildlife Fund, the mainstream dams will reduce Cambodia's fish consumption from 49kg to 22kg per person per year by 2030. This is also equivalent to a reduction of 55% in fish consumption, the main source of protein of Cambodians. Rice production in the Mekong delta will also be significantly reduced due to the lack of water resources, soil salinization and poor sediment flow. This will result in serious food insecurity in the region.

Experiences from other parts of the world have shown that without proper management of such important trans-boundary water resources, conflicts are inevitable. Currently, anti-dam campaigns have been

mushrooming in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, with the governments of Cambodia and Vietnam having officially protested against the planned mainstream dams.

Regardless of calls from the downstream countries and requests of civil society organizations for the Lao government to postpone and even annul the construction of dam projects, Lao is going ahead with the construction of the Xayaburi dam (which is 30 percent completed), and plans to construct another dam, Don Sahong. The disagreement between Lao and its two neighbors (Cambodia and Vietnam), concerning the construction of the dams is threatening regional cooperation and community building process.

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), established in 1995, was formed to facilitate regional cooperation on sustainable management of these shared water resources. Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam are the official member countries of the MRC, while China and Myanmar are the observing countries. However, the MRC does not have much executive power and authority to enforce on its members. In reality, it is a toothless institution and reforms are therefore needed to improve its status.

Acknowledging mounting challenges arising from the river management, regional countries agreed to hold a summit among the heads of government of the MRC member countries. The first summit held in Thailand in 2010, reaffirmed the importance of building closer cooperation among the MRC members and deepening institutional reform of the MRC. The leaders committed to working together to realize “a sustainable integrated water resources management for sustainable development, economic growth, and the alleviation of poverty and improvement of livelihoods in the Mekong basin.”

At the second summit in 2014, in Vietnam, pressing issues related to water resources management were addressed. In their statement, the heads of the MRC governments identify priority areas of action, which included the implementation of the MRC’s Council Study on Sustainable Management and Development of the Mekong River Basin, the impacts

assessment of mainstream hydropower projects, disaster risks reduction, food security and livelihood, water quality, river ecology and cooperation with the dialogue and development partners. However, the statement does not put enough pressure on Lao concerning mainstream hydropower dams.

There are three scenarios in managing the lower Mekong River. The first scenario: if the mainstream dams are completed, then the conflict between the Mekong's riparian countries is going to be inevitably severe with high security and economic implications. Regional cooperation and integration will be seriously disrupted and the ASEAN community building process will face a significant setback from such a crisis.

The second scenario: if the postponement and even cancelation of the proposed 11 mainstream hydropower dams is realistic, then regional countries will further deepen cooperation to assist each other in terms of development and poverty reduction, and this promotes joint management of the trans-boundary water resources. In such a scenario, international development partners and financial institutions need to further assist the lower Mekong countries to reduce poverty and promote sustainable management of the river. More development assistance to Lao is needed as an incentive for not developing hydropower dams and supporting alternative ways of development.

The third possible scenario would be for the Xayaburi dam to be completed, but other mainstream dams, such as Don Sanhong dam, will not be allowed to build. In such a case, the Lao government needs to work closer with the Mekong River Commission and downstream countries in managing the Xayaburi dam to minimize the adverse impacts caused by the dam.

The prospects of sustainably managing the Mekong River are slim. However, as long as there is political will from the political leaders, active engagement from the civil society groups and local community, environmental and social responsibility of the private sector, and support from the international donor community and development partners, the river can still be well managed.

The functional structure of MRC needs to be vitalized in order to allow this organization to have more responsibility and authority in managing the river. The member countries should lower their sovereignty and respect the rules and regulations imposed by the MRC. Internal research capacity on sustainable development of the MRC needs to be improved. The development partners need to increase technical support provided to the MRC.

ASEAN needs to build a closer working partnership with the MRC. The whole ASEAN community building process is at stake and will be futile if the Mekong River is not sustainably governed, and differences and conflicts among the riparian countries are not properly addressed. ASEAN should pay more attention to the management of the river. Preventive diplomacy in water-related conflict should be considered at the ASEAN level. An ASEAN-MRC working group should be established to promote consultation and closely monitor the development and management of the river.

The future of the 60 million people living along the Mekong River depends much on political will and leadership of the regional governments, the capacity of the regional institutions (MRC and ASEAN), and the support from the international community, in sustaining the flow of the river and preserving the ecology of the river system. A partnership between the government, private sector and civil society, including the grassroots, should be further developed and strengthened.

There is not much time left before the water and food security crisis hits the Mekong region. It is an urgent task for the regional stakeholders to confront the challenges head-on and seek common and holistic solutions. The sound management of the Mekong River will serve everyone's long-term interests. It matters all countries in the region.

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# India-ASEAN Going Beyond Delhi Dialogue VI

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he Delhi Dialogue VI, under the theme “Realising the ASEAN-India Vision for Partnership and Prosperity”, took place on March 6-7. Vannarith Chheang highlights ways to enhance economic, security, strategic and socio-cultural cooperation that can realise this vision.

India’s rise as a global power in the next two decades depends on its ability to maintain high economic performance, social inclusiveness, national unity and security. To realise that vision, India needs to have a proactive and flexible foreign policy with a new level of earnest engagement with major powers, neighbouring countries, and regional and global institutions. ASEAN is a strategic pathway for India to expand her economic interests and strategic outreach to the Asia-Pacific.

