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Lee Morgenbesser

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# CAMBODIA'S TRANSITION TO HEGEMONIC AUTHORITARIANISM

*Lee Morgenbesser*

*Lee Morgenbesser is a lecturer in comparative politics at the School of Government and International Relations of Australia's Griffith University. He is the author of Behind the Façade: Elections Under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia (2016).*

Tragedy runs like a thread through the history of Cambodian politics. Since 1953, when the country gained its independence from France, it has endured four coups, three foreign invasions, one civil war, and a cataclysmic genocide carried out by the Communist Party of Kampuchea (better known as the Khmer Rouge) between 1975 and 1979. Authoritarian rule has been a reliable accompaniment to this massive suffering—the genocide is thought to have killed as much as a quarter of the population—and unfair elections have in turn been a reliable accompaniment to authoritarianism. Monarchs, military juntas, personalist dictators, and dominant parties have all repeatedly used such bogus elections to prolong their time in power.

For eighteen months in 1992 and 1993, the United Nations intervened directly. It sent thousands of soldiers, officials, and volunteers to run the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in hopes of solving the country's persistent problems. Although UNTAC succeeded on many fronts, as a mission for building peace and democracy it failed. The power-sharing deal that it painstakingly constructed broke down, and violence flared anew in 1997. The government that emerged from the factional strife was a classic façade regime, hiding the reality of authoritarian rule behind a false front of multiparty elections.

Recent years have witnessed yet another iteration of Cambodia's tragic story. This came in the form of a crackdown leading up to a sham 29 July 2018 election in which the long-ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) claimed a 77 percent vote share and every one of the 125 seats in the National Assembly, the lower house of Cambodia's bicameral

Parliament. The architect of this travesty was dictator Hun Sen. Officially the world's longest-serving prime minister, he has ruled this South-east Asian nation of sixteen million since January 1985.<sup>1</sup> His crackdown was meant to crush the last remaining vestiges of public opposition to his CPP regime. Civil society groups, independent media organizations, and political opponents were among the targets, paving the way for the CPP to nearly double its previous total of 68 seats in the Assembly. The "one-two punch" of a brutal suppression campaign followed by a bogus election has allowed Hun Sen and his party to keep their iron grip on power while feigning conformity to the principles of party competition, citizen participation, and impartially validated results.

Even in light of the flawed elections and outbreaks of repression that have long marred Cambodian politics, the recent events are without precedent. Having failed to divide a burgeoning opposition and yet still needing to hold an election, Hun Sen did something that his fellow Cambodians have never seen in their country and that outside scholars have seldom seen anywhere: He pushed his regime from competitive authoritarianism to full-blown "hegemonic" authoritarian rule, capping his crackdown with a balloting that Human Rights Watch called "not genuine" and "fundamentally flawed" in light of the unfair conditions under which the vote was set to be held.<sup>2</sup>

According to Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, a competitive authoritarian regime is one in which

Formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage *vis-à-vis* their opponents. Such regimes are competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair.<sup>3</sup>

The recent crackdown and election in Cambodia were abnormal for a competitive authoritarian regime. Notwithstanding some parallels to ongoing events in Turkey and Venezuela, the actions of Hun Sen's government defied the more typical trajectory of an authoritarian regime. Shifts from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism are rare. The best cases for comparison are Algeria under Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Cameroon under Paul Biya, Guinea under Lansana Conté, and Russia under Vladimir Putin. The onset of hegemonic authoritarianism in Cambodia therefore offers a timely warning about how authoritarian ruling parties—and the dictators who head them—can use their dominance to shut down opposition and hollow out national elections so that they pose little risk to the regime.

According to scholars of comparative democratization, markers of hegemonic authoritarianism can include a ruling party that gains seat

or vote shares exceeding 70 percent; that wins all elections for more than twenty years straight; or that stays in power for at least a decade while holding a legislative supermajority the whole time.<sup>4</sup> In Cambodia in 2018, the CPP claimed 77.3 percent of the popular vote and continued a run of electoral “victories” that had begun exactly two decades earlier. The CPP’s legislative supermajority has never been adequately continuous, so the third marker did not apply.

