

New Face, Same Old System: Special Report on the Generational Transmission of Power in Cambodia

2023





ASEAN PARLIAMENTARIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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Father hands over power to son |

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Background

Is Cambodia in the midst of a political transition? This was the question on the minds of many foreign observers as Hun Sen, one of the world's longest ruling strongmen, formally handed the post of prime minister to his son Hun Manet. Hun Sen has ruled Cambodia since 1985 and has taken increasingly brutal measures to consolidate his power, such as using the country's courts to dissolve the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2017. In the early days of his premiership, Hun Manet has attempted to portray himself as a new start for Cambodia. While some analysts gave the transition a positive but guarded reception, the story was different inside the country. This report, researched and written by an APHR member who has requested to remain anonymous for security reasons, consists of three articles that will examine whether this transition in leadership does anything to change the political, democratic, and human rights trajectory of Cambodia.

The first article in this report details the linkages of the Hun family to powerful corporations and business groups. Through strategic alliances with other powerful families, often cemented with marriage, Hun Sen's family is arguably the richest and most powerful in Cambodia. While the sons, Hun Manet, Hun Manit, and Hun Many, hold key positions in the army and bureaucracy, it is the women in the family, Bun Rany, Hun Sen's wife, and daughters Hun Mana and Hun Mali, who occupy powerful positions in the country's corporate structure and elite civil society.

The second article in this report explores why, despite the fanfare given the generational handover, few people apart from die-hard partisans of the ruling regime think that the 71-year-old ruler is going away any time soon. One of the conclusions of the article is that the street-wise Hun Sen wants his western-educated son to learn the ways of maintaining and accumulating power, which, in the former's case, involved a mix of guile and repression. Hun Sen wants to "test-drive" his eldest son, and Hun Manet knows he has to be a quick learner in combining the iron fist with the velvet glove or his father might flunk him and opt for another in the family to lead the dynasty.

The third article is an interview with Mu Sochua, an APHR Board member and one of the leaders of the opposition, who has not been allowed by the regime to return to Cambodia. She not only explains why the leadership transition is a charade but also speculates on why a number of prominent leaders of civil society have recently joined the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Despite the continuing stranglehold by the Hun Sen group on power, Mu Sochua sees some opportunities for the opposition in the coming election for the Senate.





The Power Elite | EPA Images/Mak Remissa



The Hun Family Empire

The First Family of Cambodia is the apex of an empire that fuses political and business interests.



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Hun Sen

After turning over the premiership to his son, Hun Sen remains Cambodia's real source of power. He is head of both the Senate and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). He is also at the apex of a business empire that is estimated to be worth between \$500 million and \$1 billion, when one includes the corporate interests of his sons and daughters, their spouses, and the children of his siblings.



EPA Images/Mak Remissa

Bun Rany

Bun Rany, Hun Sen's wife, is president of the Cambodian Red Cross, the largest charity organization in the country, which is seen by many as nothing but a front for the CPP, whose board of directors is filled with cronies of the Hun family and business tycoons. She has come under criticism for her ostentatious display of expensive clothing and accouterments like Versace T-shirts, Hermes belts, and diamond earrings while distributing charity goods to poverty-ridden villagers.



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Hun Manet

Before he was made prime minister, four star general Hun Manet served as commander of the Royal Cambodian Army (RCA) and deputy commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). He also headed up his father’s bodyguard unit and the national counter-terrorism task force set up with US assistance in 2008. He received a BA from West Point and a PhD in economics from the University of Bristol.

According to Global Witness, Manet’s wife, Pich Chanmony, has links or roles in eight companies, including the chairmanship of Legend Cinema and G Gear, which has the exclusive license to sell LG products.



Hun Manith

Lieutenant General Hun Manith, Hun Sen’s middle son, is the head of the Ministry of National Defense’s military intelligence unit and is a deputy commander of the Royal Cambodian Army. He is a director and shareholder of Cambodia Electricity Private, which constitutes a violation of Article 25 of the General Statute of Military Personnel of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, which forbids career military personnel “to be a member of a board of directors or to ensure the management of a private company.”