## **Partnership Scaling New Heights**

Strategically and security-wise, India is saddled with domestic issues and a complicated relationship with the neighbour to the West. However, being aware of the increasing strategic and economic importance of East Asia, India launched its strategic and economic diversification by connecting and integrating with her neighbours in the East. India initiated the ‘Look East Policy’ in 1991 with the objectives to build trust and bridge with East Asian countries, especially mainland Southeast Asia. In 1992, India became a full dialogue partner of ASEAN and ten years later in 2002, the first India-ASEAN Summit was inaugurated in Phnom Penh.

India-ASEAN relations have been advancing at a remarkable pace. At the Commemorative Summit in December 2012, the leaders agreed to elevate their partnership to a strategic level and discussed a wide range of issues in order to serve long-term common strategic and economic interests. In the joint statement of the 11th India-ASEAN Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, in October 2013, the ASEAN leaders welcomed and acknowledged the significant role played by India in assisting ASEAN to implement its community building blueprints (political security, economic and socio-cultural.) India has also helped ASEAN strengthen its central role in constructing a stable, open, inclusive security and economic architecture in the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region.

### **Creating a Comprehensive Cooperation Framework**

In its plan of action 2010-2015, India and ASEAN have set out a comprehensive cooperation framework covering political and security cooperation, and economic and socio-cultural cooperation. It also requests establishing an ASEAN round table discussion comprising think tanks, policy makers, parliamentarians, scholars, media, business and youth representatives to provide policy inputs on future areas of cooperation. The Delhi Dialogue inaugurated in 2009 has become one of the key venues where policy makers, think tanks, representatives from the civil society groups and the private sector, come together to exchange ideas and visions to implement the action plan as well as to generate new areas of cooperation and focus.

### **Delhi Dialogue VI**

The Delhi Dialogue VI, under the theme ‘Realising the ASEAN-India Vision for Partnership and Prosperity’, took place on March 6-7. The dialogue focused on three main aspects:

- Translating the ‘Vision Statement’;

- The role of North East India in India's 'Look East Policy' and the roles of India and ASEAN in shaping the regional architecture in the Asia Pacific; and,
- The issues of financing infrastructure connectivity, the promotion of trade and investment, maritime security cooperation, technology cooperation, capacity building, and people-to-people contacts were among the priority areas of cooperation and implementation.

### **Economic Cooperation**

After the signing of the ASEAN India Free Trade Agreement in 2009, bilateral trade between the two regions has improved tremendously. In 2013, the trade volume between India and ASEAN reached more than \$75 billion; it is projected the volume will increase to \$100 billion by 2015. India-ASEAN trade and investment flows are lower compared to other ASEAN dialogue partners such as China, Japan, and the United States. However, it can be increased if there is improvement in infrastructure connectivity and regional production networks.

Political commitment and consensus are high on connecting India with ASEAN by investing in infrastructure development along the north-eastern part of India with Myanmar and Thailand. The Mekong-India Economic Corridor, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project, and the Thailand-Myanmar India Trilateral Highway are under construction. The completion of these physical infrastructure connectivity projects will significantly enhance the flows of trade, investment and people.

The uphill struggle, however, is to get efficient financial resources to fund such ambitious infrastructure development and connectivity projects. It may require multi-partnerships involving national governments, private companies, and international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB). The establishment of a common pool of financial resources among ASEAN member states and India can be considered.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have evolved to be the core agents connecting the East Asian region. India and ASEAN should work together to outline some of the barriers and opportunities for SMEs in entering into regional production networks. The newly created ASEAN-India Centre and the ASEAN-India Investment and Trade Centre should incorporate SMEs support programmes in their missions and activities. India and ASEAN need to continue to work together to implement programmes related to capacity building (i.e. English language training and management training), information sharing (i.e. transfer of best practices, knowledge institutionalization), and social capital development (i.e. networks among the entrepreneurs and educators).

### **Strategic and Security Cooperation**

India contributes to building a dynamic strategic equilibrium and power equation in the Asia-Pacific region through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. India has played its role in strengthening regional norms, institutions, and international laws. The ambition to build ASEAN-centric security architecture (i.e. East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus) would be impossible without the support and active participation and engagement of all major powers including India. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) have been cultivated and developed; and now it is moving to concretise the principles and action plans of preventive diplomacy (PD). India and ASEAN should work together to find common possible approaches to conflict management and resolutions based on the principles of international laws.

India and ASEAN need to strengthen maritime security cooperation focusing on non-traditional security issues such as natural disaster relief operation, search and rescue, piracy and oil spill. The regional cooperation and collaboration in finding the missing Malaysia Airline Flight MH370 provides a starting point that needs further deepening and institutionalisation. India and ASEAN should explore new areas of

security cooperation such as security sector reform and security sector governance, and climate change-food-water-energy security nexus.

### **Socio-Cultural Cooperation**

India and ASEAN have worked together to promote human resources development and educational exchanges, science and technology cooperation, information technology, SMEs development, tourism and other cultural activities. Moreover, India has contributed to narrowing the developmental gaps in ASEAN by supporting the capacity building programmes in the CLMV countries namely the creation of the Entrepreneurship Development Centres (EDC) and the Centres for the English Language Training (CELT) in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam.

In addition to the existing cooperation areas, India and ASEAN need to pay more attention to mass media cooperation and exchanges of journalists and news editors. To implement these initiatives it needs financial and technical resources. It is therefore necessary to expand the pool of the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund and the ASEAN Development Fund.

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# China and Its Southeast Asian Neighbours Need More Strategic Capital

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**his year marks the 10th anniversary of the China–ASEAN strategic partnership.

