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**CAMBODIA AND THE INTERNATIONAL
COMMUNITY:
TRIALS IN RECONSTRUCTION AND
FOREIGN ASSISTANCE**

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Journalist and Author, *Hun Sen's Cambodia*

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PROCEEDINGS

JOSEPH LIOW: Very good afternoon to everyone. And on behalf of the Brookings Center for East Asia Policy Studies I'd like to welcome you to this afternoon's talk on Cambodia.

Now, before Haiti, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Timor Leste, Iraq, there was Cambodia, the recipient of billions of dollars, as you know, of foreign aid since the very early 1990s as part of the international community's effort to build or rebuild a country that was coming out of a long, drawn conflict.

What was the outcome? The outcome, I think, was a country that has, in a sense, you could say lurched from one political conflict to another, one political crisis to another. But at the same time, also an economy that is making slow and somewhat steady progress on the back of, among other things, Chinese investments. And this is something that will, I believe, be discussed in the talk later, as well.

Recent years have witnessed attempts by the enigmatic prime minister, Hun Sen, the longest-serving, non-royal leader in Southeast Asia, by the way, who will soon eclipse the late President Suharto's 32 years in power. I don't think it's quite 32 years yet.

SEBASTIAN STRANGIO: Thirty years as of this month.

DR. LIOW: Thirty years as of this month. But soon. But soon. But we've witnessed attempts by him to consolidate power and curb a fledgling democratic movement.

At the same time, we have also witnessed considerable pushback, I think, not least at the 2013 elections, where the Cambodian National Rescue Party, led by the perennial thorn in Hun Sen's side, Sam Rainsy, managed to lead an opposition which managed to prevent the ruling Cambodia People's Party from securing a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

And, of course, all this is taking place against a backdrop of something that would be of interest, I think, to a number of us, which is the Khmer Rouge trials, the tribunals, which finally completed its first successful case in February 2012, when Comrade Duch was convicted for crimes against humanity when he served as the commander of the notorious prison, S-21. Mind you, it took several years for this tribunal to even agree on judicial procedures for the hearings and convictions, and I think this shows how controversial and difficult the process of coming to terms with this period of history still is in Cambodia today.

So a lot of issues, I think. Many more which I'm not even aware of, but we are indeed privileged this afternoon to have Phnom Penh-based author, Sebastian Strangio, here with us today to shed light and share some thoughts on these challenges and contradictions confronting Cambodia.

Sebastian is the author of a very well-received book titled *Hun Sen's Cambodia*. It's right here. Unfortunately, we don't have copies, but Amazon has a lot of copies, so I would urge you after this talk to check it out online. Published by Yale University Press no less. And, of course, Sebastian brings with him a very deep knowledge of the society and the politics of this amazing mainland Southeast Asian country.

So I should also add that Sebastian is an equally accomplished commentator on Myanmar, but, of course, for today, it's the Cambodia beat that we're going to be talking about, so we'll be focusing on that.

So without further ado, can I invite Sebastian up to the stage? He will speak for about half an hour tops and then we'll open up for a discussion. Sebastian. (Applause)

SEBASTIAN STRANGIO: Well, thank you, Joseph, for that very kind introduction. And thank you all for coming today. It's very encouraging to see such a healthy crowd for a Cambodia-based event. You know, Cambodia is often a country which is regrettably overlooked nowadays.

And I know people come to these sorts of events to participate in the discussion as much as to hear me waffle on, so, as Joseph said, I'm going to try and keep it relatively brief and then I'll be your captive for the remainder of this session. And I'll be happy to field any queries or criticisms or questions that you might have.

And so I think a logical place to begin is with my own association with Cambodia. It goes back about 10 years and it began, if I recall correctly, in a small bookstore on a shady back street in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. I was on a holiday in the region at the time and I picked up while I was at this bookstore a copy of Ben Kiernan's masterful study of the Khmer Rouge regime. And while I was traveling, for the remainder of my trip I worked my way slowly through this dense tome and I slowly became fascinated with the ways in which Cambodia had come to terms or tended to come to terms with this horrific period in its history.

And so later on, when I graduated from university in Australia in 2007, I booked a flight to Phnom Penh, hung around for a while, and eventually landed a position at the *Phnom Penh Post*, one of the two English-language daily papers in Cambodia. And I sort of started spending my time trying to get my head around this very complex and fascinating country.

And one of the first impressions I had when I began reporting, having spent considerable time in countries like Vietnam and China, was the extent to which Cambodians' civic life was awash in references to democracy and human rights. These narratives were absolutely everywhere. NGOs proliferated in the thousands. The Cambodian government had signed most of the major U.N. Human Rights Conventions and the country even celebrated International Human Rights Day as an official holiday; I think the only country in Asia that I'm aware of to do so.

But these references were strangely abstract. Political institutions were hollow. The rich and powerful enjoyed de facto impunity from the law. And what laws did exist were very progressive, often drafted with the help of foreign legal experts. But when it came to enforcement, this was very often lacking.

Phnom Penh itself was an interesting expression of this contradiction. It was like a post-modern treaty port city, except instead of being forced open by colonial gunboat diplomacy and Western commercial interests, it had been forced open by Western development assistance and all of the NGOs and foreign experts that followed in its wake. And these contradictions were apparent, starkly apparent, in the world of journalism. You know, as representatives of the English-language press we had a great deal of freedom to report on corruption, government abuses, impunity. But yet, for all the stories we wrote, very little seemed to change. That sinew of accountability that holds political powers to account seemed to be lacking in Cambodia.

So as a journalist, it was sort of hard to know what to make of all this. The fact that the country was falling very far short of the international standards that it so often professed was self-evident, but it didn't do much to explain how the system had come into being. And so when I started writing this book one of my main aims was to avoid simply creating a catalogue of corruption and listing all of the ways in which Cambodia fell short of what we would consider to be a democratic or human rights standard.

You know, it's self-evident to anybody that opens a newspaper in Cambodia today that there is a vast gap between norms and realities. But what I wanted to do was ask a further question: What are the political and moral implications of this? What could foreign governments do about it? And what assumptions did we make about political and social change and were they mistaken?

The current political system in Cambodia grew out of a jarring political collision. In October 1991, four armed factions, Cambodian armed factions, came together to sign the Paris Peace Agreements, which aimed at

ending a civil war which had been raging since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime by the Vietnamese military in 1979. Paris created a U.N. peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, and handed it a daunting task. UNTAC was responsible for demobilizing and disarming these four factions, with repatriating tens of thousands of refugees who were then in camps along the Thai border, and with holding free and fair elections in an unstable country that was still on the brink of civil conflict.

And when the U.N. arrived, Cambodia opened to the world. Foreign aid surged into the country. Foreign experts and consultants arrived. And Phnom Penh, an impoverished socialist capital, became overnight the focus of global attention.