Like his older brother, Hun Manet, and unlike his father, Manith is well educated. He received a bachelor’s degree in economics from Hofstra University in the US and a master’s in international business from Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia.



EPA Images/Mik Remissa

Hun Many

Hun Many, Hun Sen's youngest son, is Minister of Civil Service and a member of the National Assembly from Kompong Speu. The former head of the National Youth Federations of Cambodia, he was educated, like his older brothers, in the West, receiving his BA from Hofstra University, an MA from University of Melbourne, and another MA from National Defense University in the US.

Yim Chhay Lin, the wife of Many and daughter of former Deputy Prime Minister Yim Chhay Ly, has roles at six firms, including the directorship of a mining exploration company and the chairmanship -- and a 20% stake in -- a pharmaceutical business. Chhay Lin also has a 51% stake in "The Bay" a \$250 million condominium and hotel project in Phnom Penh with a Singaporean partner.



Facebook Page/Hun Mana

Hun Mana

Hun Mana, Hun Sen's eldest daughter, chairs at least 14 companies, including Bayon TV and Radio, Kampuchea Thmey Daily, and Moon Media, a leading advertising company. Moon Media lists many multinational clients on its website, including Visa, Unilever and Procter & Gamble. Global Witness says Hun Mana has interests in 22 companies with a total listed share capital of at least \$66.7m. It adds that the real total is likely to be "significantly higher."



Cbp

Hun Maly

The younger of Hun Sen's two daughters, Hun Maly is also a director and shareholder in Moon Media. Hun Maly's husband, Sok Puthyvuth, according to the Financial Times is "chief executive of Soma Group, a conglomerate with interests ranging from construction to energy... The company's ventures range from a part-share of a \$100m project to expand Phnom Penh's airport, to a multimillion-dollar biomass power deal in 2012 with General Electric of the US. This was the first project launched under an alternative-energy development agreement struck between GE and the Cambodian government the previous year."

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Shaun Turton and Phak Seangly, “Inside the Hun Sen Family’s Business Empire,” *Bangkok Post*, July 7, 2016, [Inside the Hun family’s business empire](#)

Machiavelli 101: Vignettes of the Dynastic Succession in Phnom Penh



Prime Minister Hun Manet addresses the UN General Assembly on Sept 22, 2023 | EPA Images/Sarah Yenesel

The transition from Hun Sen to his son Hun Manet as political leader of Cambodia in August and September was accompanied by a massive public relations effort to send the message that a new era was dawning in the country.

For domestic public opinion, the most striking initiative was the appointment of over a hundred advisers and assistants for Hun Manet, most of them drawn from young professionals in government, business, academia, and civil society.

For the international public, the new Prime Minister traveled to New York to address the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. He painted as legitimate the July 24 election to the National Assembly that resulted in a landslide victory for the virtually unopposed Cambodian People's Party (CPP), claiming, "Over 8.2 million people cast their ballots, a turnout rate of 84.59%, which was "the highest turnout since the U.N.-supervised election in 1993, and a clear indication of our people's greater political maturity and enthusiasm in exercising their democratic rights." Of course, he failed to mention the fact that the main opposition party, the Candlelight Party (CLP), had been banned from participating in the elections.

But the regime went overboard in selling Hun Sen's son. Regime supporters in the US circulated photos of three electronic billboards in New York's Time Square celebrating Hun Manet's visit to the United States, only for these to be exposed as photo-shopped shots, with the billboard companies denying they were authentic or that they were ever shown or that they had entered into any contract with anyone associated with the government.

