

By Dylan Hendrickson

Institutions versus personalities:

International peacebuilding dilemmas

Given the serious outstanding differences between the four Khmer factions at the time of the 1991 political settlement, transforming the ceasefire in force into a viable peace was going to be a difficult, delicate and long-term task. In recognition of this, various 'safeguards' were envisaged by the Paris agreements to prevent a return to the violence and disorder of the past. These safeguards were informed by two broad assumptions:

First, with no faction in a position to win outright power militarily, due to a halt in outside assistance, each could seek to strengthen its political position by electoral means. The risks of renewed violence would thus be constrained by the functioning of Cambodia's fledgling parliamentary system — the 'internal' safeguard. Second, due to the deep and persisting distrust between the factions, a neutral, firm and committed international community would be called upon to facilitate, finance and otherwise ensure that the terms of the final settlement were respected by all the factions — the 'external' safeguard.

The problem with these safeguards was that they assumed more goodwill from both the faction leaders and the international community than was forthcoming or indeed realistic at the time. Despite the UN's success in organising the 1993 elections, its contribution fell far short of laying the groundwork for the kinds of political institutions needed to attenuate Cambodia's destructive brand of personality-based politics. With the UN's departure, almost all power — and the fate of the fragile peace itself — remained concentrated in the hands of the governing CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition, subject to the whims and weaknesses of the party leaders and the deep-seated tensions between them.

Although the Paris agreements made liberal reference to a post-election international role to consolidate peace in Cambodia, as much emphasis was placed on preventing outside interference in the country's 'sovereign' affairs after 1993. Despite the fact that Cambodia has continued to benefit from vast amounts of international assistance for the purposes of reconstruction, there has been no effective mechanism to link this aid to the kinds of

Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen

Source: David van der Veen



political changes needed to build peace. This has called into question the international community's ability to decisively influence the democratic transition or to prevent crises such as the July 1997 overthrow of Prince Ranariddh.

Fragmentation of responsibility

It is worth recalling that the Paris agreements came about in large part due to the strong international consensus which existed in 1991 on the need to bring to an end Cambodia's war. Similarly, it was this solid consensus which underpinned the ambitious and intrusive character of UNTAC's peacekeeping mandate, conceived by some in terms as grand as 'nation-building'. When UNTAC's mission ended abruptly in late 1993, collective international responsibility for Cambodia was rapidly downgraded and fragmented.

This is not to say that the continuing threat to Cambodia's stability was not recognised. Indeed, a November 1993 UN Security Council resolution called for the appointment of a person to "coordinate the UN presence in Cambodia, in accordance with the spirit and

principles of the Paris agreement". However, even before the Secretary General's Representative in Cambodia (SGRC) had arrived, this mandate was modified by the UN General Assembly which rejected a proposal for 'integrated offices' combining UNDP and political functions. Some countries felt that combining development aid with the pressure to promote human rights and democracy would have given the SGRC undue power.

The mandate of the SGRC was therefore confined to 'preventive diplomacy' with responsibility for coordinating international assistance given to the UNDP's Resident Coordinator. In the absence of strong backing of UN member states or a clear or pro-active peacebuilding strategy from New York, the status of the SGRC vis-a-vis the Royal Government, the Resident Coordinator and other ambassadors was poorly defined. The SGRC's role thus remained low key, consisting essentially of monitoring political developments, maintaining dialogue with the Royal Government and reporting back to the Secretary General, with no mandate to mediate in the event that serious problems arose.

As a consequence, the primary emphasis of international engagement with Cambodia effectively shifted to reconstruction. Besides the ten UN donor agencies working in Cambodia, there were also numerous international NGOs and various governments which were providing considerable assistance. This covered a wide range of development and humanitarian-oriented activities in support of efforts to rebuild the country's damaged physical infrastructure, alleviate poverty, promote multi-party politics and hasten Cambodia's complex transition from a centrally-planned to a market-driven economy. These activities could be seen as key elements of a longer-term peacebuilding strategy which would help tackle the underlying economic, social and institutional factors driving Cambodia's conflict.

