

Lecture by Tony Kevin at Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, Phnom Penh
22 July 1999

“Cambodia and Southeast Asia”



The proposition that Cambodia is finally becoming a normal Southeast Asian country may today seem self-evident and beyond argument. That Cambodia is in process of re-establishing a normal national life by the standards of the region is now part of the diplomatic and expatriate media consensus in Phnom Penh. But Cambodia certainly was not seen this way in the three years from 1996 until the political settlement at the end of 1998. In those years, Cambodia underwent a political and national security crisis. And Cambodia is still not accepted as a normal Southeast Asian country even today, by some powerful interest groups in Washington and surrounding the UN in New York, including both conservatives and liberals, major human rights organisations, and major United States newspapers. And some representatives in Cambodia and the region of such international interest groups continue to project to the world a message that Cambodia is still far from being a normal country. So this theme that is worth discussing.

I did not learn about Cambodia by attending human rights seminars in Washington or New York. I came to work here in July 1994 when this country was engaged in a dangerous new phase of its 24-year-long civil war, that re-ignited as UNTAC left Cambodia. In early 1994, the Khmer Rouge resumed its military offensive that had been temporarily suspended during UNTAC. Its political and military organisation remained apparently strong, in terms of its leadership and discipline, its fanatical racist propaganda, and its control of territory and resources. Though outlawed in June 1994, it controlled more Cambodian territory in 1994 than at any time since 1978 and it threatened the security of a much wider area. It was a frightening and ruthless insurrection. It was taking over 1000 hostages per year, laying many landmines, and regularly cutting major roads

and bridges throughout much of Cambodia. Much of the country was unsafe to travel in. I still remember the pervasive sense of fear. April 1995 was the 20th anniversary of the Khmer Rouge capture of Phnom Penh in 1975. Some of us were wondering in our gloomier moments whether the Khmer Rouge might be planning a repeat performance for the anniversary. I remember driving down to Kampot in 1994 and Kompong Som in 1995; the armed escorts; the curfews, the “drive fast and don’t stop” sections of road, the long stretches of ruined and depopulated land through the hills along both roads.

CPP and Funcinpec, united against the common threat to peace and security, were trying against huge obstacles to begin to rebuild a civil society. All this was only five years ago. How quickly we forget, and how quickly our preoccupations change.

We not only have forgotten how it was in Cambodia five years ago. Some of us now even find it difficult to recall how it was here three and two years ago: the unworkable and collapsing two Prime Minister system, the constant conspiracies and rumours of new military alliances, the arms smuggling, the factional armies facing off against each other in Phnom Penh, the firefights up and down Norodom Boulevard, the anxiety and insecurity of the people, all signifying the real fear of a new major civil war in this country and a possible revival of Khmer Rouge power through such a war.

Why do I recall these sad memories now when most Cambodians want to leave them buried in the past? Simply because some in the international community who are professionally or ideologically concerned with Cambodia appear to have no interest in this complicated recent history at all. Such people are focussed only on problems of the present and the very recent past. For them, the shortcomings of Mr Hun Sen’s government are the cause of all Cambodia’s problems. The background is for them irrelevant.

It is because in the last two years I spoke out as a friend of Cambodia against such dangerous over-simplifications of Cambodian politics that some people falsely labelled me as a propagandist for Samdech Hun Sen and as someone whose judgement of Cambodian affairs was not objective. In that regard, I am happy to be judged on the basis of the commentary articles and speeches that I wrote over the past 22 months. All are publicly available, and a bibliography of them is attached to the printed text of my talk today. I will only say this now, before moving on to my general theme: I have never at any time in the past 22 months advocated war, civil violence, or defiance of the laws, traditions and customary courtesies of Cambodia. I have never sought to undermine any Cambodian political or social institution.

I am in fact a political conservative. I attach a high value to peace and stability. I was educated in the Catholic moral tradition which includes two principles that I believe are as applicable to Cambodia as to other countries trying to practice pluralist democracy: first, that the end can never justify the means. And second, that faced with a choice between two evils, one should choose the lesser evil.

