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Cambodia and the not-so united Nations: prospects for future stability

Abstract

Extract:

In a major international conference, held at Sydney in early April 1994, the prospects for peace and security in Cambodia were discussed in two panels. Speakers included Helen Jarvis, Serge Thion and Peter Anderson. This article is a general report on their papers, together with some contextual comments and footnotes added to allow readers to pursue the issues raised.

Keywords

United Nations, politics, international relations

CONFERENCE REPORTS:

CAMBODIA AND THE NOT-SO-UNITED NATIONS - PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE STABILITY

In a major international Conference, held at Sydney in early April 1994¹, the prospects for peace and security in Cambodia were discussed in two panels. Speakers included Helen Jarvis, a Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Serge Thion, a research fellow at the French research institute CNRS and author of *Watching Cambodia: Ten Paths to Enter the Cambodian Tangle* (Bangkok, White Lotus, 1993), and Peter Anderson, who has been an aid worker in Cambodia for over a year. This article is a general report on their papers, together with some contextual comments and footnotes added to allow readers to pursue the issues raised.

The main problems for the prospect of a lasting peace in Cambodia remain the complexity of internal Khmer politics, as well as tangled regional and international issues which were not fully resolved by the United Nations operations of the last two years. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in effect created an alternative administration until new elections could be held in May 1993. The three speakers all agreed that one of the agendas of UNTAC was to act as a mechanism whereby the government which had previously held control, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK, later known as the State of Cambodia, SOC, both based around the Cambodian People's Party, CPP), could relinquish power and allow elections to occur. This government had not been widely recognized internationally because of the support it had received from Vietnam, and in some quarters was viewed as a puppet regime imposed by the Vietnamese invasion of 1978-79. Nonetheless the State of Cambodia was a supporter of the electoral process, but sought to have this accompanied by disarmament of all parties, including the Khmer Rouge.

These complexities in part are concerned with the ambivalent status of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge and its genocidal policies were ousted in 1979 by Vietnamese troops. It was this Vietnamese involvement, in particular, which resulted in U.S. and in the long term U.N. refusal to recognize this government, though it retained effective control of Cambodia from 1979. Helen Jarvis also noted that the U.N. had given some \$80 million of aid to camps along the Thai border, while Singapore had given some \$10 million and the U.S. \$20 million to the 'non-communist' resistance. Unfortunately, large amounts of this aid ended up with the Khmer Rouge. Likewise, the investigative journalist John Pilger has revealed that large amounts of U.S., Chinese and European armaments end up in the hand of the Khmer Rouge². Helen Jarvis noted in this context that an earlier peace keeping initiative, the ASEAN proposal in 1981 of a joint withdrawal and demilitarisation of Cambodia, was blocked by the U.S. and China. Ironically, the failure of international recognition and consequent lack of aid probably forced the Vietnamese to remain in Cambodia longer than would have otherwise been the case. An initial withdrawal programme was announced in 1984, with the last Vietnamese forces leaving in 1989, slightly ahead of schedule. The U.N. had refused to send observers to oversee this action.

The U.N. operation itself was extraordinarily expensive - some \$2.8 billion was spent over two years in setting up a Supreme National Council (23 October 1991) which would prepare elections for

1. The *International Green Left Conference*, March 31 - April 4, held at the University of New South Wales.

2. In Pilger's film documentary, *Cambodia: The Betrayal*, this was in part due to active support from elements within the U.S. State Department, and from the complex trading networks of the international arms dealers. Here the policy of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' seems to have reached new heights of absurdity.

May 1993³. Interestingly enough, the Khmer Rouge were signatories to basic protocols preparing for a 'normalization' of Cambodia, but in fact were not disarmed, and chose not to fully participate in the electoral process. In fact, by 1993 the Khmer Rouge seem to have made military gains at the expense of the other factions. Peter Anderson argued that the Khmer Rouge increased their control from 5% to 20% of Cambodian territory. The freedom of movement retained by the Khmer Rouge, of course, was also evident in their ability to attack and even kidnap small units of the U.N. forces⁴. By April 1993, it seemed that the Khmer Rouge sought to oppose and inhibit the elections by threats and violence both within the countryside and Phnom Penh itself⁵. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge still remain a major military and economic force along segments of the Thai border, where they receive sanctuary in refugee camps, and also engage in an active trade in timber and precious gem stones, both of which ensure their continued economic viability. Helen Jarvis suggested that there is a pressing need for the international community to call on the Thai government to close this border trade. Of course, there is a limit to how strongly the Thai government can pursue this policy, since, as noted by Serge Thion, the Khmer Rouge have invested heavily in Thai business networks, and it seems likely that certain elements in the Thai military are interconnected into this system. Nonetheless, the Thai government is proud of its international profile, and would hate to be seen as a poor international citizen in the region. As noted by Serge Thion, there has been some reduction in Khmer Rouge facilities in Thailand. However, it is possible for the border to be, if not closed, then at least made less porous.

