



Hun Sen's Cambodia

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To many in the West, the name Cambodia still conjures up indelible images of destruction and death, the legacy of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and the terror it inflicted in its attempt to create a communist utopia in the 1970s. Sebastian Strangio, a journalist based in the capital city of Phnom Penh, now offers an eye-opening appraisal of modern-day Cambodia in the years following its emergence from bitter conflict and bloody upheaval.

In the early 1990s, Cambodia became the focus of the UN's first great post-Cold War nation-building project, with billions in international aid rolling in to support the fledgling democracy. But since the UN-supervised elections in 1993, the nation has slipped steadily backward into neo-authoritarian rule under Prime Minister Hun Sen. Behind a mirage of democracy, ordinary people have few rights and corruption infuses virtually every facet of everyday life. In this lively and compelling study, the first of its kind, Strangio explores the present state of Cambodian society under Hun Sen's leadership, painting a vivid portrait of a nation struggling to reconcile the promise of peace and democracy with a violent and tumultuous past.

Hun Sen's Cambodia Details

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From Reader Review Hun Sen's Cambodia for online ebook

Alyssa Casey says

Really great overview of Cambodia's political situation during the last few decades. And how certain prominent figures rose to power. Recommended reading for anyone living or working in Cambodia. Or anyone wanting to understand the country.

Philip says

Hun Sen's Cambodia is an evocation and explanation of contemporary Cambodia, a country synonymous with its leader, Hun Sen.

The first half of the book traces the history of the country from the end of the Khmer Rouge regime to the present; the second half investigates the reality of life in and under what the author calls "the mirage on the Mekong." Presiding over all is strongman Hun Sen, who has dominated the last three decades as Sihanouk dominated an earlier age.

Hun Sen was born into a comparatively well-off peasant family, but the family lost their money and he was forced to become a temple-boy in Phnom Penh. This remains a very common pattern today, so common in fact that it makes me wonder which of my local temples might be sheltering Cambodia's future leadership at this moment.

Exactly how the young Hun Sen became a communist – if indeed he ever did embrace the cause in any meaningful way – remains extremely murky, although Sihanouk's call for all patriotic Cambodians to join the anti-Lon Nol maquis following his overthrow in 1970 seems to have been the catalyst. It's clear, however, that he was a young man of great ability, rising to become a KR commander in the Eastern Zone before the Party's collapse into self-destructive purges forced him to flee to Vietnam in 1997.

In January 1979, aged just 26, he returned as Foreign Minister in the new Vietnamese-backed government. In this role he impressed visitors with his intelligence, hard work, and uncanny ability to tack with the changing political winds. These abilities, and possibly a certain ruthlessness, enabled him to see off his decidedly less talented colleagues, and by 1985 he was Prime Minister, a position he's held ever since. Strangio gives a fascinating account of how Pen Sovan, the first post-KR prime minister, tried to resist Vietnamese direction and ended up in a cell in Hanoi; Hun Sen in contrast made himself indispensable to the new overlords, and ended up filling Pen Sovan's shoes.

Cambodia in the mid-1980s was a tangle of personalised patronage networks – the Khmer word is "strings", conjuring up the not inappropriate image of a bowl of spaghetti. No one was better suited than Hun Sen to bring order to the chaos. Patronage is deeply rooted in Cambodian culture, and always has been. Gifts are passed down and generate loyalty which then confirms the authority of the giver. The system is, of course, deeply destructive. "Government posts [are] valued according to their potential to generate income, while the power of higher officials depend on their ability to distribute those positions." The task of making himself the ultimate source of all influence and power was to occupy Hun Sen for the rest of his career, and still continues.

Modern Cambodia has unquestionably benefited from Hun Sen's subtle approach to the role of patronage boss. The country has an open market, a democratic constitution, and a vibrant civil society. Guns have just about disappeared off the streets (the average Cambodian runs a far lesser risk of being shot than does the average American), the press is freer than in many other countries in the region, foreign investment is booming, and the tourism and garment industries are diversifying employment opportunities.

If only the reality were so bright and shiny. Strangio gives Hun Sen his due – in 2004 one in two Cambodian's lived in poverty, by 2011 the figure had dropped to one in five and falling – but as he makes clear, the commitment to Western ideas of the liberal society is both limited and pragmatic. Partly this is because Hun Sen has seen that the West's talk of the virtues of freedom is hypocritical – these were the countries that kept Pol Pot in the United Nations and isolated Cambodia through the 1980s for their own cynical purposes. And partly, of course, he can't afford to hand over the keys to the patronage machine.

