

To Liberate Cambodia

By [Robert J. Burrowes](#)

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A long-standing French protectorate briefly occupied by Japan during World War II, Cambodia became independent in 1953 as the French finally withdrew from Indochina. Under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia remained officially neutral, including during the subsequent US war on Indochina. However, by the mid-1960s, parts of the eastern provinces of Cambodia were bases for North Vietnamese Army and National Liberation Front (NVA/NLF) forces operating against South Vietnam and this resulted in nearly a decade of bombing by the United States from 4 October 1965. See [‘Bombs Over Cambodia: New Light on US Air War’](#).

In 1970 Sihanouk was ousted in a US-supported coup led by General Lon Nol. See [‘A Special Supplement: Cambodia’](#). The following few years were characterized by an internal power struggle between Cambodian elites and war involving several foreign countries, but particularly including continuation of the recently commenced ‘carpet bombing’ of Cambodia by the US Air Force.

On 17 April 1975 the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge, took control of Cambodia. Following four years of ruthless rule by the Chinese-supported Khmer Rouge, initially under Pol Pot, they were defeated by the Vietnamese army in 1979 and the Vietnamese occupation authorities established the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), installing Heng Samrin and other pro-Vietnamese Communist politicians as leaders of the new government. Heng was succeeded by Chan Sy as Prime Minister in 1981.



PM Hun Sen

Following the death of Chan Sy, Hun Sen became Prime Minister of Cambodia in 1985 and, despite a facade of democracy, he and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have been in power ever since. This period has notably included using the army to purge a feared rival in a bloody coup conducted in 1997. Hun Sen's co-Prime Minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, was ousted and fled to Paris while his supporters were arrested, tortured and some were summarily executed.

The current main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) was founded in 2012 by merging the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party. Emblematic of Cambodia's 'democratic' status, more than two dozen opposition members and critics have been locked up in the past year alone and the CNRP leader, Kem Sokha, known for his nonviolent, politically tolerant views, is currently imprisoned at a detention centre in Tboung Khmum Province following his arrest on 3 September 2017 under allegations of treason, espionage and for orchestrating anti-government demonstrations in 2013-2014. These demonstrations were triggered by widespread allegations of electoral fraud during the Cambodian general election of 2013. See [‘Sokha arrested for “treason”, is accused of colluding with US to topple the government’](#).

On 16 November 2017 the CNRP was dissolved by Cambodia's highest court and 118 of its members, including Sokha and exiled former leader Sam Rainsy, were banned from politics for five years.

Cambodian Society

Socially, Cambodia is primarily Khmer with ethnic populations of Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham, Thai and Lao. It has a population of 16 million people. The pre-eminent religion is Buddhism. The adult literacy rate is 75%; few Cambodians speak a European language limiting access to western literature. Most students complete 12 years of (low quality public) school but tertiary enrollment is limited. As in all countries, education (reinforced by state propaganda through the media) serves to intimidate and indoctrinate students into obedience of elites. Discussion of national politics in a school class is taboo and such discussions are rare at tertiary level. This manifests in the narrow range of concerns that mobilize student action: personal outcomes such as employment opportunities. Issues such as those in relation to peace, the environment and refugees do not have a significant profile. In short, the student population generally is neither well informed nor politically engaged.

However, many other issues engage at least some Cambodians, with demonstrations, strikes and street blockades being popular tactics, although the lack of strategy means that outcomes are usually limited and, despite commendable nonviolent discipline in many cases, violent repression is not effectively resisted. Issues of concern to workers, particularly low wages in a country with no minimum wage law, galvanize some response. See, for example, [‘Protests, Strikes Continue in Cambodia: Though their occupations differ, Cambodian workers are united in their push for a living wage’](#). Garment workers are a significant force because their sector is important to the national economy. Land grabbing and lack of housing mobilize many people but usually fail to attract support beyond those effected. See, for example, [‘Housing Activists Clash With Police in Street Protest’](#). Environmental issues, such as deforestation and natural resource depletion, fail to mobilize the support they need to be effective.



Having noted that, however, Cambodian activists require enormous courage to take nonviolent action as the possibility of violent state repression in response to popular mobilization is a real one, as illustrated above and documented in the Amnesty International report [‘Taking to the streets: Freedom of peaceful assembly in Cambodia’](#) from 2015.

Perhaps understandably, given their circumstances, international issues, such as events in the Middle East, North Korea and the plight of the Rohingya in neighbouring Myanmar are beyond the concern of most Cambodians.