And Cambodia's opening also converges with a global wave of optimism following the end of the Cold War. This is a period that George W. Bush described as the advent of a new world order. At the U.N., Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then the secretary-general, formulated his Agenda for Peace, arguing that after four decades of polarizing superpower conflict the U.N. would finally be able to realize its promise as a guarantor of peace and stability.

Most famously perhaps, Francis Fukuyama asked the readers of the national interest whether the world had reached, indeed, the end of history. And when he published a book with the same title two years later, he dropped the question mark. Such was his confidence that this was the future of humanity following the Cold War.

Now, for many people, Cambodia appeared to fit this narrative well. There was a neat symmetry between the country's Cold War experience and what was expected or hoped to take its place. Cambodia, after all, was one of the quintessential victims of superpower politics during the Cold War. During the 1960s and '70s, the country was devastated by American B-52 bombing intended to root out communist forces that were using Cambodia as a base. And then when the Khmer Rouge seized power in April 1975, most of the world turned away.

And so at the start of the 1990s, when the Peace Agreements began to be implemented, many people see Cambodia in the light both of past tragedies and of future utopias. Khmer Rouge horrors and a hope for human progress come together in a sort of symmetrical moral adventure with well-intentioned outsiders in starring roles.

Now, one figure who saw things very differently in Cambodia at the time was the prime minister, Hun Sen. Hun Sen had been foreign minister in 1979, when he was appointed at the age of just 26, and he had been appointed prime minister in 1985. And he ruled over a country during a period in which the regime based in Phnom Penh was isolated and embargoed by the West, partly as a

punishment for its association with communist Vietnam, which had installed it in power in 1979. And this would prove to be a crucial period for the development of Hun Sen's political outlook.

Firstly, it transformed him from a skinny rebel leader who had once fought for the Khmer Rouge into a ruthless, hardened politician, a bureaucratic infighter, and an international statesman.

Hun Sen and his colleagues also came of age in an environment of international hypocrisy. During the 1980s, the remnants of the Pol Pot regime continued to be recognized by the Chinese and the U.S. as the legitimate representatives of Cambodian people in the United Nations, a position they held until 1991. And so while there was an ideological sea change at the end of the Cold War in many Western countries, there was no such parallel change within Cambodia itself. And this is the point at which the gap between norms and realities, which I characterize as being specific to Cambodia's current-day troubles, really begins to open up.

Despite the Paris Agreements and the U.N. mission, the civil war continued. In the hinterlands it raged on until the Khmer Rouge were eventually brought to heel in the late 1990s. But it also continued within the government that took power after 1993. The government that emerged from that historical U.N.-organized election was an unstable and volatile coalition between Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Ranaridh, who led the royalist Funcinpec party.

Now, the rivalry in arms race between these two factions eventually culminated in July 1997 with factional fighting in the streets of Phnom Penh, in which Hun Sen's forces ousted Ranaridh's forces, murdered many of his key commanders, drove the remainder into exile, and seized de facto control. And Hun Sen has ruled the country much in the same way ever since: through a combination of guile and force and manipulation. And this month, as Joseph pointed out, he celebrates his 30th anniversary in power.

And so one of the first conclusions I came to in sort of exploring this history was that history didn't end in Cambodia any more than it ended anywhere else. The Cambodia that emerged in the 1990s was a collision between the hopes and realities that set in at the end of the Cold War: the hope that absent the dead hand of communism, democracy would spread around the globe, and the realities of a post-conflict country which had never experienced anything approaching popular sovereignty or democratic government.

And the outcome of this system I describe in my book as a mirage on the Mekong, a yawning gap between the norms professed by the government in order to secure international aid and the realities as they exist. In this system,

power operates behind a democratic façade, much as it always has, through patronage relationships and personal ties between key powerful individuals.

One of Hun Sen's secrets of his success is his ability to ape the democratic language of the new world order and groom the expectations of international donor countries to keep the aid coming. And I think this dynamic explains both the openness of Cambodia, the openness that I experienced reporting there, and also the effective firewalls that have been put up around key economic and political interests which protects them from any effective challenge or criticism.

And another result of this was what I termed the development complex of Cambodia, a complex intermingling of moral, institutional, strategic, and political factors. And this development and aid complex represents in some ways a true dilemma today. On the one hand, foreign aid goes towards helping ordinary Cambodians providing vital services in the health and education sectors, but, on the other, the continuing aid allows the government to redirect its resources elsewhere and prevents the establishment of any sort of development that we might term sustainable.

And so I think three lessons can be drawn from Cambodia's recent experience. The first lesson, I think, is that much of what has happened could have been predicted. For centuries, Cambodian leaders, leading a very weak state pressed between two rising mid-level powers -- Vietnam and Thailand -- have become experts at balancing outside powers and managing outside expectations. In order to secure foreign patronage they've become very good at mirroring and mimicking the language and preoccupations of their patrons.

The second lesson, I think, is that democracy cannot be engineered. It's a complex social and political organism and the reality is that we really don't understand what works, why it works, or when it works.

And the third lesson, I think, is that after David Rieff, there is no such thing as the international community, a phrase that we often use as shorthand, if we define it as a community of shared values. The reality in Cambodia's case is that the donors that have bankrolled the country's reconstruction have pursued a wide and contradictory variety of strategic, political, economic, and moral aims. And this lack of unity has allowed Hun Sen to play them off against one another in the same manner, much the same manner, in which he has manipulated his domestic political opponents.

And so overall, I think Cambodia encapsulates both the optimism that sets in as walls tumble down across the communist world and also the disillusionment that follows. Its recent history has been a solvent for outside expectations.

Now, the unfortunate thing about Cambodia today is that the country's so often ignored. Very little attention is paid. Global attention has a tendency to be very fickle and to move on very quickly to the next global hotspot. But I think there are important lessons that we risk forgetting, you know, lessons that might shed important light or lead us to question the ease with which a democratic political culture might be inculcated in a country like Myanmar or the ease with which we might redraw the map of the modern Middle East along democratic political lines.

Francis Fukuyama is not really taken seriously anymore, at least his end of history thesis, but it still, to me, seems to influence a lot of the ways we see social and political change happening. A lot of public discussion of foreign policy seems to assume still that political roads will inevitably end up at a Western variant of democracy and free market capitalism.

And I think the lessons of Hun Sen's Cambodia is not that the country somehow took a wrong turn on the way to democracy, but that the political road meanders, runs off in various directions, and often runs, indeed, in reverse. And there's no guarantees that this road will ever reach the desired destination at all.

Now, at last year's election, as Joseph mentioned, this was a huge surprise for many of us and it gave fresh currency to a lot of these sorts of questions. The CPP lost 22 of the seats that it held in the National Assembly and the Cambodian National Rescue Party scored historic gains. Indeed, the opposition claimed they would have won the election were it not for voter fraud and they immediately announced a boycott of the Parliament. And it was about a year before they finally agreed to enter Parliament in exchange for a series of political concessions.

