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Selective principles, confusing signals: *French and US policy on Cambodia*

Although France and the US no longer have significant strategic interests in Cambodia, their long involvement in Vietnam has conditioned their roles in Cambodia in contrasting ways, at times exacerbating, if not directly contributing to internal political tensions.

Courting Vietnam

France was seen to have 'saved' Cambodia from the hegemonic tendencies of its neighbours with the establishment of its protectorate in 1887, though its strategic interest in Southeast Asia has always revolved around Vietnam and continues to do so. The strong attraction Vietnam holds economically for France means that its efforts to promote good relations with Vietnam as well as to restore French influence over its Indochinese colonial empire have strongly influenced its policy on Cambodia.

Following Cambodia's international isolation during the 1980s, France was the first major Western power to restore relations with the Hun Sen regime by re-opening its Phnom Penh embassy in 1991. France led the rally to declare Hun Sen's victory in the 1993 elections and, in spite of Prince Ranariddh's surprise victory, the perceived threat he posed to French relations with Vietnam means that Hun Sen remains in favour. This relationship was clearly illustrated by France's muted response to both the July coup and Hun Sen's 1998 electoral victory under widespread allegations of fraud.

Punishing Vietnam

The US response to the July coup was also heavily influenced by its historical role in Vietnam, one which still casts a long and painful shadow. Though the initial response by the US Embassy in Phnom Penh was also muted and likely interpreted by Hun Sen as an indication that the US would not take sides, the US State Department soon came under domestic pressure to condemn the 'communist dictator' Hun Sen. Although the US has sought stronger ties with Vietnam in recent years as part of its policy of normalising relations, allowing Vietnam the moral victory of seeing its 'man' Hun Sen retain power was a step too far for right-wing elements within the American Congress still intent on punishing Vietnam for the war.

Congress' action forced the State Department to take a strong line, to cut all but essential humanitarian assistance to Cambodia, and to pressure Hun

Sen to allow Prince Ranariddh's participation in the July elections. Although unhappy with Ranariddh for his failings as Prime Minister, strong US political backing was provided for him in exile which, along with the support of other countries, was a crucial lifeline for FUNCINPEC. While the first serious attempt to use political conditionalities, there was a danger that it was based on a simplistic assumption about how democracy should be supported in Cambodia. At the same time, it also raised the spectre of partisan involvement by the US in Cambodia's affairs, reminiscent of the Cold War.

Hollow principles

The US position contrasted sharply with France's unwillingness to condemn the July events and their pragmatic argument that 'stability' should take precedence given the 'new political reality' in Cambodia. The lack of consensus between the two camps was not lost on Hun Sen, and was also evident before the coup. Furthermore, persisting tensions between Prince Ranariddh's Cabinet and the French Embassy, tensions which were often publicly, though not officially, expressed by both sides, also reassured Hun Sen that the response to his violent ouster of Prince Ranariddh would not be universally condemnatory. This proved to be true.

While the US role was key in bringing about Prince Ranariddh's participation in the elections, the limits of its principled approach soon became evident. With the refusal of the EU and Japan to place conditions on their electoral assistance, the capacity of the US to take a strong stand in influencing how the elections were conducted was diminished. While the US also publicly distanced itself from the Joint International Observation Group's premature decision to certify the elections as 'free and fair', the overwhelming response of other countries in support of it again undermined its position.

The ambiguity of the US position after the elections highlights the limits of a principled approach in dealing with Cambodia's problems when it is not adhered to consistently or when other countries do not adopt it. Without a search for greater international consensus, there is the very real risk that the policies of countries like France and the US — no matter how 'pragmatic' or 'principled' — will be seen to mask the pursuit of national interests. ■

Recognising harsh realities

In the absence of greater efforts to enable Cambodia's political institutions in line with the spirit of the Constitution, international policies unwittingly support political personalities, whether so-called 'democrats' or 'strongmen'. Moreover, with the international spotlight on the differences between Cambodia's political camps, the difficulties of governing are easily downplayed resulting in simplistic prescriptions for bringing about political change.

The reality is that behind the formal trappings of democracy in present-day Cambodia, such as the National Assembly, is a political system based on factional politics, hierarchy and personalised rule. The hostility between the so-called 'democrats' and 'communists' disguises a high degree of war-weariness and general agreement on running the state along free-market and democratic lines. The question is: who should control the process of liberalisation?