While I am as concerned as any person of conscience must be about Cambodia's current political, social and economic problems, I mistrust those who offer simple explanations and Utopian solutions. Cambodia has had far too much of "Year Zero politics". Cambodians may be better off from now on giving credence to politicians who honestly admit that the country's problems are serious and complicated and may take a long time to overcome, than believing politicians who label their political opponents as the cause of all the problems and who claim themselves to offer complete solutions.

One very special characteristic of Cambodia, that has not diminished since I was working here but has if anything grown stronger, is the high readiness of some foreigners to advise, to judge, and even to intervene in this country's affairs. In no other country in Southeast Asia would citizens feel comfortable to have their nation spoken to and written about by foreigners in the negative and disparaging way in which Cambodia is still spoken to and written about by some foreigners. Yet some Cambodians seem to want to involve foreigners in their causes in this way. Where does this special characteristic of Cambodia come from?

As Milton Osborn noted in his classic introductory history of Southeast Asia, "Cambodia's recent history sets it apart from the rest of the region". One specific difference is that in Cambodia there has been a high degree of foreign interventionism extending over at least the past three decades – while most other South-east Asian countries were independently shaping their own societies. This pattern of interventionism has created a habit of mind and a tendency among some Cambodian politicians to look to the outside world rather than to their own fellow Cambodians for solutions to their problems.

To recall the main recent history: the overthrow of the monarchy in 1970 may have had foreign support; it was certainly welcomed in some capitals. In the early 1970s, Cambodia was drawn further into the Vietnam War by the American saturation bombings of the Eastern provinces. This hastened the breakdown of the social and political order in Cambodia, and contributed to the nightmare of the Khmer Rouge regime. Then came the long 1979-1991 civil war, in which Cambodia was a proxy combat zone for other nations – the last battleground of the Cold War endgame in the Asian theatre. Eventually, after 13 years of civil war, international isolation and human deprivation in Cambodia, the 1991-93 Paris Peace Accords generated new hope for the future.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that the UNTAC period and the 1993 post-election compromise represented an armistice rather than a true reconciliation. Behind the delicately balanced two-Prime Minister interim solution lay a big question: if there was not to be a full political merger of parties, which side – royalists or CPP – was eventually to inherit real power?

That was a question in which many foreign players were still interested. Obviously the two major neighbours – Thailand and Vietnam - would not have wanted any regime to come to power in Cambodia that was hostile to their respective security interests. More broadly, ASEAN and China at the time still felt they had prestige at stake in the side they

had supported in the civil war – the Royalist/ Republican/ Khmer Rouge military resistance – getting at least a chance to share power in Phnom Penh. And there were powerful elements in the Washington foreign policy community that above all else wanted to see the CPP party – which they mistrusted as a former Communist party supported by their former enemy Vietnam – expelled from power by the former resistance parties. These complex foreign interests were all at play behind the scenes during the first Ranariddh – Hun Sen coalition.

There was also an influential group of foreign players that tried to be genuinely neutral in their approach to Cambodian politics during the first CPP-Funcinpec coalition. Here I include most of the embassies represented in Cambodia during the period, and the representatives of major international agencies. We did not favour any political party. We were simply trying to help Cambodian leaders maintain the status quo, until a free election scheduled for 1998 would peacefully resolve the issue of power according to the people's free choice. But we were unable to help prevent the build-up of tension leading to the decisive armed clash in July 1997. The sixteen turbulent months of political crisis that followed were a crucial period in Cambodia's modern history. Foreign influences played major roles – both positive and negative – in the struggle to resolve this crisis.

Today, the picture in Cambodia is far more encouraging. Cambodia conducted its own democratic election in July 1998, with little outside help – an achievement of which the people of Cambodia can be truly proud. In November 1998, Cambodia finally achieved the goal of an agreed coalition government with one prime minister, on the basis of the internationally validated election result, thus ending 16 months of political crisis.