Early this year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the ASEAN Secretariat and four ASEAN member countries to strengthen mutual understanding and strategic trust, and show support for ASEAN community building. Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan also visited Brunei and held a consultative meeting with the 10 ASEAN Defence Ministers on the sideline of the seventh ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting to exchange views on regional security issues and discuss measures to reduce tensions in the region, particularly in the South China Sea. Yet there is still a long way to go before a true partnership between ASEAN and China can take hold, with greater investments in strategic trust required.

The US pivot to Asia and the increasing role of other middle powers in the region has challenged China's regional policy. In its 2013 Defense White Paper, China observes, 'The Asia-Pacific region has become an increasingly significant stage for world economic development and strategic interaction between major powers. The US is adjusting its Asia-Pacific security strategy, and the regional landscape is undergoing profound changes'. In response to this changing political and strategic context, China needs to review and redefine its regional strategy by

enhancing and nurturing regional dialogue and consultation mechanisms and institutions.

In the last two decades, China has successfully implemented its soft-power policy in the region. Since the 1990s, China has softly approached Southeast Asia through deepening economic ties, development cooperation and cultural diplomacy. During the Asian financial crisis in 1997, China did not depreciate its currency; instead, China helped regional countries to cope with the crisis through both economic and financial measures. China is becoming the region's key development partner and development assistance provider, especially in the less-developed economies like Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Economically, China has pursued its soft power agenda through the establishment of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), which came into force in 2010. In 2012, the volume of trade between China and ASEAN was US\$400 billion and the bilateral investment volume reached US\$100 billion. China has also provided scholarship and training opportunities to students and government officials from ASEAN member countries.

China has actively engaged in developing rules-based regional relations to enhance diplomatic and political trust. It became the dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1996. In 1997, the first ASEAN–China Summit issued a joint statement highlighting a 21st century-oriented partnership of good neighbourliness and mutual trust. In 2003, China acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation to further ensure peaceful development of China with its neighbours and started to implement a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN.

China is also active in strengthening regional security institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. Here, non-traditional security cooperation is the principle area of cooperation between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours. China has supported regional countries in capacity building and collectively addressing human security issues such as natural disasters relief and humanitarian assistance, transnational crimes, terrorism and maritime

security. On the issue of the South China Sea, China and ASEAN have made some painstaking progress towards a code of conduct.

Yet China needs to work much harder to earn strategic trust and improve its relationship with Southeast Asia. Without a strong relationship, China will face substantial challenges in projecting its power to the wider Asia Pacific region and the world at large.

The principle impediment to a deeper relationship is China's maritime power projection and marine economy, together with the increasing assertiveness and presence of Chinese civilian and military forces in the South China Sea. These factors are increasing tensions between China and other claimants, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. This tension increases some perceptions of China as a threat in the Southeast Asian region and breeds distrust. It threatens to derail the hard-won good relationships between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours. If it does not effectively address these challenges, China may lose certain strategic advantages to other major powers in establishing and enlarging strategic and economic space in the region.

China and ASEAN share a commitment to not allow tensions in the South China Sea to negatively affect their bilateral relations. But they still need to do more to adjust to the new and dynamic regional security landscape. Of crucial importance is the development of strategic capital, which includes trust, confidence, mutual respect and mutual interests. Harmonising national and regional interests is key to this.

Through the development and improvement of the ASEAN-centered regional institutions, the enhancement of strategic transparency, and the maintaining of frank and sincere consultation and negotiation at both bilateral and multilateral levels, China and ASEAN can enhance their strategic capital and realise their common interests. Otherwise, the region will remain strategically divided, which is in nobody's interest.

*(This article was first published in East Asia Forum on May 23, 2013)*



# More to US - Cambodia Relations Than Rights

By Vannarith Chheang

A meeting between US President Barack Obama and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen on November 19 took on added significance given the backdrop of the 21st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit, which was held in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh in the same week.

Focusing on human rights, fundamental political freedoms, and electoral democracy in Cambodia, the conversation was generally described as "tense" by media. Obama touched a raw nerve by mentioning deteriorating rights situation, the fairness of upcoming 2013 general elections, and the issue of political prisoners. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, who accompanied Obama, said it will be difficult to deepen bilateral relations if the Cambodian government did not improve its human-rights record.

However, Obama's visit was not only about human rights; wider US interests in the region including strategic and economic relations must be taken into account. The presence of Obama in Cambodia was a significant event in the two countries' diplomatic relations. It was the first time a sitting US president visited this small and poor country, and it reaffirmed the long-term and sustainable US commitment to engagement in Asia.

US-Cambodia relations are shaped and framed by the US "pivot to Asia" strategy, which is dynamic and comprehensive. The strategy covers a wide range of activities including the strengthening of bilateral security alliances, forging of a broad-based military presence, engaging regional

multilateral institutions, expanding trade and investment, advancing democracy and human rights, and deepening working relationships with emerging powers. It is an extension of the US smart power project, which includes, as suggested by the 2007 CSIS Commission on Smart Power, five pillars: alliances, partnerships, and institutions; global development; public diplomacy; economic integration; and technology and innovation.

Issues surrounding human rights are a key stumbling block in bilateral relations that need to be addressed objectively and collectively. Since 1992, the US has provided more than US\$800 million to strengthen democracy and improve human-rights conditions in Cambodia. USAID programs have been diversified to include aspects such as education, public health, infectious disease, food security, climate change, private-sector competitiveness, and good governance. The US has contributed a lot to strengthening the role of local civil society organizations in addition to promoting democratic principles and protecting human rights.

Bilateral relations have steadily improved since the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1992. Cambodia was granted Most Favored Nation (MFN) status from the US in 1996 and in 1999 the two countries signed a Bilateral Textile Agreement (BTA) to link labor standards with trade. Under such favorable treatment, the US has become the biggest market for the garments and footwear (about 70%) made in Cambodia. The industry employs 350,000 people, mostly young women.