Taking a Leaf from the Young Hun Sen

The number of advisers to the new PM was also criticized in social media. There are 104 advisers and 70 assistants, of whom 33 are Secretaries of State, 19 Under-Secretaries of State and 18 Directors-General. A number of them have just returned to Cambodia from studies or training abroad. One likely motive for the creation of the body is to co-opt potential opposition, especially from the younger generation. Another is image-building. The idea of an advisory group of young, fresh faces is probably Hun Sen's, who learned the value of cultivating a reformist image during his ascent to power. As Sebastian Strangio, an expert in Cambodian politics, reminds us, the young Hun Sen, shortly after he was appointed foreign minister of the post-Khmer Rouge People's Republic of Cambodia, "put out a call for young intellectuals and technocrats—basically, anyone who had studied overseas prior to 1975—and gave them jobs in his ministry. 'Revolutionary' credentials were irrelevant...Soon Hun Sen was surrounded by lawyers, teachers, engineers, and diplomats—the best and the brightest that a depleted Cambodia has to offer."¹



EPA Images/Khem Sovannara

The image-building exercise has not been unsuccessful in attracting some people with a reformist bent. One is Preap Kol, former crusading head of Transparency International's Cambodia office, who said, "I believe that the next government will continue to implement...reforms, and that I will have the opportunity to contribute to them. This will also increase foreign investment."² Interestingly, the organization he was formerly associated with ranked Cambodia 162 out of 198 countries, close to the bottom, in its 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Two other big catches for the government were two of the top leaders of the opposition Grassroots Democratic Party, Sam Inn and Sem Hak. In his social media post, Sam Inn explained his move: "I would like to rejoin political life with the Cambodian People's Party so I will have the opportunity to work for the government via the environment ministry. This way, I will be able to contribute to supporting communities in protected areas and the development of ecotourism."³

¹ Sebastian Strangio, *Cambodia: From Pol Pot to Hun Sen and Beyond* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 35.

² Van Schoeata, "Ex-TI director clarifies new role in government," *Phnom Penh Post*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/ex-ti-director-clarifies-new-role-government>

³ Samban Chandara, "Grassroots leaders join CPP, get environment jobs," *Phnom Penh Post*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/grassroots-leaders-join-cpp-get-environment-jobs>

Asked why there were such high-level defectors from civil society, Mu Sochua, an exiled opposition leader, said it was most likely that they wanted to be relevant after being powerless for so long, but this was a delusion since “they will have no real decision-making power.” The price of their defection, she added, “will be losing credibility and the trust of their colleagues and the people.”⁴ Without naming names, a leading official of the Grassroots Democratic Party said that “one of the defectors from our party is most likely sincere but deluded in wanting to help society by joining the CPP, but the other one might be doing it for opportunistic reasons.”⁵

EPA Images/Kith Serey



The View from Below

In interviews with local grassroots people in Phnom Penh, Koh Kong, Sihanoukville, and Battambang, hardly anyone was convinced that the generational change in the leadership meant the winds of reform would blow soon. A typical response was that of a woman who had been jailed for leading the effort to fend off well connected urban land-grabbers linked to the regime. “The faces may be new, but it’s the same old system.”⁶ When I asked if the educational background of the new leadership would make a difference, I was told that defending family and crony interests would have priority over reform, whatever one’s educational background.

Universally, those I interviewed said it would still be Hun Sen running things, at least, while he was alive, and a few gave as an example, the recent fiasco over taxes. Hun Manet’s chief of taxation announced that there would be a new 20 percent capital gains tax and increased rates on current taxes. This reformist measure made many Cambodian economic interests unhappy, leading Hun Sen to storm back to the scene, scolding his son, “Why is it exploding? We are not taking any action yet, but the talk is causing an outcry.” At that point, Hun Manet meekly retreated and said his government will not be imposing new taxes or increasing old ones.⁷

Foreign observers of the Cambodian scene have also been skeptical about the regime turning a new leaf, though there have been some well-known journalists who have given Hun Manet the benefit of the doubt. For instance, Kavi Chongkittavorn, a columnist for the Bangkok Post, wrote, “The fresh optic will be important to dilute the longstanding negative actions and memories associated with the previous

⁴ Interview with author by Zoom, Oct 20, 2023.

⁵ Interview with author, name withheld, Phnom Penh, Oct 8, 2023.