A key limitation of the last two criteria, however, is that they only allow us to identify hegemonic authoritarian regimes based on decades-long trends. In Cambodia, hegemonic authoritarianism has developed far more quickly than that. From the crackdown’s outset, it was clear that institutionalizing hegemonic authoritarianism via an election was the goal. The systematic nature of Hun Sen’s strategy was evident. Opposition parties found themselves suddenly banned; basic civil liberties and political rights were overtly and arbitrarily violated; media autonomy and the rule of law were breached; and the government monopolized access to media.

### **A Brutal Crackdown**

This pattern of events at first may not have snapped sharply into focus because the periods leading up to elections in Cambodia have always featured heightened repression. Cambodia’s combined Freedom House (FH) score going back more than a decade and a half has been a 5.5, which has earned the country a longtime Not Free rating on the FH scale, where 1 means most free and 7 signifies least free. Until recently, the July 1997 coup (in which Hun Sen ousted co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh) stood as the most manifest example of Hun Sen’s unfettered willingness to use violence to maintain political power. The two decades since have seen a string of opposition leaders fall victim to repression, mainly through false lawsuits pressed via a corrupt court system. The most notable targets were Prince Ranariddh in the 1990s, Sam Rainsy in the 2000s, and Kem Sokha more recently.

Around the same time these figures were facing “legal fixing,” other opponents of continued authoritarian rule were facing even worse: assassination. Among those murdered were opposition legislator Om Radsady (February 2003), trade unionist Chea Vichea (January 2004), environmental activist Chut Wutty (April 2012), and political commentator Kem Ley (July 2016). The acts of repression recently seen in Cambodia were thus not abnormal by historical standards. What set the crackdown apart was its systematic nature—old repression was being made to serve a new strategy. The goal of transitioning from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism required a crackdown whose scope and severity were without precedent.

The downplaying of democracy and human rights by the administra-

tion of U.S. president Donald Trump made matters worse. The rhetorical gap that opened up between the White House and the career diplomats of the U.S. State Department in this area received wide notice in Cambodia. Even before the U.S. election, Hun Sen had endorsed candidate Trump, calling him a “businessman” who “never wants war.”<sup>5</sup>

In February 2017, a Cambodian government spokesman accused certain independent media groups of purveying “fake news” and threatened them with shutdown.<sup>6</sup> In May 2018, under the pretext of preventing “fake news” from causing social chaos and threatening national security, the Cambodian government set up a working group to monitor all news and social-networking websites. This added assault on free speech took place just two months before the national election.

Of course, the Trump administration cannot be held responsible for every human-rights abuse committed by Hun Sen’s dictatorship, which was repressing Cambodians long before Trump took office. Regardless of who resides in the White House, dictators have their own reasons for suppressing the media, the opposition, and civil society. Yet as Anne Applebaum has written, President Trump’s “frequent and markedly enthusiastic comments about dictators” are helping to solidify the authority, justify the brutality, and reinforce the power of such rulers.<sup>7</sup> Hun Sen is one of many benefactors of that new reality.

Another factor that aided Hun Sen’s crackdown was China’s seemingly unconditional willingness to back him. After a hostile relationship with China throughout the 1980s, when Cambodia enjoyed much closer ties with Vietnam, Hun Sen sought greater support from the emerging superpower. This “no-strings” relationship has evolved to include diplomatic protection (stifling debate on Cambodia in the UN Human Rights Council), electoral assistance (providing equipment for national polls), governance reforms (improving the judicial system), and military aid (supplying weapons to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces).

Phnom Penh’s economic dependence on Beijing has been growing as well. In 2016, China was the source of about 40 percent of Cambodia’s bilateral aid and 30 percent of its direct investment. By contrast, Cambodia that year received only a tenth of its bilateral aid and 3 percent of its direct investment from the United States. In July 2016, Hun Sen’s government (as it had in the past) blocked a joint statement by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations criticizing China’s aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. When Hun Sen launched his brutal crackdown, China backed him in its capacity as “Cambodia’s good neighbor” and endorsed his government’s work in “safeguarding national security and stability.”<sup>8</sup> This endorsement of repression—however swathed in euphemism—merely served to reinforce the more hegemonic direction of Hun Sen’s government.