But at the time, you know, as the first results came in on election night, it was hard not to ask the question: was this the beginning of the end for Hun Sen? Was history finally catching up with Cambodia's singular strongman? And what was happening to Cambodia? How much of what we were seeing was continuity and how much of it was change?

I think that a certain amount -- the fact that Cambodia is changing today -- is absolutely undeniable. In many ways, the opposition surge was the result of the social and economic transformations of Hun Sen's long rule. Hun Sen's rule has produced a more educated population, a more connected population, and a population more demanding of change than ever before. Lives have improved as the economy boomed, but many people have been left behind. Cambodia's destructive patronage system has normalized greed, produced incandescent levels of corruption, and led to widespread land-grabbing and

deforestation. In many ways, the political system is a system with no aim beyond its own perpetuation, and so the election result was in some ways, you know, a reaction, an inevitable reaction I think, to the system that had done very little for ordinary people.

But the continuities were just as striking, if they took a little longer to emerge and become apparent. Very quickly the country settled back into old political patterns. The 2013 election result, as all previous Cambodian election results, was trimmed and tailored to fit the prerogatives of key individuals and factions.

The CPP was shocked by its defeat, very clearly, and they promised reforms: shuffling ministries and initiating reforms in educational policy and in the environment ministry. But it also made very clear that this reform would happen on its own terms and moved very rapidly to foreclose any possibility of an opposition alternative. Protestors and opposition members were hauled into prison or hauled into court on dubious charges, where many of them remain today.

But what the opposition gains showed was that this political strategy was beginning to fray. Since 1979, the CPP had based its legitimacy on the fact that it overthrew the Khmer Rouge and brought an unprecedented period of peace and stability. But the political stability that it presided over was not based on any deep social or political consensus. It was basically based on the expedient of keeping powerful people happy. And so it raises the question of whether Hun Sen can successfully reform this system without undermining the powerful interests that have bankrolled his rise.

And the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party also contains its own contradictions. The party is made up of two, I believe, contradictory political inheritances. One is its liberal inheritance, its adherence to a Western-style democratic and human rights sort of value. And the other, the party also draws deeply from what might be termed the paranoid style in Cambodian politics: the old style nationalism focused on the demonization of Cambodia's eastern neighbor, Vietnam, a country which has been seen for the last couple of centuries as an existential threat to the country's survival.

And these two strands, I think, come together in quite an interesting way in the career of Sam Rainsy, the head of the CNRP and the long-term rival of Hun Sen. You know, when he's in the provinces speaking to ordinary Cambodians he will use this very atavistic racial language demonizing the Vietnamese and whipping up fear that they will come to dominate Cambodia's destiny. But speaking to international audiences he's harnessed or attempted to harness the end of history optimism that sets in at the end of the Cold War. And he's shown a remarkable dialect, not unlike Hun Sen, in fact, in migrating

between these dialects, in tailoring his language to whatever audience he might be talking to at any given time, from audiences of World Bank bureaucrats to European human rights activists to U.S. democracy promoters.

And so one problem, though, I think with this approach, is that appeals to the international sphere are likely to have less and less effect as time goes by. During the post-election boycott in 2013 and '14, much of the CNRP's energy was directed outwards at the United Nations, at foreign embassies, who the party called upon to re-intervene in Cambodian politics and to, again, set it on a democratic path. But it achieved little and I think this is a sign that the balance of power in Asia more generally is shifting.

The most significant sign of this is the rise of China in the region and particularly in Cambodia. Today, Chinese state banks bankroll the construction of bridges, dams, real estate projects, and tourism ventures. Chinese-funded highways have opened up the country, vast tracts of the country, to economic exploitation. Today, the China model of authoritarian capitalism looms as a direct challenge to the liberal democratic model that was believed to be in the ascendant at the beginning of the 1990s.

And for Hun Sen, China's sales pitch is a simple one to accept. They offer money with few strings. And what strings they do attach, Hun Sen is very willing to accept. As he said in 2009, when he cut the ribbon on a Chinese-funded bridge, he said China respects the political decisions of Cambodia. And today, this Chinese largess has largely offset the aid conditionalities and the demands for good governance and democratic reform made by Western donor countries. And Hun Sen, in exchange for this deal, has been very happy to tow the Chinese line, making frequent gestures of support for the One China policy, giving Chinese firms access to Cambodian land and resources, and deporting undesirable elements at the Chinese government's behest.

And I think the rise of China has to be seen as a broader shift to multipolarity in the region and around the world. In many ways, I think it's worked to undercut the liberal institutional architecture that was believed to be in the ascendant at the start of the 1990s. This is already evident in Asia today, where the U.S. has systematically downgraded human rights in its dealings with Southeast Asian countries.

The leaders of Vietnam and Myanmar have been feted at the White House on several occasions. And while Hun Sen has yet to receive a similar invitation himself, the U.S. has done little to actively sanction his government for the human rights abuses and democratic transgressions that it has made recently. The U.S. was the one major country to refrain from congratulating Hun Sen in 2013 on his election victory and it made calls for there to be an investigation and a probe of the election, but it did little to actually bring this about.

And so where does this leave Cambodia going forward? Well, I think given the country's history of -- the history of the country's collision with the international sphere, I could make a few probable predictions.

The first is I think the balance between the local and the international in Cambodian politics will move increasingly towards the local. For better or worse, Cambodia is no longer the embodiment of a global promise. Most Western donor countries have little appetite for becoming re-entangled in Cambodia's domestic squabbles. And indeed, it is worth recalling that the Paris Peace Agreements, formulated largely by the five permanent members of the Security Council, were always intended to remove foreign entanglements, remove these powers from Cambodia's domestic struggles rather than to deepen their involvement. And so I foresee a decline in leverage by the West and also less of a desire to use what leverage remains.

The second thing I think is that Cambodia will continue to develop according to its own internal dynamics, which are still very much based along the fault lines of the civil war years. You know, both the government and its opponents offer competing nationalist myths that are both characterized by their own ambiguities and contradictions.

And the third prediction I think is that the tradition of charismatic leadership will provide the template for both potential and actual Cambodian leaders going forward. And so Cambodian politics will remain highly personalized, highly egotistic, and thus highly unpredictable.

And so change is clearly coming to the country, but when it comes I believe it's more likely to follow local patterns than international models of political development, which is another way of saying that when change comes, it won't necessarily be democratic or peaceful.

And one criticism I make of the press, and indeed a self criticism, is that we frequently use words like "democracy" without really defining what we mean by them. If we take the dictionary definition -- a system characterized by fair and transparent elections, by division of powers, and by accountable institutions -- then I think, unfortunately, Cambodia will probably be waiting a long while. But to take a broader definition, a country that is marginally more fair and just to its people and offers them more and gives them a chance at prosperity and sustainable development, then I think I'm more optimistic.

I don't believe there's any going back to the traumatized country that emerged from the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1980s. And as I mentioned before, the Cambodian people are more educated, connected, and demanding of change than at probably any time in the country's history. And I don't think this

is something the government can ignore. But how the two parties go about addressing and harnessing this desire for change before the next election in 2018, I think, remains a very open question.

