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Cambodia

A Bitter Partnership is Breaking Down

- IV Online magazine - 1997 - IV289 - June 1997 -

Publication date: Tuesday 3 June 1997

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Cambodia's weak coalition government is falling apart and political violence is increasing. National elections are scheduled for November 1998, but local elections have been delayed indefinitely. As Ken Davis explains, the economy is a disaster, with most of national income coming from illegal logging, smuggling, and foreign aid programmes.

The Cambodian Peoples' Party, now led by one of the country's two Prime Ministers Hun Sen, lost the 1993 UN-organised elections (which cost \$2 bn.). But it refused to cede power, and joined a coalition with the winners, the royalist FUNCINPEC party, and the minority Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party.

Increasingly however both parties and both prime ministers present themselves as opponents. FUNCINPEC, led by first Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh, complains that the CCP has never really shared power. The royalists recently formed a National United Front, with smaller parties, including the Khmer Nation Party, led by Sam Rainsy, the most prominent of Cambodia's dissident politicians.

After invoking Cambodia's "eternal struggle" against the Vietnamese, even the ex-Khmer Rouges group led by Ieng Sary gave support to the front. Sary, once Pol Pot's number two, but now amnestied claims that only a few hundred people were killed during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-79), and that he knew nothing about it.

Support in low and high places

Meanwhile, the Cambodian People's Party benefits from strong bases of support in several provinces, in the state administration, police and army, as an inheritance from their decade as governing Communist Party. Party leader Hun Sen is a talented orator, who travels the country addressing large gatherings of poor peasants, denouncing his foes, announcing the building of schools and clinics, and distributing gifts. The CPP has also formed an alliance with small parties and defectors from FUNCINPEC.

Hun Sen also has powerful backers in the Sino-Khmer bourgeoisie. Men like Theng Bun Ma, Cambodia's richest man, president of the Chamber of Commerce. On 7 April, shot out the tires of the Royal Air Cambodge plane after airport staff "lost" his \$5,000 excess baggage, to avoid an embarrassing drug search.

There was widespread fear of an armed confrontation on 14 April (Khmer new year), when Prince Sirivuddh, ex-Foreign Minister, attempted to return from exile in France. He was exiled a year ago after being accused of conspiring to kill Hun Sen (who says he will shoot down any plane trying to bring the Prince home).

Two days later, troops loyal to FUNCINPEC surrounded the airport, guarding First Prime Minister Ranariddh against a rumoured coup by Hun Sen.

Grenades signal death of coalition

The March 30th grenade attack on protesters outside the Silver Pagoda and National Assembly buildings drew world attention to the worsening confrontation between the two main parties in the Coalition government.

The 200-strong protest for independence of the judiciary was organised by Sam Rainsy, head of the Kmer Nation

Party, and FUNCINPEC finance minister until his expulsion in 1994. Four hand grenades, thrown by people on foot and on motorcycles, killed 19 people and wounded over 100 others, many very seriously. Several were young women garment worker activists, That evening, just metres down the road from the blood stains, Queen Monineath hosted a party at the palace for international guests at the South East Asian Biennial Film Festival.

Rainsy blamed co-Prime Minister Hun Sen, saying that unidentified soldiers, presumably the Prime Minister's guards, allowed the grenade throwers to leave in the direction of the CPP leadership compound, but prevented those trying to pursue them.

Hun Sen, while "vehemently condemning" the attack, threatened to arrest Rainsy for "provoking" the violence. Police even prevented mourners laying wreaths at the site of the attack.

Who will be King?

Adding to this instability has been the increasing tension about who will succeed the ailing King Sihanouk. Any prince of any of the three royal lines can be selected by the six member Throne Council. The most likely candidates are FUNCINPEC leader Prince Ranariddh (Sihanouk's son), and the exiled Prince Sirivuddh (Shanouk's half-brother). But in mid-February, Sihanouk, from his home in Beijing, announced he might abdicate (again), ending the monarchy.

Suspecting that Sihanouk might revive his own political party and run for office, Hun Sen then threatened to cancel the elections, or at least prevent members of the royal family from taking part in politics.

Prince Sirivuddh's attempt to return to Cambodia provoked a split in FUNCINPEC with two governors and twelve parliamentarians joining the CCP alliance, giving Hun Sen majority support in the 120-member Assembly for the first time. Rumor has it that the defectors were given \$10,000 each, cars and other gifts.

The CCP has been able to strengthen the apparatus, and exacerbate the disarray of ten right-wing parties, but it offers no programme for Cambodia's development, other than that of the free market and foreign investment.

From his Beijing home, King Sihanouk has called for a "hardline Revolution" to overcome the "division, corruption, governmental, administrative and military disorganisation, permanent deforestation, trafficking of all kinds, wild capitalism, the systematic destruction of national resources, the irreversible 'de facto' partition of the State, the decline of moral values at the heart of society, [and] the irresistible advance of AIDS".

Rainsy capitalises on workers' struggle

The King is not the only politician willing to rail against corruption and exploitation. In his war against "the Communists" (CCP) Sam Rainsy also demands an end to foreign aid, which provides \$500 million each year, matching the national budget of \$580 million. He also called for the regional co-operation group ASEAN to delay the admission of Cambodia, which is planned to coincide with that of Laos and Burma in July, when the ASEAN foreign ministers gather in Kuala Lumpur.

Sam Rainsy calls for an end to corruption capture deep levels of popular urban frustration. In an effort to establish a

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firmer electoral base, Sam Rainsy and his wife, Tioulong Saumura, have thrown themselves into organising and speaking for the garment workers. Rainsy, a former right-wing Finance Minister, and champion of the free market and Western interests, now pledges loyalty to downtrodden workers, and is attempting to re-position his Khmer Nation Party as social-democratic.