Both major parties in the coalition are firmly committed to maintaining it. Both have agreed that the politics of confrontation are neither in the national interest nor in their own parties' interest. Cambodia has a new Senate and a Constitutional Council, and a small but active parliamentary opposition party. The nation's sovereignty is not being contested by any other state. Cambodia's government is internationally recognised. It has recovered its UN seat and it is finally a member of ASEAN. Relations with important near neighbours – Vietnam and Thailand – are better than they have ever been. Relations with China have become very friendly. Aid relations with bilateral and multilateral donors are moving back towards normality. The economy is returning towards normal rates of growth. On other domestic reform fronts – the military, the civil service, forestry, womens' and childrens' rights, drugs, AIDS, land tenure, even CMAC - the government is at last beginning to focus much-needed policy attention. To quote British Ambassador George Edgar:

"There is finally a situation in which the government can concentrate on economic and development issues in a way it just hasn't been able to because security issues were taking all their time. There is peace now to an extent there has not been in 30 years. I think it is different this time. There is the potential for an enormous amount to be done."

This is a substantial record of national achievement. I would like to congratulate the two political parties that make up the RGC on their wisdom and their patriotism, and on the

great progress their country has made in the eight months since their coalition agreement in November 1998. I have travelled around Cambodia quite a lot these past two weeks and I can see the benefits of peace.

Yet I am saddened by the negative way in which some influential parts of the international community continue to perceive and speak about Cambodia, and how such damaging stereotypes may continue to handicap Cambodia's self-esteem and her reconstruction and development efforts. I see a continuing reluctance on the part of some prominent individuals and organisations both in Cambodia and outside it, to accept in their hearts that Cambodia has a truly sovereign and legitimate government. Some still see this government as suspect – at worst, without any legitimacy, and at best "on probation". Some still actively encourage Cambodians to look outside Cambodia for solutions. Some seem to find it difficult to approach Cambodian political and social issues with a normal degree of respect and courtesy for Cambodians. Some still seem unable to speak and write about Cambodia in any but condescending and patronising language. Often I believe they do this unconsciously, because it has become a habit of mind and speech. They would not use such language when speaking or writing about other Southeast Asian countries. Only Burma, with far more good reason, attracts such a negative style of commentary.

It seems to me that if foreigners continue to encourage and give credence to negative and distorted perspectives on this country, this will not help Cambodia as it approaches its next election in 2003. In the foreign affairs community outside Cambodia, the rather complex politics of Cambodia are still not well understood. Negative stories continue to have credibility and the RGC is given too little credit for its efforts. The present coalition government is still, in the eyes of some foreign commentators, seen as a regime that was only reluctantly accepted by the Cambodian people under some degree of duress. Even among those who deal professionally in Phnom Penh with the Royal Government of Cambodia as the legal government in place, some still seem to find it hard to accept that this government is the legitimate outcome of the 1998 election.

This tendency was most apparent, even this year well after the political settlement, in the international human rights lobbies, in some Cambodian human rights NGOs, and among some of those who commented publicly on the issue of Khmer Rouge leadership trials. On such issues, the commentary was often still quite hostile. The RGC was in a lose-lose situation with such critics. If the RGC did not accede to international lobbies' extreme demands, it was criticised for intransigence or lack of good faith. If it looked for ways to compromise with foreign demands, it was accused of only having conceded ground under foreign pressure to cut off aid, or of having tried to outsmart its critics. To such biased interest groups, the RGC was never to be given any credit – no matter what it did.

This is not a problem just now, while the Cambodian Government is launching reform programs and making progress on many fronts. But I fear that similar negative and biased foreign attitudes may again re-appear, as preparations for the next election in 2003 get underway and as major parties come under pressure to differentiate their agendas.

Why does it have to be this way? Why have so many foreigners become accustomed to ways of thinking about Cambodia that are neither fair, proportionate, nor helpful to Cambodians? So often I see an absolutism of judgement: "Cambodia must either be perfect, or else it is a total failure". Many foreigners who came to work in Cambodia initially with an open mind, in a few years became harsh judges of this country's shortcomings. Why does so much of the international community still judge Cambodia so much more unreasonably than they judge any other countries in the developing world?