And so it continues: land seizures in the provinces, slum clearances in the capital, unionists and others shot dead or jailed, media taken over and controlled by those the elite can trust, a compliant judiciary, etc etc. Even the CNRP opposition offers no more than a change of faces, and Sam Rainsy's racist Khmer chauvinism hardly seems like something to long for. Strangio's book makes depressing reading.

And yet, for all this, he ends on a note of hope. Cambodia has not stood still for the last thirty years. A new generation has grown up, one more educated, more exposed to outside values, less willing to accept patronage politics and a society of entrenched inequality. The results were seen in the 2013 elections, when the CPP lost a massive number of seats, obviously to its own surprise. Cambodia is changing, while Hun Sen is aging.

Victoria says

Excellent book on Cambodia's modern political landscape and players.

Nallasivan V. says

I read this book right after reading Philip Short's Pol Pot. To some extent, this book can be considered as a well deserved sequel to Pol Pot. It picks up where Pol Pot leaves you and takes you through an intriguing history of the post Khmer Rouge Cambodia. If Pol Pot were Godfather I, Hun Sen's Cambodia would be Godfather II.

The first part of the book traces the history of Hun Sen from 1979, when he was one of the four leaders of the vietnam instated Cambodian government to 2010 - the twenty+ years, Hun Sen ruled the country through deft political maneuvering. He carefully balances the mirage of democracy, all the while manipulating the political narrative of the country to keep himself in power. It is one of the most intriguing political history of modern times.

The second part of the book tries to capture how life is in Cambodia under Hun Sen. This is the part which doesn't work too well for the author. For most part, it is repetitive and doesn't anything new that the first part hasn't covered.

But overall, it is a great read. It will stoke your interest in Cambodian Politics. I am already looking forward

to following the 2018 national elections.

Hadrian says

In Sebastian Strangio's book, Cambodia appears as a country of ghosts. There is, of course, the haunting image of the Khmer Rouge and the fields of bones they left behind, but also the ruins of the distant past, and the faded promises of reform in the 1980s and 1990s.

This volume is a history of Cambodia since Pol Pot was removed from power after the Vietnamese intervention in 1978. The Vietnamese occupation, which would go on until 1989, would be tellingly called 'Vietnam's Vietnam'. They wouldn't be the only ones either - the UN would occupy Cambodia as a protectorate from 1992-1993.

The strength of Strangio's account is his depiction of the political rise of Hun Sen. Hun Sen starts his career as a military commander for the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, defects to the Vietnamese in 1977, and was placed as Foreign Minister by the Vietnamese-backed government in 1979 at age 32. By 1985, he was Prime Minister, and has stayed there since.

Hun Sen has survived largely because of his uncanny ability as a political operator. He has made it through coup attempts, interparty struggle, and the royalists led by King Sihanouk. He refused to leave office after a UN backed election in 1992, staying on in a 'power-sharing agreement'.

The second half of the book is a social and economic overview of Cambodia today. The capital of Phnom Penh is now better than it was, but little of this urban development has trickled down to the countryside. The country still needs a public health infrastructure, access to clean water, and suffers from pervasive poverty. Whatever brief flowerings of civil society there were in the 1980s and 1990s were crushed by the government. Foreign pressure to improve the human rights record faded as the United States seeks regional allies in China, and other businesses covet Cambodia's natural resources. Strangio's description of local patronage networks is an excellent example of institutional corruption and how it works.

But in better news, Hun Sen's grip might be slacking. There are rumors of his eccentric behavior. He exhorts his followers to 'know reality', where he is starting to lose his grasp of it. He can be a ridiculous martinet - his speeches can be six hours long, and he once rambled for fifteen minutes on the Pacquiao-Mayweather match after losing \$5,000 in a bet. But all this is minor compared to the fact that his party has had the fewest seats in years after the 2013 elections, and the very young Cambodian population is now inclined to protest.

Strangio's account, based on extensive interviews and further research, is a useful account of the country as it is. Although it understates the country's trajectory post-2013, his account goes a long way in explaining the contradictions and developments of this often-ignored place.