Economically, Cambodians produce traditional goods for small local households with industrial production remaining low in a country that is still industrializing. Building on agriculture (especially rice), tourism and particularly the garment industry, which provided the basis for the Cambodian export sector in recent decades, the dictatorship has been encouraging light manufacturing, such as of electronics and auto-parts, by establishing ‘special economic zones’ that allow cheap Cambodian labour to be exploited. Most of the manufacturers are Japanese and despite poor infrastructure (such as lack of roads and port facilities), poor production management, poor literacy and numeracy among the workers, corruption and unreliable energy supplies, Cambodian factory production is slowly rising to play a part in Japan’s regional supply chain. In addition, Chinese investment in the construction sector has grown enormously in recent years and Cambodia is experiencing the common problem of development being geared to serve elite commercial interests and tourists rather than the needs (such as affordable housing) of ordinary people or the environment. See [‘China’s construction bubble may leave Cambodia’s next generation without a home’](#).

Environmentally, Cambodia does little to conserve its natural resources. For example, between 1990 and 2010, Cambodia lost 22% of its forest cover, or nearly 3,000,000 hectares, largely to logging. There is no commitment to gauging environmental impact before construction projects begin and the \$US800m Lower Sesan 2 Dam, in the northeast of the country, has been widely accused of being constructed with little thought given to local residents (who will be evicted or lose their livelihood when the dam reservoir fills) or the project’s environmental impact.

Beyond deforestation (through both legal and illegal logging) then, environmental destruction in Cambodia occurs as a result of large scale construction and agricultural projects which destroy important wildlife habitats, but also through massive (legal and illegal) sand mining – see [‘Shifting Sand: How Singapore’s demand for Cambodian sand threatens ecosystems and undermines good governance’](#) – poaching of endangered and endemic species, with Cambodian businesses and political authorities, as well as foreign criminal syndicates and many transnational corporations from all over the world implicated in the various aspects of this corruptly-approved and executed destruction.

In the words of Cambodian researcher Tay Sovannarun:

‘The government just keeps doing business as usual while the rich cliques keep extracting natural resources and externalizing the cost to the rest of society.’ Moreover, three members of the NGO Mother Nature – Sun Mala, Try Sovikea and Sim Somnang – recently served nearly a year in prison for their efforts to defend the environment and the group was dissolved by the government in

September 2017. See [‘Environmental NGO Mother Nature dissolved’](#).

Cambodian Politics

Politically, Cambodians are largely naïve with most believing that they live in a ‘democracy’ despite the absence of its most obvious hallmarks such as civil and political rights, the separation of powers including an independent judiciary, free and fair elections, the right of assembly and freedom of the press (with the English-language newspaper *The Cambodia Daily* recently closed down along with some radio stations). And this is an accurate assessment of most members of the political leadership of the CNRP as well.

Despite a 30-year record of political manipulation by Hun Sen and the CPP – during which ‘Hun Sen has made it clear that he does not respect the concept of free and fair elections’: see [‘30 Years of Hun Sen: Violence, Repression, and Corruption in Cambodia’](#) – which has included obvious corruption of elections through vote-rigging but also an outright coup in 1997 and the imprisonment or exile of opposition leaders since then, most Cambodians and their opposition leaders still participate in the charade that they live in a ‘democracy’ which could result in the defeat of Hun Sen and the CPP at a ‘free and fair’ election. Of course, there are exceptions to this naïveté, as a 2014 article written by Mu Sochua, veteran Cambodian politician and former minister of women’s affairs in a Hun Sen government, demonstrates. See [‘Crackdown in Cambodia’](#).

Moreover, as Sovannarun has noted: most Cambodians ‘still think international pressure is effective in keeping the CPP from disrespecting democratic principles which they have violated up until this day. Right now they wait for US and EU sanctions in the hope that the CPP will step back.’ See, for example, [‘The Birth of a Dictator’](#). He asks:

‘Even assuming it works, when will Cambodians learn to rely on themselves when the ruling party causes the same troubles again? Are they going to ask for external help like this every time and expect their country to be successfully democratized?’

The problem, Sovannarun argues, is that

‘Cambodians in general do not really understand what democracy is. Their views are very narrow. For them, democracy is just an election. Many news reports refer to people as “voters” but in Khmer, this literally translates as “vote owners” as if people cannot express their rights or power beside voting.’

Fortunately, recent actions by the CPP have led to opposition leaders and some NGOs finally declaring the Hun Sen dictatorship for what it is. See, for example, [‘The Birth of a Dictator’](#). But for Sovannarun,

‘democratization ended in 1997. The country should be regarded as a dictatorship since then. The party that lost the election in 1993 still controlled the national military, the police and security force, and the public administration, eventually using military force to establish absolute control in 1997. How is Cambodia still a democracy?’

However, recent comprehensive research undertaken by Global Witness goes even further. Their report *Hostile Takeover* 'sheds light on a huge network of secret deal-making and corruption that has underpinned Hun Sen's 30-year dictatorial reign of murder, torture and the imprisonment of his political opponents'. See '[Hostile Takeover: The corporate empire of Cambodia's ruling family](#)' and '[Probe: Companies Worth \\$200M Linked to Cambodian PM's Family](#)'.

So what are the prospects of liberating Cambodia from its dictatorship?