The reason I believe lies less in any objective Cambodian realities, and more in the combined strength of three different sets of attitudes to Cambodia. First, the left-over anger on the United States Right from the loss of the Vietnam War. Second, the desire of some international democracy-building and human rights interest groups to exercise a strong role in Cambodia in order to protect the symbolically important achievements of UNTAC. And third, the ideological program of the opposition party leader and his skill in attracting sympathy and support from both these groups to his cause.

First: America's loss of Vietnam in 1975 left anger and guilt among influential anti-Communist groups in the United States. I believe much of this anger and guilt has been played out retrospectively in Cambodia, against CPP and Samdech Hun Sen. Such ideological hostility goes beyond logical argument: it is something visceral and intensely emotional. I experienced it at first hand when I visited Washington on a lecture tour in June 1998 to try to explain the facts of Cambodia.

Second: International democracy-building and human rights interest groups have been determined to protect the political outcome of UNTAC. For these groups, Cambodia became a powerful symbol and a real-life social laboratory in which to test out political debates over Asian values versus Western values, and over the Samuel Huntington theories of East-West culture clashes. These groups wanted to prove that democratic pluralist values would prevail in Cambodia, as an example to the rest of Asia.

It was rather too easy for such liberal goals to slide into "we-know-best" paternalism, and harsh criticism when ideal standards were not met by the RGC. So perhaps again from an initial sense of guilt that the international community had let Cambodians down in the past and a desire not to let Cambodia down again, it was only a short psychological step to transfer this sense of guilt into anger, against those Cambodian political leaders who seemed to oppose the liberal human rights and democratic agendas for Cambodia. Too often the mentality became: "We know what is best for you, do not stand in our way". To some such Western idealists, the CPP and its leadership quickly became the main adversary. They dismissed as old irrelevant history – many of them are quite young - the fact that it was this same CPP which had carried on the long and lonely fight throughout the 1980s, and again after 1996, finally to overcome the Khmer Rouge.

In my view, both these groups have misjudged CPP and its leader Mr Hun Sen. First, CPP were not Vietnamese puppets or communists. Since at least the mid-1980s, they have been first and foremost Cambodian patriots. Their security partnership with Vietnam during the civil war, and their gratitude for Vietnamese diplomatic support since

then, does not render this judgement invalid. Second, there is no evidence that Hun Sen opposes Western market values or pluralist political values. All evidence suggests that he is a pragmatic leader who since the late 1980s has wanted to modernise Cambodia on market economy and democratic pluralist lines, and that he strongly supports Cambodia's 1993 constitution and political institutions. There is no evidence that he has any ideological sympathy for Asian values or culture clash theories, or that he is hostile to the United States. To project him as supporting such views misrepresents the man. His own development agenda is quite simple and orthodox - to bring peace and prosperity to his people through entering more fully into the Asian trade and investment community as a part of the global free-market trade system. This, I am pleased to see, is increasingly being understood and accepted in press commentaries around the ASEAN region – though not yet in Washington.

The third element which during 1997 and 1998 unified these two different tendencies into a powerful negative international consensus view of Cambodia was Mr Rainsy. In my past articles I have written critically about Mr Rainsy's perceptions of Cambodia, and his policies after the July 1997 fighting. I believe that his advocacy delayed and complicated the search for a peaceful political settlement in Cambodia. But happily in the end, peace was achieved. However Mr Rainsy's program has not changed at all. He continues to travel tirelessly outside Cambodia, lobbying both the post-Vietnam Right and the democracy and human rights interest groups to maintain support for his cause. He still has some international credibility with and through these groups. But since the political settlement in Cambodia in November 1998, his influence within Cambodia seems to be on the wane.

Mr Rainsy was especially helped to spread his message in Washington by United States Congressman Dana Rohrabacher. It is possible that Mr Rainsy was encouraged by Mr Rohrabacher to see relevance for Cambodia in other models of political change, such as the civil rights struggle in the United States; the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa; the "people power" protests against former Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and against former President Marcos in the Philippines.