The 'winner-take all' attitude underlying Cambodia's political culture is reinforced by the attitude that 'if you are not with us, you are with them'. This attitude is ingrained in the psyche of Cambodia's politicians, including many of those — particularly of the older generations — who have spent time in exile. This undermines cooperation and dialogue and also makes it difficult for more far-sighted Cambodians or external diplomats to play the role of a neutral mediator. In a climate of heightened competition and acute distrust, there is little incentive for transparency in decision-making, much less consensus-building.

Underlying these patterns of political interaction in Cambodia is the crucial role played by resources. Maintaining power is dependent on the ability of politicians to deliver patronage to their supporters in exchange for loyalty. All political leaders — of all political persuasions — are forced to play this card to stay in power. The past five years show that beneath the surface many of the so-called 'democrats' in the

opposition differ little from their CPP counterparts, in the way they play the political game even if their stated intentions are better.

The failure of the opposition parties to work together during 1993-97 is a sad indictment of their lack of success — if not commitment — in promoting the new, more inclusive way of politics in which they profess to believe. Moreover, the massive corruption involving some within FUNCINPEC during their time in power cannot be overlooked. Yet when these problems are seen by outsiders simply as causes of Cambodia's problems rather than as symptoms of its dysfunctional institutions, this masks the real challenge of strengthening political institutions.

In the absence of easy explanations for problems, outsiders often have a tendency to blame current Cambodian politicians for a 'lack of political will' as an explanation for what is going wrong. To the extent that the accusations frequently levelled at Prince Ranariddh for being 'an incompetent ruler' or at Hun Sen for being 'drunk with power' are accurate, this emphasises the need to see the creation of political will as an important peacebuilding goal in itself, rather than falling into the trap of assuming that it already exists and can simply be called upon.

The common tendency within the international community to search for a new 'personality' to lead Cambodia out of its troubles therefore seems like an excuse to overlook the dilemmas they will face once in power. A good example of this is the case of Sam Rainsy, considered by some to be the future hope of Cambodian politics. Young and energetic, he has the image of a reformer, and is adept at wielding the language of democracy. While he enjoys a certain popularity and demonstrated real strengths as Finance Minister from 1993-95, the extreme political positions he at times adopts have been interpreted by some as an indication that he is just another politician with a winner-take-all mentality.

Whether Sam Rainsy is better or worse than other Cambodian politicians is perhaps not the

key issue; the question is rather what can be done to ensure that he, or other people who hold power, are able to fulfil their constitutional responsibilities effectively. Without greater efforts to look beyond personalities and seek to influence the institutions which both shape and constrain the actions of Cambodia's leaders, international peacebuilding efforts will fall far short of laying the groundwork for a more stable, institution-based peace.

Engaging more constructively

While there is a genuine long-term need in Cambodia to restore some sort of balance between opposition parties such as FUNCINPEC which seem to enjoy more popular legitimacy, though lack power, and the CPP which currently enjoys more power than popular legitimacy, this must be done by supporting the political institutions upon which democracy resides. Without consensus within the international community on when, whether or how aid should be linked to progress on issues such as democracy and human rights, and a willingness to act, the democratic changes being promoted will not be sustainable.

There is nothing inherently undemocratic about Cambodian culture, though many Cambodians have lost faith in their country's ability to surmount the huge obstacles which lay ahead. While this has contributed to an apparent reluctance among some to challenge the system, it belies the fact that there are many individuals who are actively breaking the mould. Often from a younger generation, these are people who have lived in exile and returned to join either the CPP or opposition parties like FUNCINPEC. Their exposure to more mature democracies has equipped them to exert a positive political influence over leaders who have for too long expected and received the unquestioning loyalty of their fol-

lowers. These progressive Cambodians need to be identified and supported.

This nonetheless presents unique challenges for countries wary of further 'interfering' in Cambodia's political problems. Insofar as constructive engagement implies a more interventionist approach, this will only be acceptable – and consent will only be forthcoming from Cambodians themselves – if the international community is seen to adopt a more united and consistent approach. This not only means matching their rhetoric of democracy with concrete actions to promote it, but also making better use of the wide range of political tools at their disposal. ■



Source: Jean-Paul Jaslet

Pro-democracy demonstrators, Phnom Penh, September 98