The US private sector is very much interested in expanding and deepening investment and trade with the region in general and Cambodia in particular. In 2011, US investment in Cambodia was more than \$144 million, triple the amount invested in 2010. In remarks at the US-ASEAN Business Forum in Siem Reap in July 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated "Our economic ties are already strong. ASEAN and the United States are large trading partners. Last year, US exports to ASEAN exceeded \$76 billion, and that was up 42% since 2009. We have more than twice as much investment in ASEAN as we do in China. So there is a great deal of potential for continuing to grow our economic activity."

US-Cambodia defense cooperation has gained momentum since 2004

after many restrictions were eliminated, paving the way for direct military-to-military contact and engagement. Training and capacity building are the key areas of cooperation. Joint training and military exercises have been conducted regularly under the themes of disaster relief, counter-terrorism, demining activities, and peacekeeping operations.

During the visit of Cambodian Defense Minister General Tea Banh to Washington in 2009, Defense Secretary Robert Gates reaffirmed the commitment to strengthen the capacity of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) in peacekeeping operations, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. In 2010, Cambodia, with support from the US, participated in the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) program and co-hosted the Angkor Sentinel with the participation of 1,000 peacekeeping personnel from more than 20 countries. The second CARAT program was conducted in October 2012, focusing on maritime security skills such as maritime interdiction, diving and salvage operations, maneuvering, and disaster response.

The annual Bilateral Defense Dialogue (BDD) established in 2008 is a foundation for dialogue, cooperation, and confidence-building measures. It focuses on operational topics of mutual concern and coordination of security cooperation activities. The BDD illustrates the broadening and deepening of the military-to-military relationship and is an additional mechanism to further strengthen the bilateral relationship. In September 2009, Cambodia and the US created a Security Cooperation Coordination Group that meets regularly to discuss operational issues involving theater security cooperation.

In addition, there were several port visits by US naval forces to promote relations between militaries and strengthen mutual strategic trust between the two countries. The latest visit was on May 5, 2012 by sailors from the US 7th Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge and Marines assigned to Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team Pacific.

The recent bilateral talks on November 16 between US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Tea Banh in Siem Reap provided an opportunity for both countries to elaborate more on defense cooperation, especially in

capacity building of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, cooperation on the recovery of US soldiers missing in action from the Vietnam War-era, and the on new US strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Panetta reaffirmed the US goal of ensuring that the Asia-Pacific is a zone of peace, stability, and prosperity, and the commitment to work with ASEAN to increase its capacity to maintain peace and stability in the region.

US-Cambodia relations have been improving over the last decade and reflect a promising trend. Defense and economic cooperation have taken significant steps to build trust and mutual accommodation with common interests. However, as the recent talks between Obama and Prime Minister Hun Sen indicated, Cambodia needs to work harder to improve its record on human rights and democracy to advance relations with the US to a new level.

It is not a big challenge for the current Cambodian administration to improve the situation since it has established a relatively good foundation to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is a matter of continued political will, leadership, and participation from the people.

Continued US engagement with Cambodia on the issue of human rights is necessary but it needs to be more objective and scientific. Both countries should concentrate on convergent forces - economic and strategic interests - and continue to sincerely work together to overcome remaining challenges. It is in the interests of the two people and the global community of nations to raise the standard of the universal values of human rights and fundamental freedom. Cambodia and the US can continue working together on this issue.

In the rapidly changing regional security and economic environment that is increasingly complex and uncertain, there is a need to build and nurture trust and confidence. A good and healthy US-Cambodian relationship can contribute to peace, stability and development in the Asia Pacific. It would be a serious setback if the human rights issue overshadows other areas of cooperation and needs to be addressed in a holistic way.

*(This article was first published in The Asia Times Online on December 6, 2012)*

# Charting Vietnam's Course

By Vannarith Chheang

**E**very five years, the National Congress of Vietnam takes place in Vietnam to examine past achievements and failures and to determine a new direction for the improvement of the people, party and state.

The 11th congress taking place from January 12-19 has attracted great attention from both domestic and foreign observers and analysts. It has been attended by 1,377 delegates representing more than 3.6 million party members.

The expectations are high. According to reports by the Voices of Vietnam on January 11, the people centered development approach should be strictly pursued and relations between the people and the party should be promoted, market economy with socialist orientation needs to be upgraded to higher levels through democratization and manpower management demands more attention.

It is believed that through such continued reform with clear vision, Vietnam can realize its goal to become an industrialized country in 2020.

During the solemn opening ceremony, the top leadership endorsed Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thoughts as the cornerstone of the economic renewal process. Vietnam President Nguyen Minh Triet highlighted the legacy of Uncle Ho, whom he defined as “a man of world culture, while a tireless fighter for national independence”. Triet stressed the crucial role of the Doi moi (renovation) began in 1986, the increasing mobility of Vietnamese society and called for the process to be perfected.

He puts people at the center stage of the reform. He stated: “The 11th congress is a big responsibility to the people to face reality and tell the truth and pursue our transition to socialism.”

With regard to diplomacy and foreign policy, Vietnam still pursues consistently the foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development with openness, diversification and multilateralism. Economic integration is a significant part of foreign policy. Good relationships with neighboring countries is given priority.

Vietnam is regarded as one of the rising stars in the region after a successful 25 years of Doi Moi (renovation). Vietnam can maintain an annual growth rate of about 7 percent and the poverty rate dropped more than half from 37 percent in 2000 to 14.8 percent in 2009.