To my mind such models of transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy through mass protest just do not fit the facts of this country. They fail to take account of political factors that are specific to Cambodia. Firstly, the powerful stabilising influence on Cambodian politics and civil society of the King and the monarchical system. Secondly, the Buddhist culture of forgiveness and non-violence. Thirdly, the real respect and influence that Mr Hun Sen and CPP have earned among large sections of the Cambodian people through their work in governing Cambodia under difficult circumstances since 1979, through their steadfast opposition to the Khmer Rouge, and through their support since the mid-1980s for the peace process and for the UNTAC constitution and laws.

As the Cambodian political climate deteriorated from 1996 onwards, tensions escalated in Phnom Penh. Human rights violations worsened. Mr Rainsy's international weight and credibility grew in direct proportion. Funcinpec though still part of the government in effect went into a *de facto* opposition political coalition – the National United Front –

with Mr Rainsy. More and more of the world community that took an interest in Cambodia came to see Cambodia through Mr Rainsy's eyes: he made himself a symbolic focus of Cambodian democratic aspirations. More and more, symbols replaced realities.

I worked as Australia's Ambassador through most of the first coalition Government and until three months after the fighting in 1997. From 1993 to 1996, CPP was gradually establishing greater credibility with the international community working in Phnom Penh as a serious-minded party that respected the UNTAC constitution and aspired to be an effective modernising force in Cambodia. But from 1996 onwards, objective reporting from embassies had little influence on the wider foreign policy consensus on Cambodia in major capitals. There was no real policy debate. In Washington, a firm consensus developed on the Hill and in the think-tanks and media, that was pretty much identical with the views of Mr Rainsy and Mr Rohrabacher. The US State Department had the difficult task of conducting Cambodia policy in a suspicious Washington political environment, which was not interested in hearing the complicated facts of Cambodia, because Mr Rainsy and his American friends had already explained to them all they wanted to know about Cambodia. As a result, United States Government policy towards Cambodia since 1996 has been hesitant and at times contradictory.

So, for example, foreign ministries did not challenge the immediate media and political verdict that the July 1997 fighting in Phnom Penh had been a Hun Sen coup. Even now, this is still the conventional international wisdom: though Ambassadors who were working in Phnom Penh at the time well know that the true story of the origins of the factional fighting was far more complicated. The full story will be written by historians one day. Meanwhile, Mr Hun Sen is still burdened internationally with the negative allegation that he seized power by force. Foreign Ministries that know the facts of that war better have not tried since July 1997 to brief their newspaper editors and interested public opinion. I am sorry that this is the case, because Cambodia's reputation in the world still suffers for it.

In the months of instability that followed the July 1997 war, the almost 100% one-sided and emotive tone of international media commentary on Cambodia negatively influenced the course of events within Cambodia. It encouraged the opposition's intransigence and confidence that they could break the government's will. It thereby delayed a settlement and increased the risk of renewed civil war. There was a large discrepancy between the political reality of Cambodia and the way it was being reported to the world. Exaggerations and mistruths were given widespread international coverage. These false versions of reality were then played back into Cambodia, and so distorted the way many Cambodians came to see their situation. News, news analysis, and policy argument became hopelessly mixed up together.

In this way, the crisis was prolonged through several phases and it became more serious than it needed to be. Much damage was done to the Cambodian economy and to the Cambodian civil society as a result. In some ways, the last phase – the street protest phase, with large numbers of people rejecting the results of their own internationally validated election – was the most dangerous and destructive phase of all. It was in this period that

Mr Rainsy and Mr Rohrabacher were demanding that United States military forces intervene in Cambodia, protect the street protesters, arrest Hun Sen as a war criminal, and thereby restore democracy to Cambodia. The tragedy is that many in the streets came to believe that such things were imminently about to happen.

