

Cambodia

Accord 5 (1998) 'Safeguarding peace: Cambodia's constitutional challenge'

Abstract

During the 1980s women constituted 60 per cent of the Cambodian population; more than half were principal breadwinners. The article describes how during the 1980s and 1990s women's social activism – which included caring for war orphans, running a literacy campaign and setting up a system of cooperatives – evolved into a political role after the Paris peace conference of 1991. The women's

movement lobbied for greater recognition of women's rights and worked to promote a broad social development agenda focused on the neglected rural majority. Despite gaining parliamentary seats, women found it difficult to break into politics due to the heavy socio-economic demands placed upon them and prevailing views of traditional gender roles.

Background

As the Vietnam War spilled over into Cambodia in the late 1960s, the country was launched into a 30-year period of conflict and social upheaval shaped by regional Cold War dynamics and oppressive national rule.

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge took over the country. Headed by Pol Pot and inspired by Mao's China, its brand of utopian socialism led to the purging of Cambodia's educated classes. The population was systematically driven into the countryside to begin establishing a collectivised agricultural system. Between April 1975 and January 1979, 1.5 million Cambodians died from malnutrition, overwork and disease, while at least 200,000 others were executed without trial as 'class enemies'. The Khmer Rouge was eventually swept from power in 1979 by the Vietnamese. The resulting People's Republic of Kampuchea, backed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union, spent the next 10 years defending its rule against a US-sponsored tripartite resistance – comprising the Khmer Rouge, the royalist FUNCINPEC and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front.

Talks between resistance factions and the government began in 1987 with extensive international involvement. The resulting Paris Peace Accords of 1991 had two main objectives: to end international involvement in Cambodia,

and ensure all factions relinquished their weapons and took part in the political process. The UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established in early 1992 to oversee implementation of the agreements and elections. It functioned as the country's governing authority until its mandate ended in 1993. It also provided space and opportunities for the growth of civil society: NGOs, community-based civic groups, and grass-roots networks.

Implementation proved difficult in a country with no tradition of political power-sharing and a peace process driven by international pressure rather than national reconciliation. Although elections in 1993 saw an 89 per cent turnout and were hailed a success internationally, factions remained armed and fighting continued. The Khmer Rouge's power declined significantly, but other factions were able to use the power-sharing arrangements to pursue their own interests unchecked. In 1997, a coup by the Cambodian People's Party, led by Hun Sen, dislodged Prince Ranariddh and his FUNCINPEC party from government, leaving Hun Sen in complete control of the state. In 1998, the year the Accord article was written, internationally sponsored elections took place once again but negotiations over the formation of a new government remained deadlocked.

Cambodian women in politics: breaking through the traditional image

Mu Sochua

Mu Sochua has been a leading human rights advocate for over 25 years, and is a prominent member of Cambodia's leading opposition party, the Sam Rainsy Party. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 and touted by the *New York Times* in 2010 as 'part of a new generation of women who are working their way into the political systems of countries across

Asia and elsewhere'. Since her return to Cambodia in 1990 she has worked to promote women's rights, founding Khemara – the first indigenous NGO in Cambodia. She has been influential on issues of human trafficking, child abuse, domestic violence, worker exploitation and corruption. She was appointed Head of the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs in 1998.

The socio-economic burdens of Cambodia's transition from three decades of upheaval to relative peace have been disproportionately shouldered by its women. Along with unequal access to educational opportunities and persisting cultural biases, this has proved a formidable obstacle to Khmer women seeking a more active role in public life.

Women as mass mobilisers

During the 1980s Cambodian women played a major role in the revitalisation of their society. Shattered by the long war and the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodia suffered further from the international isolation of its new Vietnamese-backed government. At this time, women accounted for some 60% of the population. One third of them were widows. More than half were also the principal breadwinners in their families.

Led by the Women's association of Cambodia, women were behind a nation-wide literacy campaign. They also took the lead in caring for the thousands of war orphans and in developing a nationwide system of cooperatives to regenerate local social and economic activity. With women still struggling to meet their families' daily needs, however, only a very few became active in formal politics.

A timid political awakening

The 1991 Paris peace agreements opened the way for Cambodian women to play a greater political role than ever before. The proliferation of indigenous NGOs (some 300 to date, of which over 40 have a women's agenda) marked an important step forward. Khemara, Cambodia's first indigenous NGO, was founded by a small group of women dedicated to a society based on democratic and gender-balanced principles. The fledgling NGO-based women's movement became involved in addressing domestic violence and sexual exploitation and also lobbied for specific articles in the Constitution to ensure greater recognition of their rights.

At the same time, Cambodian women have worked to promote a broader social and human development agenda for Cambodia's reconstruction. This reflects a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of Cambodia's deeply divided society with a particular focus on its largely neglected rural majority. In a society marked by open displays of violence, the peacebuilding approaches of women, involving

diverse initiatives such as peace rallies and petitions, stand out from the more confrontational tendencies of men and student groups.

Through their experience as social activists, women have come to realise that overcoming gender-biased policies will demand a more active political role as well as broader changes in Cambodia's male-dominated society. After the 1993 elections, seven women joined the 120-seat National Assembly and a Ministry of Women's Affairs was created. At the same time, however, virtually no women won posts in the provincial, district and commune-level administrations. While there were twice as many female candidates in the 1998 elections, they still represented just ten per cent of the total at this level.

Changing mindsets

The lack of women in official posts masks more enduring problems in Cambodian society. Even when women are elected to official positions, they still face difficulties in breaking into the 'boys' club' and playing a real role in decision-making processes. Behind the formal trappings of the parliamentary system, this still occurs informally in a largely male-dominated world. Here elections and politics are often interpreted narrowly as a means of settling disputes rather than as an opportunity to debate and advance issues linked to broader national interests.

The ability of women to make their voices heard is further undermined by traditional cultural biases against women. Women are still expected to be more soft-spoken than men, and many Cambodians see the maintenance of gender relations which discriminate against women as crucial to the preservation of the Khmer cultural identity. Few Cambodian political parties, despite their claims, have seriously invested in programmes to help women move out of their traditional gender roles. Along with fears of intimidation and a lack of formal education, this saps the confidence of many women.

The huge socio-economic demands still placed on Cambodian women are perhaps the greatest obstacle militating against their greater political role. While there is still a long way to go before women enjoy the full fruits of equality, their growing involvement in Cambodia's political life has injected a new vitality into it and placed a greater emphasis on social issues.