One particularly disturbing aspect of the discussions was the ongoing problem of land mines causing widespread casualties among the civilian population. According to Helen Jarvis, the de-mining programme to date has been a poor effort, with locals being trained to do the work on low wages and limited budgets. The U.S. funded Cambodian Mine Awareness Centre does just that - promotes awareness but does not actively de-mine. It is estimated that there are 300 casualties a month due to mines, with an estimated 6 million mines still deployed. Furthermore, in the areas of contest between the government and the Khmer Rouge, mines are apparently still being laid. In fact it is possible that more mines are being laid than are picked up⁶. According to Serge Thion, in his book *Watching Cambodia*, this effort is in stark contrast to the rapid progress in removing minefields from Kuwait after the Gulf War⁷. In Cambodia, the agencies which are most effective in trying to combat this problem are NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) and the British group, the Helo Trust, but these organizations need much more international aid to deal with the problem.

The result of the 1993 elections was fascinating in that there was a 38% vote for the Phnom Penh government, led by Hun Sen, and approximately 45% for the pro-royalist Funcinpec groups⁸. Surprisingly, a new government emerged as an approximate 50/50 coalition with no genuine opposition in place. This approach to politics is understandable from the point of view of traditional Khmer political life. Serge Thion, agreeing with the kind of analysis presented by S.J.

3. This Council included representatives of SOC, of the Khmer Rouge, of Prince Sihanouk and from Sonn Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front, see Roberts, David "Cambodia's Uncertain Future", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 6 no. 1, 1993, p71.

4. See "Who Are the Khmer Rouge", *Asiaweek*, 13 January 1993, pp24-25

5. Thayer, Nate "Bloody Agenda: Khmer Rouge Set Out to Wreck Planned Elections", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 April 1993, p20

6. The situation is described by Nate Thayer: - 'Farmers continue to harvest in pockets of usable land surrounded by minefields marked with red signs bearing skulls and written warnings. UN-funded de-mining teams drive by in land cruisers, while soldiers lay new mines. More mines are laid than are being picked up these days', in "Lawless Land: Violence by Security Forces on the Rise", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 January 1994, p18. The problem is particularly acute in the northwest, as noted by Roberts, David "Cambodia's Uncertain Future", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 6 no. 1, 1993, p71.

7. Thion, Serge *Watching Cambodia: Ten Paths to Enter the Cambodian Tangle*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 1993, pp207-208.

8. The CPP received 51 seats, Funcinpec 58. The major ministries were divided between the two parties, with Funcinpec controlling the finance and foreign affairs areas. See Thayer, Nate "Surface Calm: Power-sharing Pact Brings Little Change", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 July 1993, pp26-7

Tambiah's *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (1992), noted that the Khmers have always run a 'galactic' system of local centres of power, with more powerful groups asserting hegemony over others⁹. Traditionally, as in the Thai system, there was little scope for genuine compromise, with opposing groups either submitting or being destroyed. This hierarchic system was in fact little changed by the emergence of Western style parties after the end of World War II and the development of a constitution influenced by French models, leading to full independence in 1953. It is not surprising, therefore, that princes emerged as leaders of these parties, using them in local contests for prestige and power. Ironically, this system continued within the communist and left-wing groups resisting the French colonial system, with Pol Pot only slowly emerging as a dominant power by destroying potential alternative leaders and then trying in 1978-79 to forge truly centralized control.