To comprehend recent events in Cambodia, especially their effect on the trajectory of authoritarian rule, it is necessary to understand the

methodology of the crackdown. Its main agents were the regime institutions and government ministries under Hun Sen's personal control. The premise for using the government this way was the claim, made by Hun Sen and his proxies, that their actions were defensive in nature, a *response* to the illegal behavior of the regime's critics. Conspicuously absent from the list of state agencies that carried out the crackdown were the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (including their paramilitary element, the Royal Gendarmerie). This suggests a coordinated effort to keep the soldiers out of things, for fear of the profound questions about the crackdown's legality that their involvement would raise. The courts and the police as well as the ministries of justice, finance, foreign affairs, interior affairs, and information were all among the state institutions used to repress civil society, opposition parties, and the media—but the military was not.

### Systematizing Repression

During the many years that Cambodia spent under competitive authoritarianism, civil society had of course faced difficult conditions. Yet the repression had an arbitrary, ad hoc quality: An activist who dared to speak up about abuse, corruption, wrongdoing, or anything else that put the regime in a bad light would suffer, but state action fell short of being general and systematic. That began to change in July 2015, when the CPP government rammed through the Assembly a bill modeled on the wide-ranging “anti-civil society” laws enacted by authoritarian regimes in Belarus, Egypt, Ethiopia, Russia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The goal was to limit the scope of advocacy using arcane compliance requirements related to funding, reporting, registration, and political neutrality.<sup>9</sup>

In April 2016 came an incident that highlighted the deteriorating conditions facing civil society. That month, four members of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association and a member of the National Election Committee (NEC) were arrested for allegedly bribing the alleged mistress of Kem Sokha, the head of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), to deny an alleged extramarital affair. The “Ad-hoc 5” were placed in pretrial detention and were not released on bail until July 2017. This episode was part of a wider campaign to intimidate civil society actors, particularly those campaigning against environmental degradation, land seizures, and political corruption. The question was not whether Hun Sen would wield the “anti-civil society” law as a tool of repression, but when and against whom.

The answer came along with a broader crackdown on independent media organizations and political opponents. In August 2018, the Foreign Ministry expelled the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and all its staffers from the country. With funding from the U.S. State Department, NDI had long offered political parties, citizens, and civic groups

training in how to promote government transparency and political participation. The official claim was that NDI had failed to register its activities as required by Cambodian law, but this was tied to an informal accusation that NDI was aiding opposition efforts to overthrow Hun Sen's government.

The blow aimed at NDI was soon accompanied by other strikes at civil society. The land-rights group Equitable Cambodia had its operations suspended, as did the Federation of Cambodian Intellectuals and Students, which advocates respect for human rights. The Mother Nature environmentalist group was dissolved. In February 2018, the space allowed to civil society shrank further when the Assembly hastily passed a *lèse-majesté* law. Modeled on Thailand's 110-year-old statute—known as one of the world's strictest criminal-defamation laws—the new Cambodian law empowers prosecutors to file charges against any individual or group (media outlets included) suspected of insulting the monarch. In May 2018, a grade-school principal was arrested for a Facebook posting allegedly critical of the royal family. Hun Sen had signaled his seriousness about further suppressing civil society.

Cambodia's media landscape has long featured a small number of fiercely independent news outlets existing alongside media companies controlled by or aligned with the state. In 2015, an investigation found that ten of Cambodia's 28 media owners were “on the government payroll, advisers to the Cambodian People's Party or declared affiliates of a political party.”<sup>10</sup> Hun Sen's daughter Hun Mana owns a radio station and a daily paper. His advisors Kao Kim Hourn and Kith Meng each own a television outlet. Fresh News, founded in 2012, consistently passes along government propaganda, spreads conspiracy theories, and attacks opponents of authoritarian rule.<sup>11</sup>

As part of his shift to a harsher form of authoritarianism, Hun Sen in 2017 went after what was left of the independent media. A one-party state and an independent press cannot exist side-by-side. The *Cambodia Daily*, an English-language newspaper, was the first target. In August of that year, the prime minister said that the Finance Ministry should investigate the paper's tax situation. Within hours, it was hit with a US\$6.3 million levy, supposedly representing a decade's worth of back taxes. It was given only thirty days to pay and therefore had to close. Not only Putin in Russia but also the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey have used similar tactics against the media.