⁶ Interview with author, name withheld, Sihanoukville, Oct 12, 2023.

⁷ David Hutt, “Hun Manet Backs Down On Tax, but He Cannot Deny a Hike Is Coming,” *The Diplomat*, Oct 13, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/hun-manet-backs-down-on-tax-but-he-cannot-deny-a-hike-is-coming/>

leader. Hun Manet is lucky that he does not have a so-called ‘legacy trap,’ which his father was, and thus has a unique opportunity to be a transformational Cambodian leader. It is also notable that it is the first time in 500 years of Khmer history that there has been a peaceful transition of leadership.”⁸

“Now Cambodia can show the international community what kind of transformation he can bring about, to generate a new, fresh, and respectable image for his country,” Kavi continues. “As the youngest leader in ASEAN, in the beginning, Hun Manet will be in listening mode, trying to absorb lessons learned from the ASEAN elders, particularly his father.”⁹

Imparting Survival Skills

Other observers agree with Chongkittavorn that Hun Manet will be trying to “absorb lessons from his father.” Where they disagree with him is what exactly those lessons are. The reason Hun Sen has advanced the handover of formal power to his son from when it was originally planned, according to some analysts who are less optimistic than Chongkittavorn, is that he wants to make sure that Hun Manet gets some experience in wielding power ruthlessly--the lack of which would be fatal in a polity where democracy is merely a façade and it is the informal wheeling and dealing in influence and the exercise of force that is the currency of success.

Hun Sen is a survivor, a man who combines keen intelligence with street-fighting skills. Through a mix of guile, force, and cooptation, he has outmaneuvered a succession of foes, from the Khmer Rouge, to King Sihanouk, Prince Ranariddh, Sam Rainsy, and his own party rivals like Chea Sim and Heng Samrin. He was also able to masterfully manipulate the Vietnamese, Chinese, the United Nations, World Bank, and even the United States into supporting him. Compared to him, Hun Manet, though he was trained at West Point and has a doctorate in economics, is a babe in the woods, and the 71-year-old dictator wants to throw his 45-year old eldest son to the water to see if he sinks or swims in the Cambodian rapids.

What is at Stake

The stakes are high—political power and control of much of the economy. Hun Sen remains president of the Cambodian People’s Party and president of the Senate. Hun Sen’s wife, Bun Rany, runs the Cambodian Red Cross, the country’s largest charity. The middle son, Hun Manith, is the director of Royal Cambodian Air Force military intelligence unit and director of Cambodia Electricity Private. The youngest son, Hun Maly, is a member of Parliament, representing Kompong Speu province, as well as the head of the civil service.

⁸ Kavi Chongkittavorn, “Unlike His Father, Hun Manet is Not in a ‘Legacy Trap,’” Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, July 31, 2023, <https://www.eria.org/news-and-views/unlike-his-father-hun-manet-is-not-in-a-legacy-trap/>

⁹ *Ibid.*

The formal positions held by core members of the family aside from Hun Sen and Hun Manet are powerful though at first glance they may not seem that impressive. Once you add economic interests, however, then the real extent of Hun Sen's family's power becomes clear. The eldest daughter Hun Mana is chair and owner of the media giant Bayon Media High System, a shareholder in Viettel Cambodia, and is linked to 22 companies. Daughter Hun Maly is a shareholder of Cambodia Electricity Private and Moon Media and chair of the high-end shopping mall TK Avenue. A 2016 study by Global Witness, *Hostile Takeover*, claims that Hun Sen's immediate family and close relatives have stakes in at least 114 domestic companies spanning most of the kingdom's key sectors, including major energy, telecoms, mining and trading firms. The family's combined wealth is estimated at between US\$500 million and US\$1 billion.¹⁰



Hun Sen launches another construction project | EPA Images/Mak Remissa

Hunsenomics

“Hunsenomics” is one analyst’s term for capitalism Cambodian-style—“a blend of old style patronage, elite charity, and predatory economics.”¹¹ It is a system that has forged a “stable pact” among Cambodia’s ruling elites while acting as a vacuum cleaner sucking up the wealth of the country via the unabashed takeover of community forests, lands belonging to peasants, and properties seized from urban communities. In my interviews with villagers and urban-dwellers, land-grabbing by local elites tied to the Hun Sen and his cronies that serve as the grassroots enforcers of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) is the central source of anger and discontent, which Hun Sen has periodically tried to defuse with photo-ops of him distributing land titles.