With some US \$1.5 billion channelled into Cambodia between 1993-98, foreign aid came to represent more than half the national budget and was potentially an important tool with which to influence government policy. In the absence of a framework through which this instrument could effectively be used, however, it was rarely taken out of the 'toolbox'. Crucially after 1993, any international potential to influence political events in Cambodia would depend on integrated action and consensus on peacebuilding priorities, which was in short supply among the foreign countries involved in Cambodia at the time.

There were nonetheless important short- and long-term reasons why countries should seriously consider using the leverage offered to them by their aid and the Paris agreements to influence political events in Cambodia. In the first case, with political tensions still high in the coalition government and with none of the factions having demobilised their armies, there was a very real risk of renewed violence which would undermine all that had been achieved. In the second, any hope of consolidating Cambodia's peace in the long-term was linked to the success of the democratic transition. Unless the international community was willing to demonstrate that democratic ideals were worth upholding by taking action, when

serious human rights abuses occurred or constitutional provisions were blatantly flouted, democracy would lose legitimacy in the eyes of Cambodians themselves.

Aid conditionalities

Without attempts to link financial and technical assistance with political changes to strengthen the peace, the effectiveness of international peacebuilding would therefore be diminished. The option of using political conditionalities to influence government policies nonetheless raised many dilemmas for countries, not least of which was that politicising aid would be perceived as a violation of Cambodia's sovereignty.

The principle dilemma was that for political conditionalities to be effective in influencing government policy, countries would need to act in unison. This required agreements on what kinds of conditions should be placed on aid, at what point sanctions should be used, and what the ultimate objectives of such actions were to be. Consensus was hard to achieve because certain countries had their own political reasons for not wanting to place undue pressure on Cambodia's government while others were ambivalent about what was happening in the country. With increasing international aid being channelled into Cambodia through NGOs, a related problem was that cutting this assistance would have a limited effect on government policy.

This points to a second dilemma which was often used to argue against placing conditions on the use of aid: if it was cut, even temporarily, this would have both short- and long-term consequences on stability. First, because much aid underpinned efforts to alleviate Cambodia's extreme poverty, sanctions could have serious humanitarian consequences and heighten social tensions. Second, many long-term programmes being supported by aid such as administrative reform were crucial to the success of the democratic transition and, if halted, would jeopardise future political stability. It was thus difficult to achieve agreement between aid administrators and

diplomats on the point at which aid should be cut, if at all, to further political objectives.

A final dilemma regarded the question of how far the international community could legitimately intervene in Cambodia's affairs given the legacy of foreign involvement in Cambodia and the clear provisions made in the Paris agreements to prevent a repeat of this. The question of intervention was far from clear-cut because the agreements also made the international community guarantors of the peace plan. It was clearly in the spirit of the agreements that the international community should act in the face of a serious threat to the peace even if the agreements were rather vague regarding the kinds of actions to be taken.

A clear line needed to be drawn, based on an appreciation of the provisions contained within both the Paris agreements and Cambodia's Constitution, defining which kinds of intervention could be justified. Nurturing democracy is a slow and complex process which has to take into account Cambodia's complex cultural and historical circumstances. There is therefore a danger of imposing outside priorities on the direction, form or speed of this political change. At the same time, however, there are very clear areas which are not open to negotiation: these include respect for basic human rights and the rule of law. By responding consistently when blatant violations occur, the international community's actions would also serve to strengthen Cambodia's nascent democratic institutions by bolstering their legitimacy.

When political tensions grew sharply between Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen in 1996, most countries preferred to express their concerns privately to the government. These diplomatic initiatives lacked collective force and the messages conveyed were often not in harmony with one another. While aid programmes, tourism and private investment ushered in a period of rapid economic growth, the outside world stood by as the factions again resorted to violence to resolve their differences.

Human rights: slipping mandates

The failure to protect human rights provides the clearest example of where the international community fell short of taking strong action, after 1993, to keep the peace process on track. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) was mandated by the Paris agreements to monitor Cambodia's human rights situation following UNTAC's departure and to provide technical assistance to the government in promoting human rights.