Thank you. (Applause)

DR. LIOW: Thank you. We can open the discussion to the floor now. Can I invite questions? I would appreciate if you could keep it your questions and comments brief, and if you can start off by identifying yourself. Please, over there.

QUESTION: Joel Charny. I work at InterAction, which is an alliance of U.S.-based international relief and development NGOs. Thank you, that was really an excellent talk. My question is you didn't touch on kind of emerging new leaders. I mean, I've been involved with Cambodia for a long time and my operating theory is basically eventually they will all die. I mean, eventually we'll stop fighting the '70s and '80s struggle and we'll get beyond that. And I'm wondering what your take is on that at this point. I mean, are you seeing a new generation of leaders emerging that's thinking differently or, as you implied at the end, do you think the patterns of Cambodian politics are inevitable and any new leaders will just sort of play the game the way it's always been played?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I stopped short of saying it's inevitable that these patterns are going to continue just because I think inevitabilities, you know, are never that certain. But, you know, it could still be quite a while before this generation passes. Hun Sen is only 62. So potentially, we could have a couple more decades of this sort of consensus.

But there are signs of new leaders coming up in the opposition, even people that aren't part of the formal political process, young Cambodians that are beginning to use the Internet, to learn about the world in a way that their parents and grandparents never had the opportunity to do. A lot of these Cambodians are entering civil society.

The question and, I guess, one of the weaknesses of the Cambodian National Rescue Party is that it is so much based around the personalities of Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, who are two 60-something individuals. And they're almost -- because of the highly personalized nature of Cambodian politics, it seems very difficult to replace those individuals. And when those individuals are replaced, the character of the party, well, it may well change.

But so far, I've seen the young people -- you know, unfortunately, there is sort of an adherence to these old patterns still, but, you know, it's hard to

know. If someone like Sam Rainsy stops -- was not around constantly referencing Vietnam and bringing it up and hammering that when he's in rural areas, then maybe ordinary people would start to move away from that way of thinking. But for the moment, things seem to be, at least for the next foreseeable future, things seem to be sort of stuck in a bit of a holding pattern.

DR. LIOW: Please.

QUESTION: Thank you. I'm Steve Hirsch. I'm a journalist here. First off, Sebastian, I'm about halfway through your book right now and let me just add to the praises. It really is a good book, very well written. Everybody should buy it. In your book you are fairly hard on not only the Western governments, but the U.N. and NGOs, I mean, especially in the early '90s. Now, assuming you don't end the book in the last chapter which I haven't gotten to by saying they've all learned their lesson and they're all doing a great job, do you think that Western governments and the U.N. and NGOs have learned their lesson in places like Cambodia and are doing a better job? Feel free to talk about your other country, Burma, too, in your answer. Thanks.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I mean, one thing you often hear in Burma today, if you speak to people in the aid and development world, is that we don't want this country to become another Cambodia. But that presumes there was a point at which Cambodia's trajectory could have been shunted back into a democratic one. It presumes that there was -- it was possible what the Paris Agreements and UNTAC set out to do. And, I mean, I do believe that donors in Cambodia are much more realistic and I think you do have to distinguish between donor governments and NGOs. I think there is -- and then there's also the foreign NGOs and local NGOs.

But foreign governments, I think, on the whole, have learned to live with Hun Sen. They realize that there is -- you know, they've come to accept the reality that he's the one in charge and that there is very little they can, I believe, effectively do to drag him kicking and screaming towards the democratic promised land. And so I actually have quite a lot of sympathy with the diplomats that are stationed in Phnom Penh. They're very realistic about what they're able to achieve now.

And, you know, I think that, like I said, the development issue represents a true dilemma and I don't envy the people that are forced to make these decisions about whether to cut off aid or whether to increase aid or whether to maintain present levels of funding because there is, in many ways, no optimum solution to this problem. Well, it's a true dilemma. I hope that answers your question.

DR. LIOW: Yes, back there. Okay, yes, behind you. His hand came up first, but you're next.

QUESTION: Hello. I'm Dennis Halpin. I was the Cambodia analyst in the State Department INR Bureau back in the '80s. Now I'm at the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS. I appreciated your comments today, you know, about Cambodia being internationally a backburner is true. But this morning, Cambodia came roaring back at the Senate. You might have heard Senator McCain was having a hearing with three former secretaries of state, including Henry Kissinger, and Code Pink people, I guess they're old peaceniks and hippies from the '70s, showed up and tried to arrest Henry Kissinger symbolically for war crimes in Cambodia. So it's all over the news today in the States.

MR. STRANGIO: I didn't see it. I would have probably gone down.

QUESTION: Oh, yes, this happened this morning. Senator McCain called the Capitol Police and said human scum, get them out. And George Shultz stood up and defended Henry Kissinger's career. To me it's interesting, Henry Kissinger at 91 is still a lightning rod for the culture wars.

But I would say there was another Australian journalist, Shawcross, who wrote a book back in the '70s, *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, your fellow Australian journalist. I don't know how far you want to go back into history, but do you have any comment on this - bringing Mr. Kissinger up as a central figure in what has taken place in Cambodia over the past 40 to 50 years?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I think it does -- I mean, I don't really address this directly in my book, but I think U.S. policy through early 2000s really is still dictated by this sort of Vietnam era -- well, I guess the culture war or dispute about the nature of American involvement in Vietnam and by association Cambodia.

I mean, well, firstly, on the Cambodian side, the legacy of this period leaves a very strong mark on people like Hun Sen. He, being born in Kampong Cham in the east of the country, experienced the bombings. Well, the U.S. incursion of 1970, as well, I believe, is one of his first military engagements as a young soldier. So he remembers the devastation of the bombings and that legacy of U.S. involvement.

And then in the U.S., you have a number of Republican congressmen who have always been very heavy on Hun Sen: Dana Rohrabacher from California, McCain, Mitch McConnell. And I think for these people, you know, Hun Sen is sort of a living embodiment of the American defeat in Vietnam,

as well as the promise of democracy in the early 1990s. And so, yes, I'm not sure how much more I can say about that, but it does seem that there is kind of an echo of the '60s and '70s era debates in current U.S. policy on Cambodia. And so you do see from time to time in the Senate or the House of Representatives Hun Sen being pummeled by a series of congressmen, a lot of them with very large Khmer diaspora communities in their constituencies, so there is a political sort of -- they're politically salient sort of gestures, as well.

But I do find it quite interesting, you know, somebody like Hun Sen has yet to receive an invitation to the White House. And I think that's largely because he is the leader of a strategically marginal country in Southeast Asia. And so people are kind of -- see it as a country that you can make an example of or press these sorts of issues without endangering a key strategic ally.

DR. LIOW: If I can just jump in here and push you a bit. Turn it around. In Cambodia, how cognizant are Cambodians of this particular period of their history? I mean, I read somewhere that about 60+ percent of Cambodians know only Hun Sen as the prime minister, which means that probably 70 percent of the population was born from the '80s onwards, so it's a very young population.