The increasing role of Vietnam in the region is through proactive participation and the contribution of Vietnam in regional institutions, especially ASEAN and the Mekong Subregional Cooperation groups.

Vietnam and Cambodia share more than 1,000km of a long land border and both use the Mekong River. In recent years, bilateral relations have developed well with an emphasis on good neighborliness, traditional friendship, comprehensive cooperation and long-term stability.

A regular exchange of high-level visits has been maintained to promote mutual trust and understanding. Relations between the Communist Party of Vietnam and the two Cambodian parties in the ruling coalition have also fared well. Both the Cambodian People's Party and the FUNCINPEC Party sent congratulation messages to the Communist Party of Vietnam for the 11th National Congress.

Economic, trade and investment ties between Vietnam and Cambodia have grown and flourished constantly on a par with their political ties. Two-way trade has increased by 40 percent annually, reaching US\$1.7 billion in 2008 and about \$2 billion in 2010. According to a Phnom Penh Post report on November 22, 2010, bilateral trade between Cambodia and Vietnam increased by 36 percent in the first nine months of 2010.

The value of trade between the two neighbors reached \$1.287 billion from January to September. However, Cambodia is facing a trade deficit with Vietnam. In 2009, the gap between Vietnamese exports and Cambodia's was worth about \$1.016 billion.

Vietnam's main exports to Cambodia included machinery for

agriculture, fertilizer, seafood and petroleum. Cambodia mainly ships garment materials and agricultural produce – such as wood, rubber, cashew nuts, rice and corn – to neighboring Vietnam.

Vietnam's investment in Cambodia has increased remarkably over the past years, with 50 projects licensed and valued at US\$640 million. These projects mainly focus on the exploration and exploitation of minerals, oil and gas, the construction of hydro-power electric plants and power transmission lines, rubber plantations and developing transport infrastructure.

Vietnam is interested in building rubber processing factories in Cambodia in the near future.

For other functional cooperation, the two countries have jointly conducted projects on health care, education-training and science-technology. Since 1995, Vietnam has trained thousands of Cambodian officials, university graduates and post-graduates in economics, culture and science-technology. In 2010 Vietnam provided more than 500 scholarships to Cambodian students.

*(This article was first published in the Phnom Penh Post on 17 January 2011)*

# US-Cambodia Relations: New Momentum

By Vannarith Chheang

**D**uring her sixth trip to the Asia-Pacific in the last twenty months, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Cambodia from October 30 through November 1 continues to reinforce US engagement throughout the region in general, and US-Cambodia relations in particular. It is worth noting that this is the first trip by a Secretary of State to Cambodia since Colin Powell went in 2003 for the ASEAN Regional Forum.

During her visit, Secretary Clinton paid a courtesy call to His Majesty the King of Cambodia Norodom Sihamoni and held separate meetings with Prime Minister Hun Sen and Hor Namhong, the deputy prime minister and foreign minister. She also met with Ms. Mu Sochua, the deputy secretary general of the opposition Sam Rainsy Party, visited several US-supported non-governmental organizations, and conducted a town hall meeting with Cambodia students. In addition to diplomatic talks on US-Cambodia relations, bilateral engagement focused on the issues of outstanding debt from the Lon Nol era, human rights, and UN-sponsored Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC), otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. On the cultural and humanitarian side, Secretary Clinton visited the Angkor temple complex, a UNESCO world heritage site in Siem Reap province, followed by a visit to the Tuol Sleng Khmer Rouge genocide and torture museum in the capital Phnom Penh. Overall, Secretary Clinton's visit is a significant milestone for US-Cambodia bilateral cooperation, and her presence encourages progress in promoting and protecting human rights in Cambodia.



However, the outstanding Lon Nol debt of US\$445 million, assumed during the pro-American Lon Nol administration in the early 1970s, is still an obstacle in bilateral relation. The United States would like to see Cambodia sign a bilateral agreement to settle the debt but Cambodia has refused to do so, referring to it as a “dirty debt.” In addition, Cambodians hold the United States partly responsible for igniting the Cambodian Civil War. During her visit, Secretary Clinton proposed to resume bilateral negotiations regarding the debt issue that have been stalled since 2006. Another stumbling block in bilateral relations continues to revolve around the issues of human rights and democratic restraints within Cambodia.

US-Cambodia diplomatic relations were first established in 1950. Looking back over the past sixty year, the US-Cambodia relationship can generally be characterized as a relationship with high degrees of fluctuation. In the early years, the United States provided Cambodia assistance with development projects including the construction of a highway connecting Phnom Penh to the port of Sihanoukville. However, the Vietnam war led to serious diplomatic friction between the two countries, with diplomatic relations officially severed in 1965, then briefly resumed in 1969 before being severed again in 1975.. The United States supported the Lon Nol regime (1970-1975) that overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 through a coup d'état, and carried out aerial bombardments over Cambodia from 1965 to 1973 in order to destroy Vietcong safe havens and supply lines. Bilateral relations were yet again completely absent from the mid-1970s through to the early 1990s. Normal official diplomatic relations resumed in 1994 after Cambodia elected a new government under the supervision of the United Nations.

After the resumption of official diplomatic relations, the United States has supported Cambodia across a wide range of developmental and good governance issues. Since 1992, the United States has provided over US\$ 700 million in development assistance to Cambodia. To date in 2010, the united States has provided more that US\$ 70 million in development assistance. Also this year, the United States gave US\$5 million to the ECCC, in order to prosecute former Khmer Rouge leaders

and to further strengthen Cambodia's judicial system. Furthermore, in mid-2010, Cambodia was selected among twenty countries to receive US assistance under president Barack Obama's new Feed the Future food-security initiative. Since 1998, the United States has been the top export market for Cambodian products, especially textiles. Total Cambodian exports to the United States encompassed approximately 17 percent of Cambodia's gross domestic product in 2009. However, US foreign direct investment in Cambodia is very limited as the country's institutional and physical infrastructure is not yet attractive to US investors.