Mercy Ananeh-Frempong says

I read Hun Sen's Cambodia in 2015. I found it as well researched as is possible for an investigative journalist in Cambodia. Well written, an emotionally and intellectually engaging narrative. A good introduction for anyone interested in visiting or living in Cambodia.

Stephen Morrissey says

Mayor Richard J. Daley once remarked that "Good government is good politics and politics is good government." A world away, in post-Pol Pot Cambodia, that axiom has been shown in stark relief across the decades of Hun Sen's reign. Strangio offers a fascinating look into the political, economic, and social history of Cambodia following the bloody and brutal years of the Khmer Rouge. Through battles with the royalist clan and supporters of Sihanouk and the reformist party of Rainsy, Hun Sen continues to hold ultimate sway over Cambodia, with a stranglehold on central government decision-making and superficially-intimate connection with the rural people living beyond Phnom Penh.

The Cambodia that Strangio depicts is a "developing nation" success story with a massive and horrific caveat: Hun Sen's rule has led to the sometimes murderous suppression of political opponents, as well as the literal steamrolling over citizens' lives for the sake of lining a few more pockets and acceding to the whims of greedy developers and business interests.

One excerpt that is particularly revealing is the farming out of the ticket revenues for the tourist-filled Angkor Wat temple complex outside of Siem Reap. Much of the revenues are vacuumed up by a private corporation with links between the owners and Hun Sen. If any anecdote captures the contradictions of modern Cambodia, it is perhaps that: despite economic development and massive infusions of wealth brought in by tourists and other foreign investors, Cambodia still operates not as a democracy, but a kleptocracy.

Strangio's book is not be missed if you're looking for a deep dive into Cambodian politics.

Joseph says

*Well you'll work harder
With a gun in your back
For a bowl of rice a day
Slave for soldiers
Till you starve
Then your head is skewered on a stake*

"Holiday in Cambodia", Dead Kennedys

Hun Sen's Cambodia by Sebastian Strangio is a history of modern Cambodia. Strangio is a former reporter and editor for the Phnom Penh Post, Cambodia's oldest English language newspaper. He currently is a freelance writer covering Asia, and resides in Phnom Penh.

Cambodia, for many Americans, is a place they may of heard in passing, but little else. For those of us over fifty we probably remember three things about Cambodia: Bombing during the Vietnam War, Pol Pot, and a Dead Kennedys song. My background in history and international relations added very little to those three things, except I do remember Pol Pot's death and the "democratization" of the country.

Strangio splits the book into two parts intermingled parts. The first is a detailed history which is written in a standard fashion and is well documented. The second part is written as a reporter, more of a narrative

nonfiction style. There is a fairly easily recognized style changes throughout the book. The narrative nonfiction is not a style that I like, but here is put to good use. Strangio has spend and reported on some of the more recent events in the countries history.

Cambodia was a country America wanted to forget after Vietnam. We were still bitter about the war and preferred to concentrate more in our own backyard of Central and South America. Cambodia became a puppet state of Vietnam and resistance was being fought by the notorious Pol Pot. America could not support the Vietnamese government, nor could it support Pol Pot. Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was quoted in 1985 saying that "Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him, but China could." America could sit this civil war out.

The real story in the book is Hun Sen and his rise to power and his ability to hold power to the present time. There was a great effort to democratize Cambodia by the UN and it cost a great deal of money. Cambodia was expected to move from a tradition of authoritarian rule to a democracy in one move. The results are what should be expected -- democracy in name only. Much as Mexico's Porfirio Diaz, democracy can be a misleading term in describing some governments. Hun Sen succeeded in what counts on the international stage, stability.

Strangio spends a good deal of pages reporting to the reader the current situations in Cambodia. Cambodia is an interesting country with a good deal of freedoms for the people. An English speaker will recognize a free press with little restrictions. The native will see a restrict press. Censorship is much more pronounced in the native language. Ecologically Cambodia is in trouble as nearly forty percent of its forest are now gone. Most of the forests have been sold off for cash without much planning or thought to the potential damage. Phnom Penh has been expanding at the expense of lakes and property owners. The expansion called for filling in a lake which was a water sink during the rainy season preventing floods. The GDP of Cambodia tripled in the decade between 2003 and 2013, however much of Cambodia is in the financial control of a very few.