MR. STRANGIO: Yes.

DR. LIOW: It's a very stressful period of history we're talking about.

MR. STRANGIO: Yes, well, if you're talking about the U.S. involvement in Cambodia in the '60s and '70s and the bombing campaign and all of that, when you talk to young Cambodians today you don't get a sense that there's any resentment of the American role in Cambodia. I mean, similar to the way that by the '60s and '70s in Japan, you know, young Japanese loved the United States. They loved American culture. They loved all of those sorts of things. And so you don't really get that sense, but you certainly get it when you start talking to the leaders, you know, especially when you then connect it with the sort of lecturing that they received from U.S. politicians in the 1990s and in the 2000s. It creates a very direct link between the American involvement and the sort of latent anti-colonial tradition in Cambodia.

I mean, after all the war of the Khmer Rouge, which Hun Sen was a part, their aim was to rid the country of foreign imperialists in the same way that -- well, with a different outcome, but with the same aim that the Vietnamese communists were trying to rid the French and then the Americans of their country. And so when it comes to -- on the street it's not an issue, but it certainly remains a live issue politically.

DR. LIOW: Sir, you had a question.

QUESTION: Thank you. My name's Hunter Marston. I'm an independent Southeast Asia researcher. I'm recalling the rather heated border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the Temple Preah Vihear. I'm wondering, how would you characterize Thai-Cambodian relations since the military coup in Thailand?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I mean, Hun Sen certainly doesn't care whether the country to his west is democratic or not. I mean, it seems to me that Thai-Cambodian relations, at least in the period that I've been looking at them, are characterized by mutual opportunism. When Hun Sen embraced Thaksin after he was ousted and fled into exile overseas, it was purely opportunistic. The yellow shirt royalist nationalists were creating problems with the temple, and Hun Sen probably sensed that they would be ousted at the election in 2011, which they were, and so he established a strategic relationship with Thaksin.

But at the moment, I mean, my impression of the post-coup situation is that the Cambodians are sort of biding their time and just waiting to see how things pan out. They're not moving to make any pacts of friendship or to seal any sort of lasting alliance. I mean, one thing about Hun Sen is that he really lacks any discernible ideology and he's always looking at any potential relationship with the eye to what am I going to get out of this in the long term? And I don't know enough about Thai politics to be able to predict where this post-coup situation is going to end up, but I think Hun Sen probably is keeping a wary distance for the time being.

DR. LIOW: He had his hand up first.

QUESTION: Good afternoon, Mr. Strangio. My name is Hassan Kassem. I'm with a U.S.-based nonprofit group here called Khmer M'Chas Srok, KMS for short. I read your articles quite often in the *Phnom Penh Post* before I left Radio Free Asia in 2013. My question to you, sir, in the course of your reporting on Cambodia, I wonder if you ever see Vietnam as we see it - still maintains its influence behind the scene, thus pitting the Khmer against the Khmer as we see it, and destabilizing the socioeconomic fabric of the country. What is your view on that? Thank you.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I mean, I think that the Vietnamese influence is not what it was. In the 1980s, there was indeed a sort of quasi-colonial relationship between the Vietnamese government and the Cambodian regime, which they essentially controlled. But I think the Vietnamese, even though they might have started out with ideas of incorporating Cambodia within an Indochina federation which had always been their ambition, by the late 1980s the country is in dire economic straits. The war in Cambodia is bleeding it white

and the idea of sustaining any systematic colonization or control of Cambodia begins to be seen as a little bit unsustainable. And I think when they finally withdraw their troops in 1989, they're relieved to be out of there. And since then, I think the strategic environment in the region has shifted further.

In 2012, at the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, the Cambodians essentially took the Chinese side in the South China dispute, causing one of the few examples I've ever seen of a controversial conclusion to one of those anodyne meetings. And I think that demonstrated that the Chinese now are the ones that are the main patron in Cambodia and that Hun Sen has begun to move outside of the Vietnamese orbit.

That said, you know, it's natural in some ways given the historical links between these two countries and the political links between these two countries and the fact that they border each other that there is still a very close relationship on certain levels. But I would stop short of endorsing the sort of Cambodian conspiracy theory view that there is some -- that the Vietnamese are playing Hun Sen like a puppet. I don't think that's true anymore, if it ever was.

And I think even in private, Vietnamese diplomats, some of the WikiLeaks cables have them advising U.S. officials that Hun Sen, you know, he does what he wants to do and he's an unpredictable guy. So, see, I don't think the Vietnamese influence is at all what it was.

QUESTION: Hi. My name is Baromi. I'm just interested in, you know, getting your take on CPP's new generation, especially after the 2013 election there are like several -- and, you know, Hun Manet got, you know, elected and put into the Parliament, so is Sok Sokan, Sok An's eldest son. So I just want to, you know, get your take on whether or not you think that they're going to change the way, you know, CPP runs the country or if Cambodian politics are going to change because of a new generation being injected into Cambodian politics.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, at the moment it's a bit too soon to tell. I mean, one of the problems with the CPP is that it recognizes that it has to appeal to the youth, but during the election campaign that basically took the form of playing pro government techno music and maneuvering a few sons of the leaders into positions of power. They didn't really do much to directly address the concerns of young people.

Potentially, it could be a positive thing to have young blood, but, I mean, a lot of people put a lot of hope in the fact that a lot of these young individuals have been educated overseas and that, therefore, they might contract sort of the inclination towards more democratic forms of government. But in the 1990s, most of the Funcinpec leadership that arrived and took positions of power

in the coalition government in 1993, they were educated, they were nuclear engineers, lawyers, highly educated individuals, and they were probably more corrupt than the CPP and just as intolerant of pluralism and democracy.

And whether it helps the CPP to regenerate and to maintain its hold on power, again, I think it's a bit too soon to say. I mean, these individuals might blossom into capable political leaders. But as, again, Prince Ranaridh shows, being the son of a political titan like Prince Sihanouk was, does not necessarily guarantee that those gifts -- those political gifts are not necessarily hereditary.

QUESTION: Hello. My name is Asarius. I'm a student at American University, studying international relations. I just have a question because you mentioned in your talk there's a word you mentioned was a desired destination on a political road. And in that way it made me -- I was thinking in comparison, all Southeast Asian countries in Southeast Asia, all 10 of them, it seemed only Indonesia is actually half a democratic society comparing to the other 9. And Burma was in still a process of becoming a democratic consolidation, but based on what I have read from Burma it seemed to be very questionable.

But with that comparison to other countries, it seemed that is there such a thing as the final destination or desired destination for a democratic political road in Southeast Asia or especially in Cambodia? Because it seemed like Cambodia did kind of a good job after the 2013 elections. So I just want to have your take on that. Thanks.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I mean, if you sort of jettison the idea that democracy is an inevitable development in these places and that its gains are fragile and easily reversible, I think the question becomes how do we improve non-democratic regimes without forcibly trying to transform them in toto, you know. And I think that that's -- well, I mean, I don't really even get to the issue of offering solutions in my book because these are incredibly complex questions and there may be no solutions to a lot of these questions.