Regarding military cooperation, the United States resumed military assistance to Cambodia in 2005, paving the way for improving military-to-military cooperation. Since 2006, the United States has provided over US\$4.5 million worth of military equipment and training to the Cambodian Royal Armed Forces. To date, the Cambodian military has contributed to United Nations peacekeeping operations in Sudan, Chad, the Central African Republic, and Lebanon. In 2010, the United States helped construct a United Nations Peacekeeping Operations training center in Kompong Speu province where a joint-training exercise under the Global Peace Operations Initiative, "Angkor Sentinal," was conducted this past summer. This exercise involved over 1,200 participants from twenty-two countries.

This ongoing development and military support to Cambodia is part of the United State's attention and interest in helping Cambodia develop and engage more actively in regional and global affairs. The development assistance and engagement also aims to assist Cambodia in having a strong balance in its external relations. During her talk with Cambodian students, Secretary Clinton stated, "It's like our relationship with other countries. You look for balance. You don't want to get too dependent on any one country." In this case, "any one country" referred to China. After meeting with Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong, she expressed her optimism about Cambodia's future and that of US-Cambodia bilateral relations, "I am very optimistic about Cambodia's future... And I hope that the United States can be a good partner and a friend." In a

letter to His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni on the occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of diplomatic Relations between the United States and Cambodia, President Barrack Obama reaffirmed that, “In the coming years, we look forward to taking advantage of the positive momentum that has been created, and to see the partnership between our two nations grow stronger and deeper in areas such as food security, climate change, health, education, human rights, and strengthening democratic institutions.” Current bilateral relations between the United States and Cambodia are more stable and positive than they have ever been over the last six decades.

For Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the region, national interest is generally understood as economic development and poverty reduction, and its diversified foreign policy is aimed to serve this purpose. Securing development assistance, promoting exports, and attracting foreign direct investment are the means to achieving this goal. As for Cambodia’s defense policy, it is aimed at modernizing its defense force with emphasis upon capacity building and professionalism. The United States has played a significant role in meeting Cambodia’s needs. Increasing trust and good relations between Cambodia and the United States will significantly contribute to the vibrant and active neutrality of Cambodia, which will serve the interests of United States throughout the region

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# ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus The “ASEAN Way”

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he Asia Pacific region remains vulnerable to possible conflicts deriving mainly from historical antagonism, extremism, and unresolved sovereignty issues, though regional economic interdependence does help reduce the likelihood of open hostilities. However, as security issues get more transnational, complicated, and unpredictable, miscalculation regarding the Korean Peninsula, the East and South China Seas, and the unresolved border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand remain ever present. As such, the region needs an effective institution that can reduce the strategic mistrust and misunderstanding between and among states. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, has emerged as the central actor in creating a regional security dialogues throughout the region. The “ASEAN Way” of consultation, quite diplomacy, consensus-based decision making, along with non-interference in internal affairs has proven to be a formula that works.

ASEAN’S open regionalism to incorporate other dialogue partners has been carefully managed in order to maintain ASEAN’s centrality within this expanded regional architecture. Specifically, relating to regional security matters, ASEAN hosted the first ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in May 2006. This meeting agreed on a concept paper outlining the roles, objectives, and scope of ADMM. At the fourth meeting of ADMM in May 2010, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) was officially endorsed as a dialogue forum to discuss regional security concerns. In addition to the

ten ASEAN countries, ADMM-Plus includes Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korean, and United States. ADMM-Plus is intended to complement the other key existing regional security institutions: the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asian Summit.

The ADMM-Plus has five main objectives: to build ASEAN capacity to deal with shared security challenges; promote mutual trust and confidence; enhance regional peace and stability through cooperation; contribute to the realization of an ASEAN Security Community; and to facilitate the implementation of the Vientiane Action Program calling for ASEAN to build a peaceful, secure and prosperous ASEAN Community with an outward-looking regional perspective.

ADMM-Plus was inaugurated in Hanoi on October 12, 2010-the first time that defense ministers from these eighteen countries in the Asia Pacific region have gathered to discuss regional security issues. The second meeting of ADMM-Plus will be hosted by Brunei in 2013. The Hanoi ADMM-Plus was the first multilateral meeting that included US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie at the same venue. Initial outcomes indicate that some regional security tensions were addressed. China and the United States held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines and both parties agreed to resume top-level military contacts. Furthermore, early next year, Secretary Gates will Visit China after accepting an invitation from his Chinese counterpart, Minister Liang, thus resuming US-China military-to-military dialogues. In the post-summit joint declaration ADMM-Plus was endorsed by the eighteen defense leader, as “a useful and effective platform for cooperation on defense and security issues that is able to make useful contributions to regional peace and security”.