Cambodia's plethora of Khmer-language nongovernmental radio stations made up the next set of targets. In August, the Information Ministry suddenly declared that the U.S.-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Asia as well as Voice of Democracy radio owed back taxes or had violated their licensing contracts. By the time Hun Sen had finished, fifteen radio stations across twenty provinces had been forced off the air. Given that radio is a vital communications medium in the provinces,

voters in these stations' former broadcast areas have been deprived of a key source of objective news and information. Television stations, meanwhile, did not need to be targeted because CPP officials or their allies already controlled all existing outlets.

In May 2018, the media-suppression campaign swiveled its sights back toward print. That month, the influential *Phnom Penh Post* was sold to Sivakumar S. Ganapathy, a Malaysian investor with ties to Hun Sen. When the new owner sought to retract a story that the paper had published on this relationship, the chief editor refused, and was fired. Other journalists and editors also resigned. Soon after the sale, the *Post* began running fewer investigative stories, and its coverage became biased in favor of the government. Within a few months, Ganapathy sold the paper to Ly Tayseng, who also has CPP ties.

For Cambodia's opposition movement, the 2013 election had been the high-water mark. That year, the opposition coalition had added 26 seats, boosting its total in the Assembly (which at that time had 123 seats) to 55, while the CPP saw its seat block shrink from 90 to 68. Since the onset of multipartism in the early 1990s, opposition parties and their leaders had all too often proved vulnerable to factionalism, disorganization, and cooptation. The career of the best-known opposition party, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Co-operative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), had been symptomatic. After winning the 1993 election, this royalist party was forced into a provisional power-sharing arrangement with the CPP, which controlled the civilian bureaucracy as well as sizeable factions in the military and the police. The CPP drove FUNCINPEC from power in the 1997 coup, after which FUNCINPEC squandered its reputation as a foe of authoritarianism by repeatedly allowing itself to be coopted.

After the 2003 election, Hun Sen lured Prince Ranariddh (the current monarch's half-brother and the head of FUNCINPEC) into breaking a deal with fellow opposition leader Sam Rainsy and joining the CPP coalition by adding new cabinet and lower-level posts that Ranariddh could fill, giving him the use of a new helicopter, and returning his seized private jet. A similar coalition followed the 2008 election. In October 2017, FUNCINPEC filed a lawsuit charging that the CNRP (then the main opposition party) had tried to "topple the royal government." The next month, Hun Sen's packed Supreme Court ruled the CNRP illegal. Those whom Hun Sen cannot coopt, he crushes.

The CNRP had been founded in July 2012 when the Sam Rainsy Party merged with the Human Rights Party, forming Cambodia's first opposition coalition. The advantages of such pacts are clear: They draw votes away from the ruling party, make cooptation less likely, help to keep regime loyalists law-abiding, and mobilize citizens by giving them a credible alternative to support.<sup>12</sup> The coalition's impressive showing in the 2013 election proved the value of these advantages.



Hun Sen's initial response was to try maneuvering and cooptation. The CNRP boycotted Parliament for ten months after the 2013 election, complaining that regime manipulations and misconduct had stolen their

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majority. Hun Sen persuaded Rainsy to end the walkout by offering a license for a CNRP television channel, four of the nine seats on the National Election Commission (NEC), and a vice-president's post in the Assembly. (Only the last promise was kept; Kem Sokha got the job.) Then Rainsy agreed to join the prime minister in a "Culture of Dialogue" designed to prevent threats and insults between their respective partisans. This turned out to be a trap. It straitjacketed the

CNRP's ability to criticize the government and slowed popular momentum for political change. Unlike opposition parties elsewhere that had led successful "color revolutions" against authoritarian rulers, Cambodia's opposition chose moderation over confrontation—and paid the price.