Yes, so it's hard to say. I mean, I think if we scale back our ambitions a little bit and our expectations we'll probably have a more realistic idea of what can be achieved through incremental change in very targeted ways. I hope that answers your question. Today it's a difficult thing to answer.

QUESTION: Yes, my name's Ni Yung. Thanks for your presentation. I was just wondering if you can talk about social, cultural, economic policies and how do that they handle the political prisoners. For instance, many policies, they have foreign assistance, and if they have war and peace, they might have to change monetary policies or their values or even change the currency itself.

MR. STRANGIO: You're talking about political prisoners in Cambodia?

QUESTION: Political prisoners and socioeconomic changes.

MR. STRANGIO: Oh, I'm not sure I understand.

QUESTION: If they have war and peace and (inaudible), they have an inflation period, a depression, or whatever, they got to change their fiscal and monetary policies. So assuming if they have inflation in assuming, they might have to change the dollar value, Cambodian dollar, maybe in terms of originally 1-to-1, probably have to change to 40,000-to-1.

MR. STRANGIO: Right. Well, I mean, I'm not an expert on the economic implications of shifting -- or the de-dollarization, I suppose, which is what a lot of economists are advocating that Cambodia adopt. But, I mean, I can say, though, the Cambodian government on macroeconomic issues has been relatively good.

I mean, the general rule of thumb in Cambodia is that if a reform is going to touch entrenched political and economic interests, then it won't work. But a reform that deals with the visible side of the economy, the government does have the political will in those cases to enact significant changes: currency reforms; de-dollarization they are constantly talking about exploring, but whether it actually happens or not, I mean, like many reforms there's a lot of talk and not a lot of action. But, yes, I hope that answers what you're asking.

DR. LIOW: I think that lady had her hand up. Could you -- yes. Yes, yes, yes.

QUESTION: Thanks. Hi. I'm Monica Johnson. You spoke a little bit earlier about the role of the Cambodian-American diaspora impacting American legislators. I was wondering if you could expand on what you perceive to be the significance of the Cambodian diaspora, if any, and the political transformation.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, the Cambodian diaspora, according to the Cambodian Constitution, anybody who's Khmer, ethnically Khmer, has the right to Cambodian citizenship, and so this group actually plays a significant role in Cambodian politics today. It provides the lion's share of the funding for the Cambodian National Rescue Party, which is part of the reason that Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha and figures like this spend so much of their time outside of the country at fundraisers in Long Beach or Lowell, Massachusetts, or in Paris.

And, you know, the Cambodian diaspora, in many ways, it remains, in terms of its politics, remains stuck in the 1980s and it sees Vietnam very much as an existential threat to the country and it still sees Hun Sen as a communist even though Hun Sen probably in truth was never really a communist or a Marxist. And it is, yes, on the whole very strongly opposed to current government and so it -- and, of course, those views which are, like I said, sort of a Cold War vintage dovetailed with the sort of Cold War preoccupations I suppose you would say of some of the Republican congressmen who represent them, which is why you see these periodic sort of pummeling of Hun Sen in the Senate and the House of Reps.

Yes, but the diaspora, their politics tends to be very anti-communist, very anti-Hun Sen. And they are pretty much the financial lifeline of the Cambodian opposition. I think if they were to collapse, the party would -- or if the funding was to stop from the diaspora, the party would have a lot of difficulty surviving.

DR. LIOW: Over there.

QUESTION: Thanks. My name's Terrell Henry. I work in the U.S. Senate. You talked a bit about the dominance of Chinese investment in infrastructure in Cambodia and its role in kind of counterbalancing other international donors. And I think we've seen recently in Sri Lanka and in Burma a kind of both elite and popular pushback against this and it results in political changes there. And in Africa you're seeing also a kind of popular blowback to that. So I'm wondering if you see the same kind of trend happening in Cambodia and what the potential, you know, political implications could be.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, one of the ironies of the Cambodian situation is that Vietnam, a country whose influence has slowly declined, I believe, over the last two decades is still seen as the existential threat by many people whereas China, a country that is by far the most powerful patron of the Cambodian government and exercises the most political influence, is largely seen in a positive light. There is little public pushback in the way, in Cambodia, of the sort that you see like in Myanmar, for instance, where anti-Chinese politics has a long history.

But I think this is partially explainable by the fact that a lot of Cambodians have Chinese parentage somewhere along the line, especially the country's elites. And even more generally than that, you know, the Chinese culture is seen as a positive thing. It's a symbol of prosperity and middle class sort of optimism, I guess. And, you know, it's very common to see in Cambodian people's homes Chinese shrines or Chinese New Year decorations. Many Cambodians take off from work the Chinese New Year even though it's not an official public holiday.

And so, yes, so far the pushback against Chinese influence in Cambodia as such has been limited. I mean, there have, of course, been protests against Chinese-funded tourism developments where people have been thrown off their land, but it hasn't explicitly engaged with the fact that these are Chinese investments.

But I think, yes, even Sam Rainsy has voiced his support for China's claims in the South China Sea, mostly on the basis that the enemy of your enemy is your friend. And his focus on Vietnam leads him to that position, I think. But it is surprising how little reaction there has been to China's rise in Cambodia.

QUESTION: My name is Yu Ponsu. I'm from American University. I was hoping I would listen somewhat on the role of monarchy and its sustenance as a political institution even after the death of the former king, Norodom Sihanouk. What's your comments on that?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I think the death of Sihanouk really sealed the monarchy's end as a viable political force in Cambodia, but that development could probably be traced back to 2004, when Sihanouk abdicated and abdicated his throne and the kingship passed to his son, Norodom Sihamoni.

I mean, ever since the return of Sihanouk to Cambodia in 1991, after about 15-odd years in exile, the CPP has -- it worked to sort of blunt his influence. Sihanouk was one of the -- I think the main threat to the party's hold on power in that transitional period, and partly that threat was neutralized by neutralizing the royalist party, Funcinpec, which Sihanouk had founded in 1981, even though he was no longer by that point the president of the party. And by also, you know, I talk in my book about the way that they shackle him with constitutional requirements.

You know, the constitution, passed in 1993, says that the king will reign but not rule. And the CPP has done everything in its power to ensure that Sihanouk did not overstep those constitutional lines.

And so Sihanouk, you know, you see him, especially after 1997, becoming increasingly frustrated with the restrictions. He still saw himself as the country's savior, as he did in the '60s. And I think that by the end of his life, he was quite a melancholy figure. You know, he'd missed his chance to guide Cambodia into a new era of prosperity.