Not surprisingly, even as the economy has grown in GDP terms, inequality has skyrocketed, poverty engulfed over 35 percent of the population in 2018, and 15 percent of the country’s 16 million people suffer from undernourishment.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Strangio, p. 135.



New facade, old realities | EPA Images/Kith Serey

Defending such a fused political-business empire, keeping the opposition off balance, and keeping the people down is not for the inexperienced or the faint-hearted, and probably as a warning to his son to speed up his imbibing crash courses from Machiavelli 101 to Machiavelli 501, he said he could come back as prime minister if Hun Manet “is in danger.”

Ranariddh as a Negative Example

Hun Sen knows what happens to aspiring politicians who are not fast learners since he himself dispatched one to an early retirement: Prince Ranariddh, the son of the famous King Norodom Sihanouk, the high-wire artist who dominated Cambodian politics before he was ousted in a coup in 1970 and regained political influence in the post-Khmer Rouge era. Hun Sen might find in Ranariddh’s relatively sheltered life before he entered politics similarities to his son’s own protected upbringing and wants to make sure no one can do to Hun Manet what he did to Ranariddh.

As Sihanouk’s second eldest son, Ranariddh, according to Cambodia expert Strangio, had enjoyed a pampered upbringing, studying law in France, earning his doctorate, and taking a teaching position in Aix-en-Provence. After Ranariddh joined his father’s service in 1983, “he enjoyed a frictionless rise.” Three years later he was appointed commander of Funcinpec’s armed force, the *Armee Nationale Sihanoukienne* despite his evident lack of military experience.¹²

Parachuted into the rough and tumble of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian politics, Ranariddh was a woeful amateur compared to the battle-hardened Hun Sen. Despite his winning the elections held by the United Nations mission (UNTAC) in Cambodia in 1993, he was outmaneuvered at every turn by his rival, who ultimately destroyed Funcinpec and forced Ranariddh out of politics and back to teaching in 2006.



The enforcers | EPA Images/Kith Serey

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The Crony Generational Handover

Ranariddh's fate is something Hun Sen does not want his son to suffer, either at the hands of opposition politicians like Sam Rainsy or by his own cronies in the CPP, once he is gone. Hun Sen believes in the saying that you have to keep your enemies close but your friends even closer. To defang the potential threat from the CPP's old guard, he devised the innovative tactic of convincing them to retire along with him but allowing them to hand over, in feudal fashion, their positions to their children. Thus Tea Seiha, Hun Manet's defense minister, is the son of his father's long-serving defense minister, Tea Banh, who served Hun Sen for 34 years. His interior minister, Sar Sokha, too, inherited his position from his own father, Sar Kheng, who held the top security position for 31 years. The new minister of commerce, Cham Nimol, is the daughter of Cham Prasidh, who ran the ministry from 1994 to 2013. Control of Cambodia's central bank is passing from Chea Chanto, in charge since 1998, to his daughter, Chea Serey.¹³

Will this collective generational hand-over ensure a stable succession? One problem, as Mu Sochua sees it, is that the solution of buying stability by allowing powerful people to hand their positions to their children might satisfy some powerful interests but it also alienates others--old and new cronies--who haven't been granted the same deal. Then there are the families and interests of old allies like the deceased Chea Sim and Heng Samrin, whom Hun Sen elbowed out of competition in his drive to the top. All these discontented factions would be ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness once the old man goes.