In late 2015, Hun Sen's government began ramping up repression. In October and November, two opposition lawmakers were beaten outside Parliament while the CPP stripped Kem Sokha of his Assembly vice-presidency and Sam Rainsy faced arrest over a 2011 defamation case (he would leave Cambodia for French exile in 2016). Hun Sen deployed these repressive measures because, for the first time, he had failed to split his opposition's leadership. In May 2016, Kem Sokha ignored two court summonses to answer phony charges of defamation and the procurement of prostitution. He moved into the CNRP headquarters building for five months until the king issued a pardon.

There seemed to be a lull in the struggle around this time, but it was only because Hun Sen was preparing to unleash the most systematic crackdown of his three decades in power. Faced with a popular, organized, and stubbornly unified opposition coalition, his strategic options were limited. Since the CPP depended on elections as a mechanism to distribute patronage and gain legitimacy, simply putting a halt to voting would have raised the cost of repression. On the other hand, the CPP would have difficulty defeating the opposition on a level field, so allowing electoral competition to unfold without interference would have raised the costs of toleration.<sup>13</sup> Given these poor options, Hun Sen chose an alternative strategy to stay in power: cripple electoral competition without banning elections altogether. He would keep the shell of elections, but not their substance.

The drive toward hegemonic authoritarianism moved forward rapidly

throughout 2017. During a speech in early February, Hun Sen stated his intention to change the law so that political parties could be dissolved for wrongdoing committed by individual members. He cited as his model Section 68 of Thailand's 2007 Constitution, which had been written under heavy influence from that country's armed forces after the September 2006 military coup.

Within weeks, the Cambodian Parliament had given Hun Sen what he asked: The Supreme Court and Interior Ministry would have power to dissolve political parties for the ambiguous offenses of causing "incitement that would lead to national disintegration" and "subverting liberal multiparty democracy." In July, a second round of legislation banned parties from "using the voice, image, written documents, or activities of a convicted criminal," and prevented them from "supporting or organizing any plans or conspiracies with any individual to undertake any actions against the interest of the Kingdom of Cambodia."

Even before King Norodom Sihamoni put his signature on the sweeping changes in late October, the Interior Ministry had begun moving against the CNRP. In referring the case to the Supreme Court—a move based in part on a complaint from FUNCINPEC—the government stressed the formal legality of what it was doing. On November 16, the Court (headed by Dith Munt, a close Hun Sen ally) disbanded the CNRP. The NEC then redistributed the CNRP's 55 Assembly seats. The bulk of them—41 seats—went to FUNCINPEC. It had not managed to win even a single seat in the last election, but now it was being rewarded for lending its support to Hun Sen's crackdown. With the main opposition party banned and FUNCINPEC coopted, the final phase of the transition to hegemonic authoritarianism could begin. This last step was the 2018 election.

## A Sham Election

Until the 2018 national election, Cambodian elections had tended to be tilted in favor of the incumbents, but still competitive—opposition parties could view the ballot box as offering a genuine path to power, even if that path ran steeply uphill due to the unfair ways the CPP government raised its own chances. Even the fairest and most free election of modern times, the May 1993 balloting overseen by UNTAC as its culminating act, was marred by the CPP's use of violence, which led to 176 deaths, 316 injuries, and 67 abductions.<sup>14</sup> Still, that vote had resulted in the CPP's only outright electoral defeat: FUNCINPEC outpolled it 45 to 38 percent, and gained seven more seats (58 to 51). The four elections that followed were less violent, but Hun Sen's machinations deprived them of integrity. What was new about the 2017 crackdown and the latest election was the increase in phony competition, inflated voter participation, and biased validation.

The CNRP's dissolution had solved one problem but created another: With no credible opposition party, it is hard to have a "competitive" system. How could Hun Sen make the system appear to allow room for competition even as he was banning his chief rival? To create a semblance of competition, he replaced a two-party system open to minor parties with a one-party system requiring phony parties.