And, yes, I think by the time he abdicates and nominates Sihamoni as his successor, that's the point at which he really gives the CPP what they wanted all along, which was a king who would stay out of politics, and Sihamoni

was certainly that. He'd grown up in Prague and spent much of his life in Paris, where he was a dance choreographer and ballet dancer. He was a man of the arts. He had very little interest in a political life and very little political ambition. And he lacked the sort of vigor and political instincts of his father, and so for the CPP he was perfect. He was somebody who would cut ribbons, bestow titles, and, you know, becomes in due course the subject of rote official praise of the monarchy, but he's politically defanged.

And so today, the monarchy's basically window dressing. Everybody can refer to the monarchy as sort of -- they claim to support it and it's the symbolic heart of Cambodia, but a lot of real duties of the old what you would have, I guess, described as historically the role of the Cambodian monarch has been essentially subsumed within Hun Sen's power. Even though he would never say this and I think it would be very sensitive for him to actually admit this openly, but he's essentially become the monarch now.

I describe him as a peasant king and, you know, his rule is embellished with the same sort of Sanskrit titles and ranks and symbolism of past king. And indeed, he even claims or claimed at one point to be descendent from a Cambodian king from the 15th century who had, you know, unified the country and brought prosperity. So I think that gives you a sense of how he sees himself and I think that he does see himself very much in the tradition of figures like Sihanouk.

DR. LIOW: Okay, up front here and then back there and then all the way back.

QUESTION: Eleanor Bachrach, former USAID. Could you speak a little about the war crime tribunals? I don't know whether they've concluded. What impact did they have on the political situation, if any?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I mean, I described sort of the UNTAC mission and the Paris Agreements as representing a collision between two vastly different world views in some ways. You have the Kantian optimism of the United Nations and the sort of hope for a world of globalizing democracy, and then you have the realities of Cambodia. And in my book I title my chapter on the Khmer Rouge tribunal "UNTAC Redux," because I think this is a period at which a lot of the disappointed democratic hopes become rebooted. And the tribunals or the chance of holding tribunals to try former members of the Khmer Rouge is seen as a way of, again, putting the country back onto a democratic path.

And so one of the problems of that, of course, is that the tribunals have now borne this incredible weight of expectation. They've become like a blank screen on which interest groups of all sorts have projected their hopes for the country. And so for human rights groups, it's a chance to end the culture of

impunity. For the Cambodian government, it's a chance to reinforce its founding myths as the overthrowers of the Khmer Rouge and the bringers of peace. And for the opposition, it's a chance to unravel that myth and substitute its own. And there's many more different examples.

And so, again, I think the tribunal represents a very similar clash between two incompatible ideas of justice. You know, the Cambodian idea, which is that you -- that's a very politically colored version of justice, where you put a few handpicked clique, as it would have been referred to in the 1980s, on trial and you milk it for political capital. And then there's the United Nations very legalistic view of justice, which is that you need to have an independent court that can roam freely and investigate crimes and find out who's most responsible and try them accordingly.

And the fundamentally incompatible views of justice have created an institution which is fundamentally divided in itself. I mean, the tribunal is made up of an international and a national wing, both with their own operating budgets and staff. And whenever the tribunal strays into politically sensitive territory, as when it is suggested that certain individuals be tried beyond what the government has sort of allowed so far, then the national staff of the tribunal and the international staff find themselves at loggerheads.

And when you're asking what impact the tribunals had, I think, like many things, it's too soon to say. But one thing I've noticed is that in the villages, you know, it's very abstract what's happening in Phnom Penh in the courtroom. I mean, even for people who are raised in a culture where these sorts of trials -- we understand the idea of an impartial judiciary and a fair trial and, you know, core principles like the presumption of innocence. Even people with that background have difficulty getting their head around this labyrinthine legal process. But when you go to the villages, you know, people ask questions like why do these people in prison, why do these horrible leaders, these indefensible human beings, why are they getting better medical care than the vast majority of the Cambodian people? Why is there no chance for these people to be -- why is there no chance for the death penalty? And, again, I think international standards and local realities come into quite jarring collision.

DR. LIOW: Yes, there was a question over there and then we'll take the other one, as well, together.

QUESTION: Hi. My name's Carl Hollick and I've been back in D.C. for 6-1/2 months, but I've been living on and off in Cambodia for 17, 17-1/2. And in 2014, I did my thesis and it was on social media activism and forced evictions in Cambodia. So, of course, I talked to a lot of the people in the Independent Monk Network for Social Justice. And as I'm sure you're aware,

you know how heavily they leveraged Facebook and social media to move people around the country and so forth.

MR. STRANGIO: Yes.

QUESTION: And during my interviews, I mean, you talked about the Vietnamese kind of being demonized and there's historical basis to that, but it's also undeniable that a large portion, if not the most largest proportion, of the companies involved in forced evictions are Vietnamese-based. So I asked a number of the monks and I said, well, you know, in Burma, in Myanmar, the monks have taken a very political stance and motivating a lot of the common people to be violent against their own will. And I want to ask the monks about this. They said, yes, it eventually could happen here with the monks. This wasn't everybody. Do you foresee that as realistic at all?

MR. STRANGIO: An outbreak of violence?

QUESTION: Yes, not just like in general, but some of the monks participating, as well.

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I mean, one thing that became very evident during the post election period when there were these street protests and crackdowns is the simmering anger that a lot of Cambodians feel. And it's something that, for the most part, the surface is always very calm. But, you know, there was the case when -- this was actually the event that broke the political deadlock. There was a small protest called by the opposition and their district security guards employed by the city were sent out to discourage them, you know, and scare them away. And the protestors set upon these guards and beat them, beat several of them bloody. And the sudden anger that was sparked by that was quite unexpected and it shows that there is a lot of deep anger there in certain segments of Cambodian society.

And so, I mean, it's too hard to say whether this is like -- or to assess the likelihood of this happening. But I think one of the dangers of the Vietnamese issue is that Vietnam and the perception of the threat posed by Vietnam becomes so closely linked with legitimate social justice issues that political change could be accompanied by an outbreak of violence against Vietnamese or against people perceived to be Vietnamese. And so did I answer your question?

QUESTION: (inaudible)

MR. STRANGIO: Oh, please remind me.

QUESTION: Yes, you did.

MR. STRANGIO: Oh, thanks. (Laughter)

DR. LIOW: Yes, back there, sir.

QUESTION: Yes, my name's Stephen Morris. I'm the author of a book called *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*.

MR. STRANGIO: Oh, yes, I'm familiar. Yes.

QUESTION: Okay. Look, I've been following this country for a long time and I'm just back from there right now. One of the things that strikes me about Cambodia in terms of the changing situation is the demographics. The younger generation are not as much under the fatalistic influence of the party. The last election I drove around on the motorbikes with the demonstrators who were against Hun Sen, and it's obvious and striking how the younger generation is vociferous and unafraid unlike the older generations, unafraid of the government.

And it seems to me that it's inevitable over time, given the structural sickness of the country, which is a product of the political system, that the younger generation are going to become so large in terms of the voting segment that they're going to create a very difficult situation for Hun Sen in terms of election rigging.