EPA Images/Kith Serey



Back to Basics: Repression

As for the opposition, Hun Sen's classic tactics were on display in the last two weeks of October. Hun Sen's style has always been to keep people guessing, feinting with the promise of reform, then, when one's guard is down, he delivers exactly the opposite. Over the last few months, the passing of the torch to a new generation of leaders has been the dominant political theme, and Hun Sen has encouraged people to read into the new developments the promise of reform, though no reforms have been explicitly promised. And just when it seemed reform seemed a serious possibility with the ascent to power of a new generation, it suddenly took a back seat to repression. On October 18, Candlelight Party vice president Thach Setha was sentenced to three years imprisonment for alleged incitement to commit a felony and incitement to discriminate on the basis of race, religion or nationality, based on social media comments he made that criticized the Cambodian government's policy on Vietnam.

¹³ Alex Willemyns, "Hun Sen's legacy: Cambodia as the family business," Radio Free Asia, Aug 21, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/hun-sen-legacy-08182023094118.html>

Then, on October 24, four former opposition parliamentarians in exile, Sam Rainsy, Mu Sochua, Eng Chhai Eang, and Ho Vann were sentenced to eight years imprisonment and a five-year ban from running for office for alleged incitement and conspiracy to commit treason. They were charged in relation to a series of Facebook comments about whether Cambodians should temporarily stop paying loans during COVID-19 as well as another set of Facebook comments about high-ranking Cambodian officials buying citizenships in Cyprus. Eight other opposition activists were also found guilty in the same case and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

It's Machiavelli 101, classic Hun Sen, but carried out by his son. It was probably a test of whether Hun Manet had the capacity to carry out repression. Hun Manet probably knows that these moves are undermining the reformist image that he was cultivating. But he knows that he has to act as his father's son, that he must never forget that it is not reform that is the objective. It is the preservation and expansion of power, and for that, he must develop his father's ruthlessness or risk being sidelined by him or, when he's gone, by ambitious elements within the CPP.



EPA Images/Sarah Yenesel

Lessons from Damascus

Those still waiting for Hun Manet's "transformational leadership," might ponder the transformation of Basher Assad, the Syrian strongman. Like Hun Manet, he had an upbringing divorced from politics. He was a medical doctor by training and spent time studying ophthalmology in London, where he struck people as having no interest in politics and appeared more inclined towards technical matters. But when his brother, the heir apparent, died, his father, the strongman Hafez Assad took him in tow and for six years and a half taught him the art of political survival in Syria's dog-eat-dog political world, one that is much like Cambodia's. Basher learned quickly how to combine repression with guile, cooptation, and image manipulation. He outmaneuvered rivals within the ruling Baath party and survived the push for democratization from below during the Arab spring, not hesitating to throw the full force of the military and police against both democratic forces and fundamentalist challengers. After two decades of rule, Basher has become a spitting image of his father Hafez.

To make Hun Manet a spitting image of himself—that is also Hun Sen's objective, and for him, failure is not an option, and Hun Manet knows this.

Cambodian Opposition Leader Mu Sochua on the Political Transition



EPA Images/Stephen Morrison

Mu Sochua is vice president of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) who is currently in exile in the United States. Along with three other opposition parliamentarians in exile--Sam Rainsy, Eng Chhai Eang, and Ho Vann--Mu was, in late October 2023, sentenced in absentia to eight years imprisonment and banned from running for office for five years for alleged incitement and conspiracy to commit treason. She was a [Member of Parliament](#) (MP) for [Battambang](#) and served as [Minister of Women and Veterans' Affairs](#) in Cambodia's coalition government from 1998 to 2004. She was interviewed by the writer of this report on 20 October 2023.

Question?

Will the “transition” that is supposedly taking place right now make any difference?

Answer:

No. Nothing at all. In a month, Hun Manet has gone to China twice. He's using the same line as his father. We were hoping that he would release some prisoners. Nothing at all. He even talks in a very tough language. He has shown no signs of the reforms he will take. He's just not very smart, not very sharp. He's just like a kid trying to learn the ropes, not confident at all.