The internationally observed election was a crucially important reality check on such destabilisation scenarios. I will never forget – I was there as leader of an independent NGO observer team – when two days after the election, Democratic and Republican observer team leaders Congressman Steve Solarz and Ambassador James Lilley courageously assessed this election as "a miracle on the Mekong". Sadly, it did not take long for their parent party institutes in Washington to reject their two team leaders' honest conclusions and to revert to the former orthodoxy that the election had been fatally flawed. I think Solarz and Lilley had it right, and I regret that their party institutes changed their findings afterwards. Of course the revised NDI/IRI stand encouraged the street demonstrators to believe that the United States Government was really moving towards supporting them, and only needed a little extra push to go the full distance.

Was there ever any real risk of physical United States intervention in Cambodia at any stage during these sixteen months of the crisis? Probably not; but it seems to me that the aggressive, almost hysterical tone of public and media commentary by many in Washington may at times have put the Clinton –Albright administration under some policy pressure. After all, this was a government whose liberal supporters were arguing the case for military intervention in places like Kosovo, saying that national sovereignty can be no defence for regimes that grossly violate universal human rights. So, let me turn the question on its head: If the US Government had done what Mr Rainsy and Mr Rohrabacher wanted it to do, who in the United States foreign policy community would have opposed such action? Not the Washington Post or the New York Times; not IRI or NDI; not the Senate or Congress Foreign Affairs Committee Chairmen; not Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

There is some collateral evidence that the US government was under pressure to intervene in Cambodia in 1997-98: e.g., the continuing suspension of US intergovernmental aid after July 1997; or the remarkable US Government decision in September 1998, after the election result had been validated by the full community of international observers and while the street protests were continuing, to lobby its friends in the UN to keep Cambodia's UN seat vacant; and even today in the continuing degree of United States official awkwardness towards Hun Sen, as seen during his recent private visit to the USA for his son's graduation from West Point. These are clearly still not normal diplomatic relations. The State Department still has to reckon with a hostile and sceptical Washington opinion.

In this situation, the Cambodian Government is following the right policies. It is refusing to allow itself to be provoked by those who would try to provoke it into ill-judged actions. It is persevering quietly with its developmental and diplomatic agenda, and achieving some successes in both areas. It wants Cambodia to be a country without enemies. Cambodia is becoming more and more accepted and enmeshed in the ASEAN region,

and from that increasing regional acceptance will come a wider international acceptance. I am convinced that, if there was a deliberate attempt to destabilise Cambodia in 1997-98, it failed; and that the circumstances making such a destabilisation attempt possible will not be repeated.

I share the view expressed by a predecessor in this CICP distinguished lecture series, Dr Carl Thayer, that the ASEAN involvement in the international diplomacy around Cambodia in the 1997-98 crisis period – though at times disapproving of the RGC - was really protecting Cambodia from something that could have been much worse. ASEAN was reminding other powers that Cambodia was a prospective member of ASEAN and a country in their own region of direct security interest to them. Their disapproval of the RGC was never so extreme as some of the voices coming from elsewhere, and their measured diplomacy in the 18 months of the crisis by containing the diplomatic pressure helped Cambodia through a potentially dangerous time. As well as ASEAN, Japanese and French diplomacy, and the public advocacy of some individuals within and outside governments, helped to maintain a more balanced perspective on what was happening in Cambodia, and thereby allowed time and opportunity for a peaceful settlement finally to be negotiated between the major parties.

Today, Cambodia's prospects are good, and I find it hard to see such risks to national stability recurring again. History seldom repeats itself exactly.

I would only say this as a final word. Cambodia has a democratic pluralist constitution. It needs active and committed opposition political parties and human rights and democracy interest groups to draw public attention to problems and abuses, and thereby to help fulfil the promise of its constitution and laws. But it does not need political fundamentalism: the politics of hatred and contempt. What is most important today in Cambodia, it seems to me, is to rebuild and strengthen a social and political consensus; civic pride, respect for the law and for all fellow citizens, and acceptance that – whatever your political differences – your political opponents have the right to be respected and honoured in your country and abroad as fellow members of the same civil society. Without those essential elements, political opposition becomes just an invitation to social breakdown, anarchy and foreign interventionism.

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