Secretary Gates said that the United States regards ADMM-Plus as a “most useful innovation” that can strengthen participants’ capacity to cope with regional security challenges. China considers ADMM-Plus as an important official platform to jointly deal with non-traditional security challenges, and strengthen mutual trust and cooperation. China’s Defense

Minister Liang stated at the meeting that “Non-traditional security threats are transnational and unpredictable, and require joint response [s]. We support ADMM-Plus in focusing on non-traditional cooperation”. Both the United States and China wish to see more practical cooperation and capacity building with ASEAN in addressing common regional security concerns. This commitment from dialogue partners, particularly the United States and China, resonates well with the needs of ASEAN members, especially in terms of capacity building relating to natural disaster management, humanitarian relief, peacekeeping operations, counter-terrorism, maritime security, and military medicine. The ADMM-Plus encourage ASEAN defense officials to cooperate with and support their eight dialogue counterparts in cooperatively addressing security issues of common concern, along with developing the capacity of each ASEAN defense ministry to design and implement its own national defense policy within a multilateral regional context.

Taking Cambodia as an example, security institutionalization will encourage the Ministry of National Defense to play an increasing role in international affairs. It is a significant challenge for Cambodian defense officials to think more strategically, especially pertaining to non-traditional security issues. The Cambodian Royal Armed Forces will have to learn how to multilaterally address common regional security concerns. Recently, Cambodia, through the ADMM-Plus framework, expects to see more commitment and support from dialogue partners in providing capacity building and expertise sharing through information and educational exchanges, joint military exercises, and other training opportunities.

Different from other regional security mechanisms, the ADMM-Plus is supported by Expert Working Groups (EWGs) authorized by the ASEAN Defense Senior Official Meeting (ADSOM-Plus). Each EWG is co-chaired by an ASEAN member state and a non-ASEAN country. EWGs will be in charge of discussing specific security issues and reporting their findings to the ADSOM-Plus. Both China and Vietnam, the two main conflicting claimant in the South China Sea, are interested in co-chairing a working group on humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

ADSOM-Plus is also responsible for implementing the agreements and decisions of the ADMM-Plus. Being part of ADMM, the ADMM-Plus is also supported by the Network of ASEAN Defense and Security Institutions and the Meeting of ASEAN Chiefs of Security Agencies.

Thus, ADMM-Plus can be regarded as remaining within the realm of the “ASEAN Way.” Defense leaders tried to avoid touching on some of the most sensitive issues such as the unresolved sovereignty issues in the East and South China Seas. Since it is a consensus-based dialogue, it is easy to talk about non-traditional security issues. The ADMM-Plus joint declaration is a general statement expressing the commitment of member states to support each other to maintain peace and stability, and solve disputes in a peaceful manner. The most important part of the joint declaration is the endorsement of specific functions provided to the ADMM-Plus. Non-traditional security issues are prioritized and functional cooperation is emphasized. The ADMM-Plus, a milestone within the evolution of ASEAN defense regional architecture, will perform as a functional security mechanism within the context of extended security regionalism for non-traditional security issues.

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# Reinvigorating US-ASEAN Relations

By Vannarith Chheang

**A**SEAN-United States dialogue relations, established back in 1977, have gained new momentum since 2009 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted to ASEAN leaders in Thailand that the US had returned to Southeast Asia, by which she referred to seeing more dynamic engagement between US and ASEAN. The US signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in July 2009, which paved the way for the US to be an official dialogue partner of ASEAN and allowed it to be part of the East Asia Summit. The US also sent an ambassador to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. In November 2009, the first ASEAN-US leaders' meeting was held in Singapore and on September 24, there will be the second meeting in New York.

Such a meeting is an important platform for leaders from ASEAN and the US to exchange views and find common ground for policy design and implementation. Both ASEAN and the US wish to learn from each other the issues of common concern. In her statement in February 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "the United States must have strong relationships and a strong and productive presence here in Southeast Asia. This region is vital to the future not only the United States and each of the countries, but to the world's common interests: a significant and trade-oriented regional economy; a critical strategic location; and a set of countries that will be key to any solutions we pursue on climate change, counterterrorism, global health and so much else". Relating the US's involvement in the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan stated: "The successive and proactive re-engagement of ASEAN by the US has brought about a transformation of seismic proportions to ASEAN-US relations."



ASEAN, established in 1967, has been evolving to be the main driver in regionalism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN, at the beginning stage of its establishment, was expected just to be a regional institution that could prevent war and conflict between member states and to cope with the spread of communism in the region, but now ASEAN has moved far away from this task to play more important roles in promoting economic development, regional identity and community, and regional order. Such huge tasks have challenged ASEAN leaders to a great extent.

ASEAN is proud of its achievement over the last decades since there has been no war or large-scale armed conflict between or among member states. Economic integration has been accelerating although development gaps are still a big stumbling block. The good thing is that ASEAN leaders have shown their commitment to building a true political, economic and sociocultural community by 2015.

In order to realize the goal of achieving an ASEAN community with openness and inclusiveness, the bloc needs support from all dialogue partners including the US. ASEAN expects that the US can help its economies in terms of trade and investment, technology transfer, education and capacity building, and help to reduce the development gap in the region. Moreover, ASEAN wishes to see the US's presence in the region in order to maintain regional security, order and stability.

There is a significant economic link between the US and ASEAN. US foreign direct investment in ASEAN totaled US\$130 billion in 2007, the largest destination for US FDI in Asia. Investment from ASEAN into the United States ranks fourth among Asian sources, totaling \$11 billion. In terms of trade, the US is ASEAN's third-largest export market, comprising 12 percent of its exports. US exports to ASEAN totaled \$66 billion in 2008.

ASEAN wishes to see more investment flow between it and the US, which should continue and further support the poorest countries in ASEAN to export their products to the US market. In the case of Cambodian textiles, with the preferential trade treatment from the US,

Cambodia becomes one of the leading textile producers in the region and this industry provides a lot of jobs and income for Cambodians – especially women from rural areas – contributing to poverty reduction in this country. Aid for trade is very important for Cambodia and other least developed countries in ASEAN to develop and catch up with other member countries. The US can help ASEAN to reduce development costs through aid-for-trade mechanisms.