Question?

Would you say that it's really the father who's running things?

Answer:

Definitely. Let me give you an example. About a month after he took over, somehow the department of taxation announced that it would tax middle income people, impose some property taxes...He was somewhere, but his father had to come out and say, no, this is not right. My son has not been in power for a month. This is bad timing. And the prime minister said right away, yes, this is very bad timing. So there will be no taxation. Another example. One Cambodian was killed last Saturday in the Hamas attack. And the father said, no, we're not bringing people out of Israel. We have to stick with Israel because we're good friends. We don't leave our friends. We don't let our friends down. And the son said, yeah, yeah, yeah, we won't do anything. Our people will have to stay in Israel.

It was just like during Covid, when the Cambodian students in Wuhan, where the pandemic broke out, begged, please let us come home. At that time, the whole world was really terrified, but Hun Sen said no, we don't leave our Chinese friends, we stay!

Question?

Some people say, it's not just a personal transition, but a whole set of people connected to Hun Sen are passing on their positions to their children. Do you agree with that?

Answer:

Totally, it's the deal that Hun Sen had to make within his own party for his son to replace him, so that he would not have to go through the parliamentary vote. They had to amend the constitution, to make a sort of detour or short cut so that the ruling party would present a candidate to the king for approval, whereas before the ruling party's choice had to be approved by parliament.

He also prepared the field to the last detail, so that his son would be totally secure in his position. Because his son is junior in the parliament, he made him a member of the politburo, and he also made him a four-star general, and these moves were undermining all the senior CPP people. So to appease the turmoil within the party, he made a deal with the senior members. So, for example, the minister of defense, his son takes over. The minister of interior, the son takes over. So it's that type of deal, where it's either the son or daughter that takes over. There are, in fact, two daughters that inherit their father's position. And for those with no positions to positions, he creates positions for their children as advisers to Hun Manet. It's like a bribe, you know.

Question?

Now within the family, do you think there are internal struggles over the succession, or is the family solidly behind it?

Answer:

Within the family none, but within the party there are a lot of people who are upset, because those who are senior but who don't have sons or daughters who are "qualified," they're out of the deal. So it is clear that it is those who are so close to the Hun Sen family that get the deal. For the rest, it's a raw deal.

Hun Manet promised reform, but how could you call this reform, when this big headed cabinet, much bigger than the body, has people who feel so superior, and they give themselves titles--titles that seem like those that the royal family would give to themselves. So many tycoons who are involved in land-grabbing, drug trafficking, cybercrime, it doesn't matter, they're up there.

Question?

I have been told that they're been trying to recruit young people, people who're academics and from civil society. Do you think this effort to coopt younger intellectuals will succeed?

Answer:

No, no. These people are from the opposition, and the aim is to weaken the opposition. That's number one. But they're not given a position that is a decision-making position. So how can the government function when the main guy who makes the decision is Hun Sen. But the young people have dreams, because Hun Manet is sold as a reformist, a West Point graduate and all that. But even he cannot make any decision. But if you're well qualified, like this guy who used to head Transparency International in Cambodia, we called him Mr Anti-Corruption--well, he's now one of the senior advisers in charge of civil society, well, what about his expertise as anti-corruption when Hun Manet is not interested in anti-corruption? They take him because he has a good rapport with civil society, like a bridge, an ambassador to civil society...

Question?

Let's focus on that. Why do you think this fellow agreed to join? Is it for money?

Answer:

He left civil society a couple of years ago. He's a really, really good guy. He's really at the top internationally. He then had a dream, a delusion that he could make a difference. There's another guy who was trained in Germany. He was the vice president of the Grassroots Democracy Party, and his expertise was in agriculture. Even when we were in opposition, we tapped some of his ideas and put it into our political platform. He joined the CPP as secretary of state, as vice minister. They all believe they can make a difference. They can make a difference but only up to a point. For instance, if you're in agriculture, in agriculture or forestry or fishery, can you say anything about deforestation? What can you do, for example, to make sure that the national budget for agriculture will increase? What can you do for farmers when interest rates are very high, the cost of fertilizer is very high, hydrology, exports and imports, and these issues are not being addressed?

