ESSAY

An uneasy peace

Twenty years ago the Paris Peace Accords promised a new dawn for Cambodia. How has the country fared?

By **Dr. Markus Karbaum**

This month marks the twentieth anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords. The agreement that supposedly marked the end of hostilities and the beginning of reconstruction in Cambodia was the conclusion of four years of talks that brought together the United Nations secretary general, four Cambodian factions and 18 representatives from other states. It was by no means an easy feat.

From 1970 until pen was put to paper on October 23, 1991, Cambodia was one of the world's bloodiest battlefields. Ravaged by a war, genocide and civil war that collectively claimed millions of lives, the country was torn apart during the darkest episode in its history. Hostilities between the different factions continued through the 1990s, all spurred by a common aim: power and legitimacy.

1991 proved the year Cambodia finally faced up to a destructive trajectory that had devastated all aspects of life in the country. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, the new People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) emerged as a socialist country, controlled by its Vietnamese occupier. Very similar to the present day, Cambodia was deeply dependent on foreign aid – at that time from the Eastern Bloc, especially the Soviet Union. And as was common during the Cold War, Cambodia was thus cut off from Western aid, despite a grave need for it.

Cambodia quickly became a key player in the East's Iron Curtain, which ran along the Thai-Laotian and Thai-Cambodian border. Fearing the Communist domino effect could come into play in Southeast Asia, and looking to avenge its humiliating defeat in Vietnam, the United States – along with a coalition that included other Western allies, Thailand and China – stoked hostilities in the Kingdom for a further 12 years.

The anti-PRK coalition was a surprising amalgamation of groups with different ideals. Its figurehead was Prince Norodom Sihanouk, former Cambodian king and head of state. >

Good faith: French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas holds the hands of Hun Sen (right), prime minister of Cambodia's then pro-Vietnamese government, and Prince Norodom Sihanouk (left), leader of the Cambodian resistance coalition, before the start of peace talks in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, in Paris on July 24, 1989

Photo: AFP

His royalist party, Funcinpec, was much weaker militarily than his allies, the Khmer Rouge, who provided the vast majority of the resistance troops. Sihanouk and the ultra-Maoists had been allied already in the early 1970s, when General Lon Nol toppled the prince and abolished the monarchy. Some of Lon Nol's former supporters also joined the coalition as the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), the smallest rebel group.

However, the 'partnership' between Funcinpec, the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge (who killed hundreds of thousands of royalists and republicans earlier) was of convenience only. Only their resistance to a new common enemy united them: Vietnam's occupation force and its puppet government in Phnom Penh, whose survival relied on Hanoi's presence in the country.

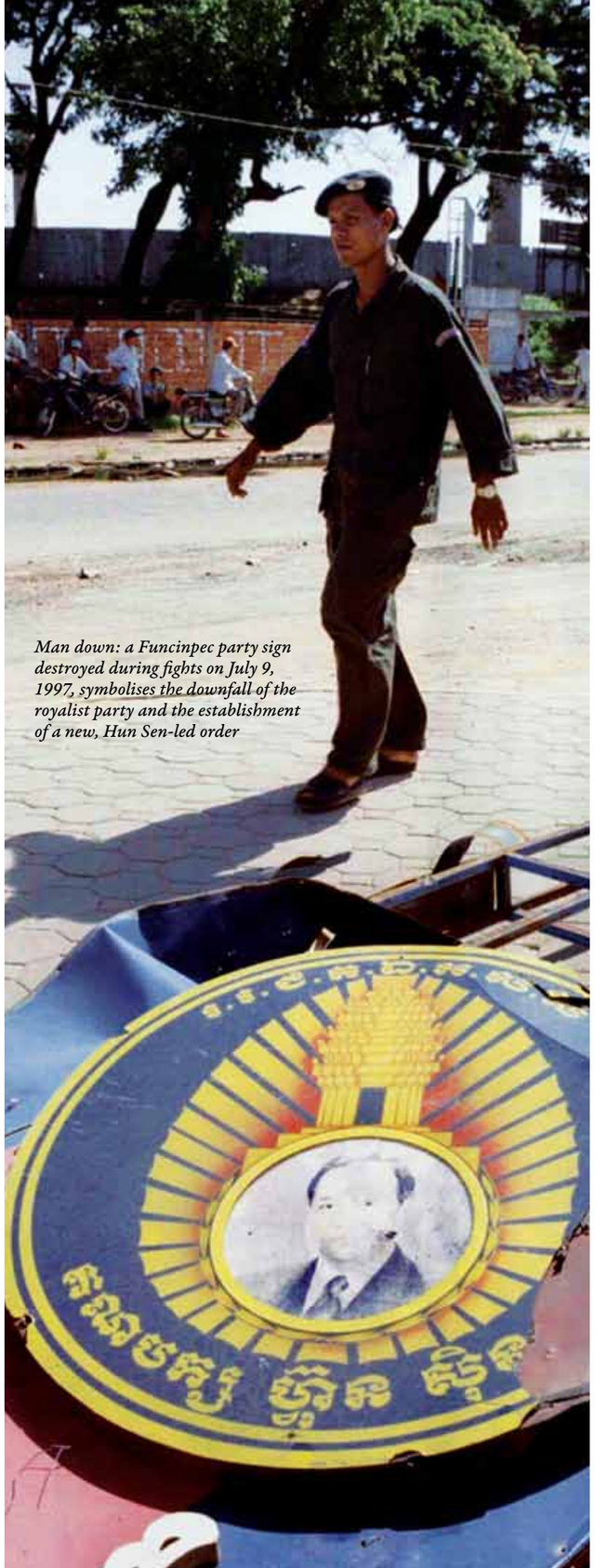
In 1989, the PRK regime – by that time renamed the State of Cambodia (SOC) – faced an economic crisis. Vietnam withdrew its forces at the same time the Soviet Union faced serious economic problems. Eastern Europe was in turmoil and the collapse of the post-World War Two, bipolar world went from an abstract scenario to a possible reality. With financial support waning, Cambodia was on the brink of total disintegration and on the verge of becoming what would later be described as a 'failing state'. All parties (except the Khmer Rouge) were under incredible pressure to find a solution. The answer came in the form of a

