

Cambodia in 2021

With Fear and Favor

ABSTRACT

In 2021, Cambodia confronted the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid a surge in case numbers and total deaths, the virus brought new and profound consequences for the Southeast Asian nation. A spate of decrees, laws, and provisions provided Hun Sen's government ways to contain the outbreak, along with an opportunity to further stifle political dissent. The economic effects of the crisis were acutely felt in the crucial tourist industry and garment sector, both of which experienced severe contraction that will be long-lasting. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia's foreign affairs were dominated by its friendly relationship with China, poor reputation within the United States, and pending chairmanship of ASEAN.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, ASEAN, authoritarianism

The COVID-19 pandemic caught up to Cambodia this past year. In contrast to 2020, when the country avoided a major surge and enjoyed some of lowest case totals in Asia, the virus finally took hold in 2021 (Ciorciari 2021). By late December, Cambodia had recorded a total of 119,000 cases and 2,835 deaths—300 times and 28 times, respectively, the numbers in the previous year. This new reality did little to displace the existing reality of economic, political, and social life in the Southeast Asian nation. After 37 years in office, prime minister Hun Sen's penchant for curtailing independent media organizations, stifling civil society groups, and undermining opposition actors was still on full display. The outbreak of the coronavirus in Cambodia merely

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offered another opportunity to continue this habitual practice. In 2021, fear and favor were still the order of the day.

POLITICAL AFFAIRS

The most important storyline of Cambodian politics in recent years has been the transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism. To keep the Cambodian People's Party at the apex of power indefinitely, Hun Sen's government oversaw a brutal crackdown (Morgenbesser 2019). Opposition parties were 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's access to the media was monopolized. The most significant target of this assault was Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which was disbanded ahead of the 2018 national election. The intervening period saw Hun Sen's government extend and intensify this crackdown; 2021 was no exception.

The year opened with the first of two mass trials of 150 activists, members, and supporters of the CNRP, such as senior party leaders Sam Rainsy, Mu Sochua, Ho Vann, and Eng Chhai Eang. Some of the politically motivated charges included incitement to commit a felony, inciting military personnel to disobedience, and plotting. Many of the charges related to the planned return of CNRP leaders to Cambodia in November 2019. On that front, a group of CNRP officials were also thwarted from returning to Cambodia in January 2021, when international airlines refused to board them because their passports had been canceled by the government. The failed mission prompted CNRP deputy president Mu Sochua to declare, "The question that we should ask is 'Who denied us visas?' I didn't go to Cambodia as a tourist, but to answer before the court. I am appealing for justice because my rights are being violated" (Radio Free Asia 2021). The extraterritoriality of repression was omnipresent.

Cambodia's COVID-19 situation worsened significantly in late February. A surge in cases stemming from a community event was traced to two young Chinese women who had bribed a guard, breached quarantine, and gone partying in Phnom Penh nightclubs (Hunt 2021). The outbreak was symptomatic of how systemic corruption is a poor setting for a communicable disease response. In response to the worsening situation, Hun Sen's government hurried through its Law on Preventive Measures against the Spread of

COVID-19 and other Severe and Dangerous Contagious Diseases, which was promulgated on March 11. It calls for prison terms of up to 20 years and fines of up to 20 million riels (USD 5,000) for those convicted of violations. It also gives the government the power to ban or restrict any gathering or demonstration. The United Nations issued a statement condemning many of the law's disproportionate and unwarranted measures.

It was hardly surprising that the pandemic strengthened, rather than weakened, the repressive apparatus of Hun Sen's government. Using its control of the legal and judicial system, the aging dictator ramped up his attacks on the CNRP. In March, Sam Rainsy was sentenced in absentia to 25 years in jail for an alleged plot to overthrow the government in 2019. Mu Sochua and Eng Chhay Eang each received sentences of 22 years. The court also stripped the trio of the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in an election. The repression hardly stopped there. In April, as confirmed cases of COVID-19 grew exponentially, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court issued an arrest warrant for Sam Rainsy on charges of incitement. Specifically, he was accused of calling on citizens to disobey the strict COVID-19 lockdown orders for the capital and surrounding areas. This was just one of countless examples of authoritarian regimes around the world using the pandemic as an excuse to violate democratic standards and tighten their grip on power (Edgell et al. 2021). Few were truly inoculated from the climate of fear.