The ever-pliant NEC faithfully did its bit to lock this quantity-over-quality strategy into place, approving no fewer than nineteen opposition parties for inclusion on the ballot. Of these, thirteen were brand new (the 2013 election had featured a total of three new parties). In addition to the Cambodian Youth Party (which also filed a lawsuit to dissolve the CNRP) and the Khmer National United Party (whose leader was released from jail just in time to compete), others included the Cambodian Light Party, the Dharmacracy Party, the Khmer Rise Party, and the Our Motherland Party.

With the CPP buying votes and intimidating voters who could not be bought—and with the clutch of small opposition parties lacking organization, resources, and reputation—the results were not surprising. Indeed, there were actually more invalid ballots cast (8.4 percent) than ballots cast for the best-performing opposition party (FUNCINPEC with 5.8 percent). Hun Sen's government nonetheless happily pointed to the larger number of parties on the ballot as a sign of the election's credibility. An official statement claimed that "political parties who had participated in this election have clearly seen that this electoral process was held freely, fairly, and justly with utmost transparency."<sup>15</sup>

Alongside so many new (but small and enfeebled) parties, the 2018 election heralded another novelty: an emphasis on citizen participation. From 1998 through 2013, Cambodia had held four elections and had seen turnout decline from 94 to 69 percent across those fifteen years. The drop had never seemed to bother the CPP, which asserted its right to rule regardless of how many citizens abstained from voting. The knock-out of the CNRP, however, caused an urgent reshuffling of priorities. Fearing that turnout would dip so low as to become an embarrassment, while also supplying grounds for such critics as Sam Rainsy to deny Hun Sen's legitimacy, the latter's government insisted that citizens would have to vote lest "multiparty democracy" be destroyed.

A letter purporting to be from the king urged citizens to vote. Fines approaching \$5,000 were imposed on individuals who were caught promoting the "clean-finger" boycott campaign (in Cambodia as in many other countries, ink is used to mark one of a voter's fingers to prevent multiple voting), which the opposition had at any rate announced too late for it to be effective. To get more students to the polls, they were given three days off school nationwide. The Labor Ministry told all factory owners and company directors (the latter on pain of dismissal) that they would have to grant their workers the same conditional divi-

**TABLE—CPP PERFORMANCE IN CAMBODIA'S  
NATIONAL ELECTIONS UNDER HUN SEN, 1993–2018**

Year	Popular-Vote Share (%)	Seats Won	Seat Share (%)	Voter Turnout (%)
2018	77	125/125	100	83
2013	49	68/123	55	68
2008	58	90/123	73	74
2003	47	73/123	59	83
1998	41	64/122	53	94
1993	38	51/120	43	90

*Sources:* Data for 2018 from Cambodia's National Election Commission; data for 2013 and 2008 and 2003 from the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL); data for 1998, and 1993 from Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz, and Christof Hartmann, *Elections in Asia: A Data Handbook*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70.

dend. In the provinces, long a CPP stronghold, agents of the ruling party went door-to-door threatening to withhold development projects, material goods, and specialized services unless people in the area voted in sufficient numbers. After election day, the NEC proudly reported that registered-voter turnout had been a whopping 83 percent—a huge increase over the 69 percent from the 2013 election and a high figure of the sort regularly claimed by hegemonic authoritarian regimes. (See the Table above.) How could Hun Sen's government *not* be democratically legitimate with participation like that, officials asked.

This quest for legitimacy underpinned another unfamiliar election feature: more biased validation. A traditional part of Cambodian elections has been their inspection by international observation groups such as the Asian Network for Free Elections, the EU, and the NDI and its sister organization, the International Republican Institute. The 2018 electoral process was different. In view of the crackdown and the habit the government had developed of ignoring all previous suggestions for improving electoral integrity, none of these organizations sent a monitoring team.

To fill the gap, Hun Sen's government cynically and cleverly deployed "shadow" (or "zombie") observation groups to validate the sham election. These are observers (whether an individual or a group) whose signature is not on the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers. Zombie monitors routinely validate elections that independent experts judge to have low or very low integrity.<sup>16</sup> In addition to numerous far-right politicians from Europe, some of the dubious groups to declare the Cambodian election free and fair included the Centrist Asia Pacific Democrats International, the European Council on International Relations, the International Conference of Asian Political Parties, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the World Elections Monitors Organization.

