Profile: Hun Sen

At the age of forty Hun Sen has already reached the peak of his political career. His place in Cambodian politics, however, has never been as ambiguous as now. His rise from obscurity and onto the international stage has meant for him, just as it has for Cambodia, renewed uncertainty and disruption.

He was born to a peasant family in Kompong Cham, eastern Cambodia, in 1952. After a very brief school education Hun Sen joined the Khmer Rouge at age sixteen and worked as an underground courier. When the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975 he had risen to the level of intelligence officer. Less than two years later, escaping purges in which he would almost certainly have been executed, Hun Sen defected to Vietnam and thus began his career in politics.

Hun Sen the politician must be understood in the context of traditions of Cambodian political leadership and nationalism. All post-independence Cambodian leaders have claimed to represent the interests of the Cambodian people. They have all sought the backing of one or more foreign powers as guarantors for their small, militarily weak and politically volatile nation-in-the-making. While Sihanouk, Lon Nol, Pol Pot and Hun Sen have for so long decried each other’s legitimacy as rulers, aspects of their leadership styles and their nationalisms overlap.

When Hun Sen became Cambodia’s foreign minister in 1979 he was known only for his reported talent as a military commander. By 1985, when he moved into the prime ministerial portfolio, Cambodia was still firmly in the era of socialist internationalism, marxism-leninism, and isolation from the West. The public face of Cambodian political leadership was like that of Vietnam, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: staid and straight-laced. In 1989 identifiable factions and personalities began to appear through the veneer of the Cambodian ruling party’s public unanimity. Both domestically and internationally, Hun Sen has been the most prominent of these. His public image is well-honed, whether speaking colloquial Khmer with rural Cambodians, negotiating in Western conceptual terms with high level foreign diplomats or conversing in ‘high’ Khmer, a ‘royal’ language Hun Sen took pains to learn specifically for audiences with Sihanouk. He thus appears an able political tactician, capable of drawing wisely on past lessons for his own political benefit. At no time in his career, for instance, has he boarded the racist bandwagon of ethnic nationalism, a strategy which sealed the fate of both prior regimes.

For many years Hun Sen depended on the Communist Party and his administration for political support. Now, however, he has distanced himself from the party which has lately come under the unchallenged control of conservative Chea Sim. Student protests in Phnom Penh have revealed the startling dissipation of the Phnom Penh administration. State assets have been entirely sold off to private interests by renegade bureaucrats. Yet Hun Sen’s inaction in the face of these events indicates serious shortcomings in his political authority. His popular credibility has also been harmed by evidence of corruption within his own family network.

With recent institution of the Supreme National Council (SNC) as the peak ruling body in Cambodia, representatives from each faction—and therefore of each past tradition of Cambodian nationalism—are in Phnom Penh vying for their share of political influence. Hun Sen, while positioned carefully by Sihanouk’s side, is forced to deal with the current political malaise from the position of a politician with a rapidly dissolving support base.

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