Serge Thion argued that this traditional system of accruing and developing personal power still influences contemporary Cambodian politics and subverts rational state-building efforts. It explains why no genuine opposition party operating in a legal and peaceful way could find a place in the Khmer system, and why the current coalition has found a place in government for its erstwhile opponents. In this context, we can understand how the Khmer Rouge have recently asked to be recognized politically through the notion of 'equilibrium', and asked to be allowed to operate inside the political regime, having officials appointed at different levels of government. This can be requested without any genuine implication that the accords underlying the current settlement are really accepted, or that the Khmer Rouge will disarm, even now that they have lost support from the People's Republic of China. In this sense, Serge Thion argued, the current Cambodian political solution is not necessarily permanent, and not necessarily stable. The lack of stability in the political system militates against a lasting peace in Cambodia. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge have moved many of their activities into smuggling, drug running, the exploitation of gems and timber within their zone of control, and invested more widely in fishing and agricultural enterprises. The Khmer Rouge is 'doing business', and with these resources is able to continue both its access to munitions, and to sustain its political influence. Peter Anderson described them as the richest guerilla force in the world¹⁰. According to Serge Thion, the Khmer Rouge is no longer an ideologically committed revolutionary organization, simply one player among others in a quest for power and wealth. In this context, there have recently been relatively large numbers of Khmer Rouge defections (2,000 in the last year), though more needs to be done to encourage defectors. It is particularly important to ensure that they can safely return to their villages without the fear of violent retribution. Here once again traditional social practices come into play: a government amnesty is not enough since defectors need to find local protectors to ensure their safety¹¹.

The sizeable areas of Cambodia under Khmer Rouge control have also forced the current government, since December 1993, to undertake an offensive around Pailin (near the south-western border with Thailand) to gain back lost ground. It is unclear whether the apparent success of this operation is in part based on a Khmer Rouge political decision to appear non-aggressive in order to gain international sympathy, while at the same time retaining the ability to launch a counter-offensive at a later date. As noted by Peter Anderson, with the urgent task of rebuilding the badly damaged infrastructure of Cambodia, it is exactly these military activities that the current government can little afford. In fact, government forces are badly organized and have logistic problems in supplying both food and ammunition to their front line units.

Against these problems we must note one surprising feature of the UN operation. In spite of the enormous cost involved, the UNTAC effort left little permanent infrastructure in place. These issues were raised by Peter Anderson, who had been in Cambodia for approximately a year as an aid

9. See also Tambiah, S.J. *Culture, Thought and Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp322-324.

10. It is estimated that the Khmer Rouge earn \$1.2 - \$3.0 million a month in their gem trade alone. See Roberts, David "Cambodia's Uncertain Future", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 6 no. 1, 1993, p74.

11. For efforts made by Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh to improve the amnesty programme, see Thayer, Nate "Defectors' Dilemma: Broken Promises Hold Back Khmer Rouge Surrenders", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 December 1993 & 6 January 1994, p16.

worker. Bearing in mind the enormous cost of the UNTAC operation (\$2.8 billion), the total aid pledged for 1994/95 to help Cambodia rebuild its devastated nation is only \$770 million. Here we see clearly outlined one of the major problems of U.N. operations. Though a success in allowing elections to proceed and in reducing the international refugee problem (for example, some 370,000 Cambodians are expected to be repatriated from Thailand¹²), the U.N. operation is likely to have had only short-term rather than long-term successes in truly stabilizing Cambodia. In the meantime, the annual average income remains extremely low¹³, with slight increases in wages through 1994. Government workers, for example, have received only US\$16 a month, with a 20% increase expected in 1994¹⁴. Minefields and the prospect of further military conflict remain. In this context, it is not surprising if both government and private efforts will only result in slow economic and social gains¹⁵. As noted by Serge Thion in *Watching Cambodia*, the prospects for Cambodia suggest that after an initial recovery, there is the danger of subsequent stagnation. Only in the long term will Cambodia develop sufficiently to have a chance to enter fully into the 'modern world economy'.

Further Reading: A good general history of Cambodia from ancient times up until 1991 is provided by David Chandler's *A History of Cambodia* (2nd edition, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1993). For a very different interpretation to that proposed by Helen Jarvis and Serge Thion, see Gunn, Geoffrey C. & Lee, Jefferson *Cambodia Watching Down Under*, (Bangkok, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1991)

12. Thayer, Nate "Wretched of the Earth", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 April 1993, p21.

13. In 1992 the GDP per capita was estimated to be only US\$90. From Krien, Peter *SBS World Guide*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 1992, p78.

14. Downie, Sue "Aid Funds Lift Cambodia as Government Reshapes Economy", *Asia Today*, January 1994, p14.

15. Roberts, David "Cambodia's Uncertain Future", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 6 no. 1, 1993, p75.