While the government focused most of its repressive energy on sidelining key leaders of the CNRP, it also targeted lower-level officials. In July, former commune council member Kem Tola was detained on the charge of incitement for posting comments on Facebook expressing support for Sam Rainsy's return to Cambodia. In August, nine opposition activists were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 12 to 20 months for bringing pro-democracy petitions to the foreign embassies of China, France, and the United States, declaring that Cambodia had violated the democratic principles of the Paris Peace Accords. In October, former commune councilor Tum Bunthorn was arrested on charges of conspiracy and incitement. A former member of a CNRP musical group, he had been jailed in 2019 amid a wave of arrests of opposition party activists and members. Such disparate instances of repression were similar, and therefore clearly politically motivated, in that they involved the same unlikely crime occurring across space and over time.

The general and systematic nature of repression invariably extended to citizens, civil society figures, and journalists throughout the year. The

apparatus underwent an alarming and significant change in February, when Hun Sen signed a sub-decree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway. The sub-decree requires all internet traffic in Cambodia to be routed through a regulatory body charged with monitoring online activity before it reaches users. The sweeping change allows the blocking and disconnecting of all network connections that affect safety, national revenue, social order, dignity, culture, tradition, or customs. In the view of Human Rights Watch (2021), “The grounds for action are both overbroad and not defined, permitting arbitrary and abusive application of blocking and disconnecting powers.” The outcome was inevitable. In June, an autistic teenager, Sovann Chhay, was arrested for writing a message on Telegram that allegedly insulted Cambodian People’s Party officials. His father just happened to be a (jailed) senior member of the CNRP. It was further sign that no individual—regardless of their age, gender, religion, or sexuality—was immune to the long arm of the repressive state.

Occasionally, things were different. Fear sometimes gave way to favor. The personalist nature of Hun Sen’s authority has long meant that the legal and judicial system is susceptible to his influence, either in whole or in part. The question is never whether Hun Sen will pervert the course of justice, but when and for whom. In May, he provided legal assistance to Mean Pich Rita, a television presenter and former Miss Grand Cambodia, who had been arrested for allegedly stealing the mobile phone of an influential business tycoon. The charge was dropped within a matter of weeks. In September, the charges against a prominent political researcher were dropped after Hun Sen took an interest in his hypothetical ideas around a national unity government. “I would also like to encourage Dr Seng Sary to continue with his research and analysis of social issues for the benefit of social science research in Cambodia. . . . On behalf of head of Cambodian government, I call on the court to consider withdrawing the arrest warrant for Dr. Seng Sary,” he wrote on his official Facebook page (Nov Sivutha 2021). As always, the individuals lucky enough to hold favor with Hun Sen’s government were a paltry number, compared to the many who were not so lucky.

ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

COVID-19 wrought further consequences for Cambodia’s economy. Since the abandonment of socialism in 1989, a program of economic liberalization had

spurred one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with GDP growth averaging 7.6% per year. After a contraction of 3.1% in 2020, the International Monetary Fund forecast a mere 1.9% for 2021. Minister of planning Chhay Than stated that the pandemic had resulted in more than 6 million people in the informal economy either losing their job or being on the verge. The signs of economic trouble were clear to see in Cambodia's main growth sectors.

The tourism industry was hobbled by a lingering shortfall of international arrivals. By January, the Cambodia Association of Travel Agents said that roughly 3,000 tourism enterprises had closed due to the ongoing health crisis. The government initially responded with a set of policies designed to keep tourism businesses afloat, including free licenses and tax exemptions. But the worst was yet to come. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in late February, the government canceled the traditional Khmer New Year celebrations, banned travel between provinces, and ordered a two-week closure of tourist sites. In the worst-affected areas, designated "red zones," people were prohibited from leaving their homes even to purchase food, which worsened food insecurity for many ordinary Cambodians. In August, the government instructed municipal and provincial governors to impose a 9 PM to 5 AM curfew on provincial towns, populated areas, and the capital city, Phnom Penh. Combined with the paucity of international tourists, these public health measures effectively quashed the idea of recreational travel within Cambodia for several months. The annual Pchum Ben Festival of early October, which saw hundreds of thousands of fully vaccinated domestic tourists visit popular sites around the country, was considered a litmus test for the sector. The government has voiced plans to reopen the country to vaccinated international visitors in 2022, but it will be several years before the sector recovers its pre-pandemic vitality.