Between 1994-96 the local UNHCHR office at times took a critical stand on government policies which resulted in threats from the co-Prime Ministers to close it down. In 1997, human rights abuses mounted dramatically when 16 people demonstrating against the government were killed in a grenade attack in front of the National Assembly. This was followed by the extra-judicial killings of some 40 military advisers of deposed Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh following the July coup, meticulously investigated and documented by the UN rapporteur for human rights, Thomas Hammarberg, in which people close to Hun Sen were implicated.

Yet to date it has not been possible for the international community to translate this evidence of human rights abuse into sufficiently strong pressure by UN member countries to see justice served. It has been felt by some countries that to take too strong a line against the government would compromise the international community's ability to maintain a human rights presence in Cambodia. At the same time, however, in the absence of strong actions condemning human rights abuses this inevitably strengthens Cambodia's tradition of power politics.

Accommodating the strongman

The events following the July coup brought home most clearly the extent of the international community's disengagement from Cambodia since 1993. In spite of clear signs that tensions were threatening to erupt violently, little concerted international action was taken to avert the fighting. In the aftermath, the official Security Council statement was surprisingly mild, calling for no specific action on the part of the UN. With no official reaction from either China or Russia, this left initiatives in the hands of ASEAN, Japan, the US and EU.

Divisions within the international community were heightened, with the US threatening to treat Cambodia as a pariah state because of Hun Sen, and other nations such as France choosing to overlook human rights abuses. Cambodia was receiving confusing signals at a time when clarity was needed (see box opposite). Just as the lack of consensus had created conditions favouring Hun Sen's coup by leaving him confident that concerted international condemnation would not be forthcoming, after the coup it gave him a certain freedom to consolidate his position.

The July events left many countries torn between their stated commitment to the Paris agreements on the one hand, and growing ambivalence regarding events in Cambodia on the other. Temporary and partial cuts in international assistance were made and Cambodia was deprived of its UN seat and entry into ASEAN. Few countries were eager to see the unwieldy pre-July 1997 power-sharing arrangement restored, nor were there any easy options. The new reality was accepted and Hun Sen was instructed to respect human rights and ensure that 'free and fair' elections took place, as scheduled in 1998 with Ranariddh's participation.

The main opposition to Hun Sen's consolidation of power in the run-up to the elections would come from the US, whose call for a 'principled' democratic line conflicted with the more pragmatic stance adopted by other coun-

tries including Australia, China, Japan and members of ASEAN and the EU.

At this point the gap between the rhetoric of many members of the international community, which professed a strong commitment to democracy in Cambodia, and their actions on the ground, became glaring. Hun Sen was completely dependent on international assistance to organise the elections and turned to both the EU and Japan which between them provided US \$18 million in support. While both insisted that this assistance was conditional on the establishment of a neutral political environment in order for 'free and fair' elections to take place, no clear benchmarks were established to determine when assistance might be cut.

With stability also seen as key to development, and Hun Sen's iron grip the best way to ensure stability, the blatant perversion of the 1998 electoral process became an acceptable 'cost'. Elections seemed the only solution to the crisis which those in favour of stability and democracy could agree on. As in 1993, this would enable the establishment of a 'legitimate' government — at least in the eyes of the international community — which could be supported without too many awkward questions asked. As in 1993, few countries were willing to confront the contradictions inherent in their policies, not least of which was that by accepting Hun Sen's victory under the shadow of widespread political intimidation and allegations of fraud, they were delegitimising the very democratic process they were trying to promote.

This rhetoric of 'democracy' versus 'stability' adopted by the international community masked not only different national interests but also shared constraints on how to influence policy in Cambodia. In practical terms, support for human rights and democracy was increasingly tempered by a pragmatic acceptance of certain political realities: the slowness of democracy to take root, the lack of political will to make the changes needed, and the apparent need for a 'strongman' to rule the country in order to avoid renewed conflict.