The upcoming ASEAN-US leaders meeting will provide more concrete steps towards bilateral relations and nourishment between ASEAN and the US. Economic development and non-traditional security issues such as transnational crime, terrorism, climate change, food and energy security, natural disaster management and pandemic disease will be given priority. US and ASEAN are committed to working together to deal with these regional and global issues on an equal relationship and partnership.

*(This article was first published in the Phnom Penh Post on 17 September 2010)*

# The China-ASEAN FTA Brings Advantages and Challenges

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he New Year marks a historical event in the region: the coming into force of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (FTA). It is the biggest trade zone in the world, with a population of 1.9 billion, total GDP of nearly US\$6 trillion and trade worth around US\$4.5 trillion. According to the agreement, the average tariff on goods from ASEAN countries to China is reduced to 0.1 percent. Six original ASEAN members (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) introduced tariff reductions on Chinese goods from 12.8 percent to 0.6 percent. By 2015, the policy of zero-tariff rates for 90 percent of Chinese goods is going to extend to the four newest ASEAN members, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

As the world slowly begins to recover from the global economic crisis, the China-ASEAN FTA could push forward regional economic integration and help the region recover more quickly. China is the locomotive for regional economic development through deepening intraregional trade and investment.

It is noted that China is among the top three trade partners with ASEAN member countries, with a total trade volume of more than US\$230 billion in 2008. Moreover, direct Chinese investment in ASEAN countries has increased remarkably. For instance, in 2008 alone the total capital investment from China in ASEAN was US\$2.18 billion, up 125 percent from 2007.

Cambodia could greatly benefit from such a mechanism. China is

currently the leading investor in Cambodia, with a total investment of more than US\$6 billion over the last 15 years. The main investment projects focus on hydropower, trade, tourism, agriculture, infrastructure and telecommunications. Today, there are about 700 Chinese companies and enterprises doing business in Cambodia.

Trade volume between Cambodia and China reached US\$1.13 billion in 2008. China is expected to be the main trade partner for Cambodia in the near future, as domestic consumption increases in China – especially in the field of agricultural products. However, there are challenges given Cambodia's low quality standards. To address this, Chinese aid to Cambodia should focus on supporting exporters to ship their products to China under the Aid for Trade scheme.

The China-ASEAN FTA not only promotes regional economic integration and joint development, but also reduces the Chinese threat perceived by some ASEAN leaders. Stronger economic interdependence can reduce the potential for conflict, especially regarding the South China Sea issue (a regional security flashpoint involving China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei) and the Mekong River development differences between upstream China and downstream Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The China-ASEAN FTA will no doubt positively contribute to regional economic integration and interdependence. It is a win-win for China and ASEAN. It is a breakthrough for free intraregional trade. Nevertheless, several challenges need to be overcome, such as the standardization of the rules of origins and customs policy, promotion of the Aid for Trade scheme and linking trade with poverty reduction, particularly the rural poor.

*(The article was first published in the Phnom Penh Post on 4 January 2010 )*

# ASEAN Must Act in Cambodian-Thai Dispute

By Vannarith Chheang

**T**he Association of Southeast Asian Nations is trying to realize the goal of an ASEAN community, similar to the one in Europe, by 2015, with the ultimate objective of living in peace and prosperity under a shared common identity. ASEAN is regarded by many as the driving force in shaping regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region, yet the alliance is currently held back by the fact that domestic politics and nationalism still dominate foreign policy and international relations in the region.

The Cambodia-Thailand border conflict is a case in point, demonstrating the alliance's limitations. Because of ASEAN's well-known non-interference principle, its potential for conflict resolution in the region has not been utilized.

History has often found Cambodian and Thailand in rival positions, leading the states' respective populations to demonize one another. This legacy of nationalism and mistrust is at the root of present-day disagreements between the two countries.

The Cambodia-Thailand border conflict is a case in point, demonstrating the alliance's limitations.

Thai ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is expected to give a public lecture today to hundreds of Cambodian economists in his capacity as government economics adviser.

Because of his experience and expertise, it is possible that Thaksin's advice could be useful to the ruling Cambodian People's Party as it formulates its economic policy. I am concerned, however, about the implications of

Thaksin's appointment and his presence here in Cambodia for Cambodian-Thai relations and, to a larger extent, regional security overall.

As a result of Thailand's anger over Thaksin's arrival, bilateral dialogue and negotiation between Thailand and Cambodia over the border issue will now likely come to a standstill, a possibility portended by Thailand's decision to revoke the memorandum of understanding on overlapping maritime boundaries agreed upon and signed in 2001.

Economic relations between the two countries could be cut as well, which will significantly impact the livelihoods of poor merchants and others from both countries who live along the border. Economically, this is a lose-lose situation.

How to solve this dispute? At the 2008 ASEAN summit, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong asked Singapore, then the chair of ASEAN, to form a regional, inter-ministerial group to help find a peaceful solution to the bilateral dispute and prevent military confrontation from occurring.

ASEAN, however, encouraged Cambodia and Thailand to utilize a bilateral mechanism to solve their disagreements. Unfortunately, bilateral dialogue has produced no result.

The mistrust between the two nations has now reached a point at which negotiations cannot move forward without intervention and mediation by a third party. It is therefore necessary for ASEAN to take more assertive action and help broker a solution for the conflict. The ASEAN principle of non-interference must be modified to meet this and other new challenges in the region.

*(The article was first published in The Phnom Penh Post on 12 November 2009)*

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