Mu Sochua after her verdict by Court on 4 August 2009. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

To begin, there is little evidence to suggest that leadership for any movement to do so will come from within formal political ranks. Following the court-ordered dissolution of the CNRP on 16 November 2017 – see '[Cambodia top court dissolves main opposition CNRP party](#)' – at the behest of Hun Sen, 'half of their 55 members of parliament fled the country'. And this dissolution was preceded by actions that had effectively neutralized the opposition, with two dozen opposition members (including CNRP leader Kem Sokha) and critics imprisoned in the past year alone, as reported above, and the rapid flight of Opposition Deputy President Mu Sochua on 3 October after allegedly being notified by a senior official that her arrest was imminent. See '[Breaking: CNRP's Mu Sochua flees country following "warning" of arrest](#)'. But while Mu Sochua called for a protest gathering after she had fled, understandably, nobody dared to protest: 'Who dares to protest if their leader runs for their life?' Sovannarun asks.

Of course, civil society leadership is fraught with danger too. Prominent political commentator and activist Kem Ley, known for his trenchant criticism of the Hun Sen dictatorship, was assassinated on 10 July 2016 in Phnom Penh. See '[Shooting Death of Popular Activist Roils Cambodia](#)' and '[Q&A With Kem Ley: Transparency on Hun Sen Family's Business Interests is Vital](#)'. Ley was the third notable activist to be killed following the union leader Chea Vichea in 2004 – see '[Who Killed Chea Vichea?](#)' – and environmental activist Wutty Chut in 2012. See '[Cambodian Environmental Activist Is Slain](#)'. But they are not the

only activists to suffer this fate.

In addition, plenty of politicians, journalists and activists have been viciously assaulted by the security forces and members of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit – see, for example, [‘Dragged and Beaten: The Cambodian Government’s Role in the October 2015 Attack on Opposition Politicians’](#) – and/or imprisoned by the dictatorship. See [‘Cambodia: Quash Case Against 11 Opposition Activists: No Legal Basis for Trumped-Up Charges, Convictions, and Long Sentences’](#). In fact, Radio Free Asia keeps a record of [‘Cambodian Opposition Politicians and Activists Behind Bars’](#) for activities that the dictatorship does not like, including defending human rights, land rights and the natural environment.

Moreover, in another recent measure of the blatant brutality of the dictatorship, Hun Sen publicly suggested that opposition politicians Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha ‘would already be dead’ had he known they were promising to ‘organise a new government’ in the aftermath of the highly disputed 2013 national election result. See [‘Rainsy and Sokha “would already be dead”: PM’](#). He also used a government-produced video to link the CNRP with US groups in fomenting a ‘colour revolution’ in Cambodia. See [‘Government ups plot accusations with new video linking CNRP and US groups to “colour revolutions”’](#).

In one response to Hun Sen's ‘would already be dead’ statement, British human rights lawyer Richard Rogers, who had filed a complaint asking the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate the Cambodian ruling elite for widespread human rights violations in 2014, commented that it was simply more evidence of the government's willingness to persecute political dissidents. ‘It shows that he is willing to order the murder of his own people if they challenge his rule’. Moreover: ‘These are not the words of a modern leader who claims to lead a democracy.’ See [‘Rainsy and Sokha “would already be dead”: PM’](#). Whether Hun Sen is even sane is a question that no-one asks.

So what can Cambodians do? Fortunately, there is a long history of repressive regimes being overthrown by nonviolent grassroots movements. And nonviolent action has proven powerfully effective in Cambodia as the Buddhist monk Maha Gosananda, and his supporters demonstrated on their 19-day peace walk from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh through war ravaged Khmer Rouge territory in Cambodia in May 1993, defying the expectations of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) coordinators at the time that they would be killed by the Khmer Rouge. See [‘Maha Gosananda, a true peace maker’](#). However, for the Hun Sen dictatorship to be removed, Cambodians will be well served by a thoughtful and comprehensive strategy that takes particular account of their unique circumstances.

A framework to plan and implement a strategy to remove the dictatorship is explained in [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#) with Sovannarun's [Khmer translation of this strategy](#) here.

This strategic framework explains what is necessary to remove the dictatorship and, among consideration of many vital issues, elaborates what is necessary to maintain strategic coordination when leaders are at high risk of assassination, minimize the risk of violent repression while also *ensuring that the movement is not hijacked by government or foreign provocateurs whose purpose is to subvert the movement by destroying its nonviolent character* – see, for example, [‘Nonviolent Action: Minimizing the Risk of Violent Repression’](#) – as well as deal with foreign governments (such as those of China, the European Union, Japan and the USA) who (categorically or by inaction) support the dictatorship, sometimes by

supplying military weapons suitable for use against the domestic population.

Sovannarun is not optimistic about the short-term prospects for his country: Too many mistakes have been repeated too often. But he is committed to the nonviolent struggle to liberate Cambodia from its dictatorship and recognizes that the corrupt electoral process cannot restore democracy or enable Cambodians to meaningfully address the vast range of social, political, economic and environmental challenges they face.

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