Question?

So you think these people are deluded, that there's no money involved?

Answer:

No, I don't think so. I think it's more...sometimes I feel that way, like I should go home and join the ruling party, maybe I can make a difference, it's that moment of feeling I really can make a difference...but then when you think clearly, you realize that there is no difference you can make because everything is in the hands of one family. They take people who're educated in the West and take them around, as part of the entourage of Hun Manet, and it's really impressive, but if you talk to these guys, to the spokespersons of the ministries, they can't speak because they're so afraid of making a mistake.

Question?

So what happens then when they join? Do they lose credibility with their former colleagues?

Answer:

Yes, they do. First of all, you can't trust them anymore. And the credibility is not just with former colleagues but credibility with the people. Mr Anti-Corruption cannot even talk about corruption now because he is in the system.

Question?

This recent coalition that was formed, where the Candlelight Party and the Grassroots Democratic Party and a number of other parties said they would unite—will it make a difference?

Answer:

I think they're thinking long term. The vice president of the Candlelight Party (CLP) is a very smart guy. He had his own think tank on the economy. He had his own company. So he knows a lot about the economy, export-import, rice, agriculture. He did not want to join the government. He wanted to join the opposition. He was thinking about the next elections, five years from now. At the press conference, he made some good points, like he said, we're not in opposition, we're in competition. He said I am not a politician. I am an economist. I will not compete with you as a politician but I will compete with you as an economist because that's what the people want. That's what the people need. That's what the country needs, experts. And if you compete with me this way, we can ease the political tension, and that way we can heal the country. We're democrats, and we'll always be democrats, and it's the interest of the people and the country that comes first. And the president of the other party, the Grassroots Democratic Party, he's a really, really good guy. He's not a politician. He's civil society who's trying to run a political party. And the other guy who's also a vice president of the Candlelight Party, he's a very good speaker, and he has the respect of people because he did not defect and has a position that is meaningless.

Question?

My understanding is that the CLP, which has been disqualified from electoral competition, will urge its voters to vote for the other parties during the Senate elections. Do you think the grassroots of CLP will do that?

Answer:

Yes, the grassroots are quite disciplined, but we might lose some, because though they're for us, they might be tempted with a lot of money.

Question?

Is there going to be a change regarding allowing people like you back into the country as long as Hun Sen is there?

Answer:

As long as the international community is preoccupied with someplace else, which is now the case, as long as the international community is deluded that Hun Manet is a reformer who can bring change, we don't have a chance. But the economy is suffering right now. The number of people in debt is enormous. I would say 75 per cent. The other 25 per cent don't have to worry, they're millionaires. But because of the structure of the system, because of the judiciary, even if you're a millionaire, you never know when you're going to lose your money. The courts are not independent. Also, because of the state of the economy, Hun Manet might not survive his full term. Hun Manet is not taking off. He keeps making mistakes. Like the case of the billboards in Times Square congratulating Hun Manet when he came to New York and claiming that the general elections were fair, and we were outside the General Assembly protesting. And Hun Sen posted the billboards on his Facebook page, and it turned out three of them were fake, totally fake.

Question?

Once Hun Sen goes, do you expect instability in the sense of fighting among the CPP people for the succession?

Answer:

There could be. First of all, there is instability because the economy is not doing well. And China does not give out money as easily as before because China is in trouble as well. And when the father is no longer there, mistakes will be made, and those who are now very, very upset because they did not get much out of the deal, they and the army and police will say it's time to do something. And Hun Manet can't cut it. His speeches are all over the place. He's not sure of himself, he's not confident. He's all over the place.

Question?

So he does not have the vicious capabilities of Hun Sen?

Answer:

Yes, and he also has to perform well enough so his father is not disappointed. So he's being watched by his father. You really need to show him you have a really strong, decisive mind to make decisions.