Now, the question I have for you is, if Hun Sen is found to be unable to rig a future election through various methods, not only the inequality of access to media, but also through ballot stuffing and so on, if we see that situation in an upcoming election under what circumstances do you think the international community could enforce the result in favor of the opposition given the fact that when we had the United Nations there in the past, they didn't enforce the election result? Do you see any will on the part of the international community to enforce a fair election if such an election took place?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, they're really two questions: do they have the will and do they have the ability?

Now, I think if a post election upheaval were to be accompanied by large levels of violence, then I think that is a point at which foreign governments will reassess their approach to Cambodia. But Hun Sen has been very clever in sort of --he's curbed his more violent tendencies, I think, in recent years and he has a very narrow room for maneuver when it comes to employing those sorts of tactics. And so they tend to be employed in very strategic and very limited ways that are effective in scaring people, but, you know, not in scaring away foreign support.

And after this last election, I mean, the opposition did claim they had won, but they never produced any evidence that they could show to the internationals to say, look, we actually did. It was basically an assertion. They may well have been right, I don't know.

I mean, I don't think anybody really knows for sure what the real outcome was, but they would have to be able to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt they had won the election, so that would be a challenge. I think there's enough ambiguities once you get to the village level in Cambodia that it would give donors an escape route to avoid doing anything. And barring any massive outbreak of violence or upheaval or civil conflict, I think that they would probably go along with supporting the status quo or, if not supporting it openly, but certainly tolerating it.

But really what will happen in the next election, that's really the \$60,000 question. And I think the demographics are absolutely vital. I mean, 65 percent of the population is under the age of 30. I mean, these people don't have that same fear about the Khmer Rouge. And the government, I think, is taking that challenge pretty seriously.

But at the same time, you know, cultures don't change overnight. And one of the things about the post election situation is that as soon as things got real, as soon as the troops were sent into the streets and started shooting at people, it quickly came to an end. And I think that instinctive deference to authority and fear, the commingling of fear and awe that a lot of ordinary Cambodians view their leaders with, that was quickly activated once Hun Sen sort of made it clear that he would not tolerate any more acts of civil disobedience or public protests.

And so, yes, in some ways things are changing, but it's about sort of balancing where the changes begin and the continuity ends or vice versa. But I think that it's undoubtable that young people no longer have that low benchmark. I think that's probably the main change. They no longer have the benchmark that anything better than the Khmer Rouge is acceptable.

The benchmark is now, well, it's Thailand, it's Vietnam. They have access to the Internet, which is an absolutely crucial thing now because it gets them around the government's media firewalls. And all of a sudden, they're seeing that actually we're kind of behind. And I think that that's one of the main things that's really pushed people into the street as of late.

DR. LIOW: Yes, at the back there and then we'll take these two questions, the last questions. At the back there, sir, and then the lady in front here.

QUESTION: Hi. I'm Tom Lum with the Congressional Research Service. I have a question about current politics and institutions, the Parliament. So the National Rescue Party gained seats, but has that translated into any greater influence in the National Assembly or not or any sort of check on Hun Sen's power? So, in other words, does gaining seats in the National Assembly mean anything politically?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, the short answer is not really. I mean, Cambodia remains a country in which political power centers on individuals, not on institutions. And so when the minister -- you don't work for the ministry, you work for the minister himself. And when the minister changes positions, you go with him regardless of your or his expertise in that new position.

And one of the problems with the opposition is that they've made demands for institutional changes in a system where institutions have very little purchase. And so it hasn't done much to restrain Hun Sen's power. However, it's not entirely meaningless. I mean, I think that having them in Parliament pressing their claims and questioning the government officials and maintaining that sort of -- trying to play that role as best they can within the limitations that exist has -- can, you know, do some good.

I mean, one of the most -- the recent stories to come out of Cambodia and one of the saddest in a while is a village in the west of the country which has been infected by HIV/AIDS because of a doctor, probably a quack, who reused syringes and he infected virtually -- 200-odd people were infected with the virus, and there has been a big upheaval and uproar about this in Cambodia. And the National Assembly Commission on Health is actually grilling the government now about -- and I believe that's controlled by the CNRP, that particular commission as part of the political arrangement last year. And I have effectively been able to press this question and the government realizes that this is indefensible, you know, that this has happened.

And so on issues that don't touch upon fundamental political interests and economic interests, I think that they can do some good and they can represent their constituents, but it's not going to be a real -- they're not going to function as a real check on Hun Sen's power, at least not at the moment.

DR. LIOW: Final question here.

QUESTION: Hi. My name is Mindy. I'm with American University and Asia Society. I wanted to touch upon the Chinese-Cambodian relationship that you mentioned. So would you say that Cambodia has bandwagoned to stay with China unlike its Southeast Asian neighbors who are more or less hedging and not knowing which direction they want to go? And if that's the case, what are the implications of Cambodia's role within ASEAN?

MR. STRANGIO: Well, I think Cambodia -- well, Cambodia's relationship with China goes back a long way. That's the first thing to note. Sihanouk, who led the country in the '50s and '60s, and Zhou En-lai were very close, personal friends. And the Chinese gave Sihanouk sanctuary during his years of exile in Beijing and they gave him a palatial home and a monthly stipend that enabled him to keep his political career bubbling along. Sihanouk actually didn't have that much independent wealth, so it was vital for him. It was a vital lifeline for him.

I think the Cambodian enthusiasm for China has to be seen in the context of the international intervention in Cambodia in the early 1990s. For Cambodian leaders who have always bristled at foreign arrogance and foreign lecturing, and bristled at the hypocrisy of Western governments that have supported the Khmer Rouge and then turned around and lectured them about their own accommodations with the Khmer Rouge, for instance, they see China as a way of shrugging off that pressure. And so I think that explains the enthusiasm with which Chinese influence has been welcomed in Cambodia.

Within ASEAN, I mean, this could create quite an interesting schism. I mean, I know that after the 2012 foreign ministers meeting in Phnom Penh, when the Cambodians endorsed sort of the Chinese view that the South China Sea dispute be settled on a bilateral basis rather than on an ASEAN level or multilateral basis, other ASEAN governments saw Cambodia as a stalking horse, as a cat's paw of China. And I think the danger is that that perception takes hold and it divides ASEAN in some way. But it's too soon to say really. You know, ASEAN integration still hasn't sort of reached its endpoint, but it certainly is potentially a point of tension going forward.

DR. LIOW: Okay. I think we're just about out of time. I don't know about you guys, but I've learned a lot. It's been an illuminating session for sure and, also, just a sampling, I would say, of what's in the book. So again, here's another pitch --

MR. STRANGIO: At good bookstores everywhere, yes.

DR. LIOW: -- do get the book. I would recommend bookdepository.com. It's free shipping, so look that up. (Laughter)

For now, please join me in thanking Sebastian for his talk.
(Applause)

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