There is little doubt of the harsh history inside Cambodia. The progress that shown today is mostly just on the surface. Life is still harsh for the vast majority, but far less so than it was during the time of Pol Pot. It was a country that was perhaps too quickly pushed into a democracy. Very few countries make a smooth transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic one. Cambodia is showing hope and that hope is in the hands of the man running the country since 1998. Establishing a stable modern democracy is a long process and it took decades for South Korea to (arguably) move into that category. Sen Hun's Cambodia is an excellent study of a country, a man, and the current situation in Cambodia. Well worth the read.

Randall Wallace says

Having previously enjoyed Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia by William Shawcross, I noticed that Sebastian's book picks up the story with the reminder that our lovely US government dropped more bombs on just Cambodia between 1965 and 1973 than the Allies did during the entire Second World War! Mostly this book focuses on today's de facto ruler of Cambodia, Hun Sen, who has been in power since 1985. Under his rule, it's a patronage state of systemic corruption and little justice. Get known for saying the wrong thing in public and you'll find yourself shot dead in the street. Another way to shut you up is you get sued for "slandering" and bought judges assure that you lose. Or you could get charged with insult, or worse, the catch all vague accusation of "incitement". Even monks know not to talk politics in Cambodia. The present problem is that, while Hun Sen has brought peace, he has increased corruption; even if Hun Sen wanted to do stop it, he couldn't rein in all that corruption that he nurtured for decades. And so Cambodia's justice, education and health system lie in shambles to keep this Ponzi scheme of patronage afloat. Under Hun Sen, Cambodia has gone from historically no landless people to now, where

one fifth of the rural population is now landless creating a new serf class that neoliberals would salivate over. The poor think their deeds in past lives made them poor now and therefore super rich Hun Sen must seem god-like to them! Convenient. The powerful in Cambodia historically have exploited the Khmer people being "passive and deferential" to exploit them unfairly for increased profit. Cambodia's largest export industry is apparel; the profits largely go to the supporters of Hun Sen who were granted their concessions. In Cambodia, you get the just the mirage of choice, of dissent, and freedom. US Aid has usually increased corruption; yes, the twenty six hundred 501.c3 donors in Cambodia continue to fill gaps in failed social services purposely left wanting, but then the government takes credit for any of the victories paid for by these NGOs, thus keeping the patronage cycle alive.

Mariavv says

I think this is a really important book, which ideally should be read by anyone planning on visiting Cambodia (if only to find out where the money you pay to get into Angkor Wat really goes!). It's not exactly easy reading, but it's really well written so it's not difficult going either. If you have ever read or heard anything about Cambodian history, you will know about the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime. This book briefly describes those, but mostly focuses on what happened after: how does a country keep going, or start over, after such a period of total destruction? It's a good book for anyone interested in nation-building by the international community, and the lessons learned (or more often not really learned) apply not just to Cambodia but to similar efforts around the world.

I read this book after visiting Cambodia, and some of the issues it describes are rather shocking. When I was in the country I got the impression that people were quite optimistic about the future and things were looking up, but this book once again shows that as a visitor you just see what the government wants you to see. That said, it won't put me off visiting again, and the next time I will definitely understand more of what I see.

Andrew says

An excellent overview of the Hun Sen years to present. It is well-written, organized, documented and quite accessible for those interested in the country, or just for general Asian knowledge.

It corroborates many issues and specific cases that are well-known in the country. I still look around every day and ask myself "where is all this money coming from?" because you never see any actual transactions. Pages 218-234 are simply blistering in their appraisal of the Cambodian government and their foreign enablers and facilitators (other governments and NGOs). Corruption is not a one-way street. I also especially liked his summation of the self-serving NGO sector.

Equally important is how Cambodia now realizes how little it needs the "West" when all they have to do is look northward to China, a government with no moral compass. Unfortunately, China is going to take far more than they will ever give. Hun Sen and his cronies are too busy stuffing their pockets as fast as they can to keep their patronage system and grip on power intact to realize that there will eventually be an end of days.

Let's not forget that in over 1,000 years of history Cambodia has never been a democracy.

Sadly, there are probably another 75 to 100 countries that are being run (and enabled) pretty much the same way.

Davis Florick says

It was a good book overall.

Satu says

Very pleasant read despite its very unpleasant subject matter. Rarely does a non-fiction book keep me glued to the chair like this one did, I read it in two sittings. I'm always a bit apprehensive about reading non-fiction that's not written by an academic not trusting myself to be critical enough. But reading this book I didn't feel that way. Strangio's style was clearly journalistic and his own voice was constantly present. I felt there was no mistaking his own views and interpretations for facts. I was able to just sit back and enjoy the nice flow of the text, original use of metaphors and of course the very, very strange world of Cambodian past and present.