Hun Sen's government used its control of the media to broadcast the zombies' fawning assessments to every corner of the country. The goal was to create a generalized perception among citizens that this had been a high-integrity election. To speed the effort along, authorities ordered internet service providers to block seventeen news websites on election day and the day before. The Khmer-language services of the Voice of America, the Voice of Democracy, and Radio Free Asia were among the outlets thus silenced. State-controlled and state-aligned media organizations filled the resulting information vacuum. Another milestone on the road to hegemonic authoritarianism had been passed.

The abrupt focus on phony competition, voter participation, and biased validation was vital to the sham. The flagrant use of manipulation and misconduct puts the 2018 election in the company of the 1976 election—held by the infamous Khmer Rouge regime—as the worst ever sanctioned by a Cambodian government. The 2018 vote was certainly the most flawed held under Hun Sen. Indifferent to condemnation, especially from the EU and the U.S. State Department, Hun Sen forged ahead with putting a CPP member in every last Assembly seat. The ruling party's supermajority means that it can alter the constitution at will—a monopoly of power that doubtless adds intensity to the aura of invincibility that it shares with other hegemonic authoritarian regimes. Where the crackdown pointed, the system has now gone.

## Continuity and Change

The brutal crackdown and sham election perpetrated by Hun Sen's government constitute another sign of the democratic recession that now grips the world. Despite the continuous lack of democracy in Cambodia, the transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism invariably means a reduction in de facto political rights and civil liberties. The onset of hegemonic authoritarianism was immediately evident once the polls closed on election day, when *no* mass demonstrations erupted over the systematic practice of manipulation and misconduct. In addition to being a first for modern Cambodian elections, the lack of protest was symptomatic of the political stability that tends to characterize hegemonic authoritarian regimes.

Could the current situation pass, however? Could competitive authoritarianism make a comeback? The crackdown and bogus election were meant to keep the ruling party in power. With another mandate to rule in his pocket, will Hun Sen soften his repression and allow at least some of his opponents to return to the political arena? It would be good if he did, of course, but this would do nothing to repair the full scope of the damage done by the wide-ranging crackdown.

The obliteration of political opponents may be the most prominent marker of the emergence of one-party rule, but the added clampdown on

civil society groups and the media must be reckoned with as well. The sham election served to institutionalize hegemonic authoritarianism. A few civil society groups and autonomous media organizations might be allowed to operate, and a few political opponents might be allowed to participate, but none will be permitted to threaten the CPP's newfound hegemony. Any leniency that Hun Sen might show opponents will only be a sign that he has assured himself of their powerlessness. Once set in place, hegemonic authoritarianism is not likely to prove a mere passing phase.

Counterbalancing the predicted continuity of hegemonic authoritarian rule is an anticipated change in who rules Cambodia. After more than three decades in power, the 66-year-old Hun Sen has stated that he intends to stay for another ten years. Does he mean it? It is hard to say; he has sent conflicting messages about his retirement plans before. The succession question remains pertinent because Hun Sen has for many years been grooming his sons to take over. But which son is in line for the top job? General Hun Manet is 41 and commands the Royal Cambodian Army. Brigadier-General Hun Manith is 37 and heads the General Directorate of Intelligence. Hun Many is 36 and serves as a colonel in the prime-ministerial bodyguard and a member of the National Assembly.

The succession process could be a major source of trouble in Cambodia. In a personalist dictatorship, to paraphrase Machiavelli, "a ruler must be alone." The onset of hegemonic authoritarianism nevertheless makes any eventual transfer of power easier because it provides the ruling party with a legislative supermajority. This means that Hun Sen can amend the constitution and pass new laws as he likes, granting himself immunity against any crimes committed while in office. The tragedy that has afflicted Cambodian politics is thus likely to prevail.

## NOTES

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2. "Cambodia: July 29 Elections Not Genuine," Human Rights Watch, 25 July 2018, [www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/25/cambodia-july-29-elections-not-genuine-0](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/25/cambodia-july-29-elections-not-genuine-0).

3. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

4. See Marc Morjé Howard and Philip G. Roessler, "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (April

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