For Cambodia's critical manufacturing sector, the impact of the European Union withdrawing its trade preferences in 2020 was compounded by the full-fledged outbreak of COVID-19 in 2021. This impact was particularly felt in the garment, textiles, and footwear industry, which employs some 800,000 people, most of them women. The frequent lockdowns imposed in major cities, especially Phnom Penh, saw many workers pushed to the point of poverty as employers refused to pay wages. It is estimated that more than 110 factories were forced to close permanently, while another 400 had to temporarily suspend manufacturing. In June, the government sought to address the scope and severity of the problem with a payment of USD 40 per month

to an estimated 130,000 unemployed or underemployed garment workers. In September, Hun Sen intervened in the ongoing negotiations over the minimum wage for garment sector workers by ordering a meager USD 2 raise (to USD 194 a month). This fell well short of the USD 204 being demanded by union representatives. Amid increasing inflation and rising costs of living, not to mention the devastating impact of the factory closures, the change was seen by many as insufficient.

Cambodia's latest attempt in its long quest for domestic oil production also ended abruptly this past year. Singapore-based KrisEnergy, which operates the Apsara oil field in the Gulf of Thailand off Sihanoukville, announced in June that it had filed for liquidation. Despite much fanfare from Hun Sen, who publicly celebrated the beginning of production in December 2020, the company said that output had remained at less than half its initial estimate of 7,500 barrels a day, leaving it unable to repay its debts (Takahashi 2021). The task ahead is to locate another suitable foreign operator for the problem-plagued economic venture.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The controversy and anxiety surrounding the Ream Naval Base intensified throughout the year. Since news of the secret agreement between Cambodia and China broke in July 2019, there have been widespread concerns about the emerging superpower having a military foothold in the Gulf of Thailand (Page, Lubold, and Taylor 2019). The deal apparently allows China to use the base for a minimum of 30 years, whereby it can post military personnel, store weapons, and berth warships. In September and October 2020, the Cambodian government went as far to demolish two existing facilities at the base, which were originally built and continually funded by the United States. The agreement moved ahead in 2021. In April and May, Hun Sen's government appeared to fast-track the construction of two new buildings so that they would be completed just days before US deputy secretary of state Wendy Sherman was due to visit. Cambodia's defense minister, Tea Banh, sternly rejected the allegation. Just before the US defense attaché was denied full access to the base (on an invited visit), he insisted that not only was the construction timing coincidental, but also Cambodia had the right to choose where it sourced its development aid. "We want to develop a suitable place. . . . Cambodia alone can't do it. It is moderately costly as well, but

I don't know how much," Tea Banh said. "They [China] are helping with no strings attached" (Sun Narin 2021). In August and September, another three buildings and a road were completed. Coming at a low point in the relationship between Cambodia and the United States, this latest construction activity did little to improve the status quo.

The poor state of this relationship was further evidenced by the passing in September of the Cambodia Democracy Act of 2021. Emerging from the US House of Representatives, the bill aims to promote free and fair elections, political freedoms, and human rights, while also directing the Biden administration to impose sanctions on senior government, military, or security forces officials responsible for acts undermining democracy. The law is unlikely to have a tangible impact on the organization of authoritarian rule in Cambodia. What it seemingly did do is compel Hun Sen's government to address its poor reputation in the United States. Just days before the bill passed, Cambodia signed a contract with Qorvis Communications, a Washington-based lobbying firm, paying USD 69,300 per month for "strategic communications and media relations services in support of increasing public awareness along with travel and tourism for the Kingdom of Cambodia" (Strangio 2021). This "image management" strategy mirrors that implemented in the aftermath of the 1997 coup, when the firm Porter Wright Morris & Arthur was hired to quash a US Senate resolution that criticized Hun Sen's government for being the sole abuser of human rights in Cambodia. After more than three decades in power, a certain degree of repetition was unavoidable.

Cambodia's interaction with, and position within, ASEAN took on added significance in 2021. On February 1, Myanmar's military (the Tatmadaw) initiated a coup ousting the ruling National League for Democracy. After initially saying the coup was an "internal affair" not worthy of comment, in an August letter Hun Sen acknowledged junta chief Min Aung Hlaing as the head of state. The initial coup and ensuing crackdown, resulting in more than 1,100 civilian deaths so far, precipitated a crisis for ASEAN. In early October, the association made the unprecedented decision to bar Min Aung Hlaing from its regional summit, citing a lack of progress toward restoring peace in Myanmar. For Hun Sen's government, the crisis is particularly relevant because Cambodia assumed chairmanship of the organization in late October. Given what happened in 2012, when it used the chair to unilaterally block a joint statement criticizing China's encroachment into the South China Sea, events in Myanmar present an acute test for Cambodian foreign

policy. The preference for maintaining noninterference—via the tradition of informal interaction, nonbinding agreements, and consensus-based decision making—will be difficult to sell amid pressure from the European Union and the United States, as well as from nearby Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Any hope that Hun Sen’s government can maintain ASEAN’s credibility should be set to low.

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