To me the strength of this book is in giving a plausible explanation for how an oppressive and abusive system of government, deeming people to poverty can stand free elections -something that has always puzzled me. Another subject I found fascinating was Strangio's outlook on the inertia of the Cambodian "development complex" and the way foreign aid is deeply entrenched in and manipulated by the Cambodian government (ie. Hun Sen) for its own purposes.

The book has its weaknesses though. The chapters on land use (or land grabbing) and civil society -both essential aspects of any society- lacked both the fact and vision that the other chapters had. These are clearly not Strangio's main areas of interest. However, I gladly forgive Strangio for these weaknesses because I really felt I gained a better understanding of how these countless pseudo-democracies in the world work and enjoyed the process too.

Menglong Youk says

Sebastian Strangio, Cambodia-based journalist and a former reporter and editor of the Phnom Penh Post, has released this new accessible-history-of-modern-day-Cambodia book, *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, early this year. Basically, the book is not only guiding readers to some of the most important biographical portrait of the longtime Cambodian prime minister - and the one and only strongman - Hun Sen, but also unrevealing many complicatedly untold histories in the last decades in controversial Cambodian politics. Strangio details how Hun Sen unbelievably developed himself from a poor skinny pagoda boy and unworldly senior official in the Vietnam-installed after Khmer Rouge regime into a living God (?) who has dominated the country for thirty years. By far, he has become incredibly rich and an increasingly powerful leader in Southeast Asia region.

Fast forward to 1979, after Vietnamese invasion in Cambodia, Hun Sen was the youngest foreign minister in the world. During his time of power in the ministry of foreign affairs, unlike his seniors who were president, head of states, etc. being busy appointing their relatives and comrades in many positions in the country, Hun Sen wisely knew that if his power was to be remained and more powerful in the future, he must gather in engineers, teachers, lawyers, diplomats, and former highly experienced officials, whom he thought he would need to support him and be his allies to run the country with him. This is unmistakably an important strategy how Hun Sen has been able to dominate the country for so long. Strangio reveals how Hun Sen's version of iron-fisted stability and growth - albeit growth with high inequality - also truly made the strongman popular with the public. Strangio shows how Hun Sen alone, among Cambodia's major political figures, understood how to build a nationwide party organization and how to appeal to the rural population, in much the same way former King Sihanouk appealed to the Cambodian poor. The author also shows how Hun Sen, whose party lost 1993 election which was born because of billions of dollars of foreign peace investment in

Cambodia organized by UNTAC, refused to accept the result and threatened his opponent until he received a compromise on being the second prime minister of Cambodia. This case never happened anywhere around the world, except for Cambodia. (Unique) -_-

In the epilogue, the author also states that Hun Sen's traditionally powerful strategies, which he has used for decades, has no longer had any effects to modern Cambodian youth who are living in digital world with no information can be hidden from them. It's high time Cambodia's destiny was in Cambodians' hand. These are the last sentences of the book, "Cambodia's march toward democracy has never been inevitable. History and culture continue to exercise their strong gravitational pull. But there is some hope that the Cambodian mirage might one day flicker and fade, revealing a social landscape that is fairer and more just. After so many dark times, the Cambodian people would deserve nothing less."

Overall, this is the most enriched-information book on Hun Sen's modern-day Cambodia that has been released so far. It's also my most favorite Cambodian politics book I've read this year.

Jane Griffiths says

The go-to work on Cambodia today

Journalistically written and concise, this is a workmanlike summary of Cambodia's history, past conflicts, and is an attempt to describe the making of modern Cambodia. It is interesting on the character of Hun Sen, and while its relentless harping on corruption and patronage gets repetitive, it is a repetition worth making, as it is corruption and patronage which are holding back Cambodia's development today, and keeping its people more impoverished than they need be. It is also a useful foil to the generalised assumptions of NGO workers, and other foreigners working in Cambodia, who can be seduced by the easy living and permissive atmosphere. It is relatively sanguine about Cambodia's polity - Cambodia has a democratic future ahead of it, but that future is not very near. A valuable source book for those who live or work in Cambodia, or who are considering doing so. Others should read it too.