"Peace is not the absence of violence..."

peace treaty, a fundamental condition for Western aid. Of course, the lure of billions of dollars made it easier for the enemies to come together and forge an agreement.

Although the Cold War was over, the international community maintained a strong presence in the Cambodian conflict. The royalists had excellent connections to France, whereas the supporters of the republican KPNLF were mainly based in the US. China, who had backed the Khmer Rouge from the movement's inception in the 1960s, continued to support the group in order to contain the influence of Vietnam – who ousted the Khmer Rouge and maintained powerful influence in the country through the Hun Sen government. However, the destructive rivalry between the two regional powers, China and Vietnam, opened the door to a 'Western-style' solution: general elections and a liberal constitution accompanied by a UN peacekeeping mission. Under the belief that they would each win the election, the government, Funcinpec and the KPNLF agreed to the peace agreement.

Then began what was at that time the most expensive United Nations mission in history. From March 1992 to September 1993, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (Untac) successfully assisted the repatriation and resettlement of millions of displaced Cambodians and organised elections for the constituent assembly. The biggest failure, however, was the abortive demilitarisation of the different factions. The Khmer



Man down: a Funcinpec party sign destroyed during fights on July 9, 1997, symbolises the downfall of the royalist party and the establishment of a new, Hun Sen-led order

Photo: Reuters

Rouge refused to disarm and fighting resurged. Consequently, Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Sihanouk's Funcinpec did not put their weapons down as they were needed to defend government strongholds after Untac's withdrawal. As Cambodia did not have a national army, every soldier was affiliated with one of the biggest political parties. After losing the 1993 elections, the CPP, which had used widespread violence during its election campaign, used its might to force a coalition with Sihanouk's son Ranariddh, who became first prime minister and Hun Sen second.

It was an uneasy relationship. The tensions among the former enemies simmered, creating an atmosphere along the lines of what historian David Chandler described as a "winner-takes-all political culture based on endemic distrust". And with time, the power gap widened: the CPP was much stronger than Funcinpec, which at this time had to deal with its first major split-off. After losing his cabinet position, his party membership and his seat in the National Assembly, Sam Rainsy founded his own party. In March 1997, the fledgling Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) became victim to one of the cruellest outbursts of politically motivated violence after the Paris Peace Accords. Approximately 20 supporters were killed during a demonstration when unidentified assassins threw grenades into the crowd. Sam Rainsy himself barely survived the attack.

Later that year, in July, Phnom Penh was embroiled in a two-day conflict. Hun Sen initiated a coup d'etat against the Funcinpec party to smash the power resources of his partner in government. The royalists lost their troops and more than 40 officials were killed. Therewith, the power struggle that had lasted almost two decades finally concluded. Resorting to familiar forceful tactics, the CPP succeeded in the 1998 elections.

In the 13 years that have passed since then, Cambodia's strongman has consolidated his power against all of his opponents, inside and outside his party, and has become more autocratic. Twenty years after the peace accords were signed, many wonder what remains of the peace accords. How successful were they? What are Cambodia's prospects for the next 20 years?

Peace is not the absence of violence. Politically, at least, the term is far more ambiguous: it means an agreement formulated without coercion (except coercion to maintain that agreement) of individuals to co-exist in social groups. Therefore, it is a government's duty to balance the numerous interests that exist in society. Over centuries of different political experiments, majority rule and the rule of law have become the type of government with the highest probability of ensuring non-violent forms of decision-making and peaceful societies. In this sense, peace cannot be understood as a situation, but as a never-ending process.

For Cambodia's ruling elite, its dominance is less based on the consent of the people than on succeeding decades of conflict or, as scholar Sorpong Peou has noted, in "an environment where the 'politics of survival' prevails over concern for morality and justice". More tangible than any peace agreement, the events from 1997 continue to affect the present: The royalists lost their political competitiveness and opposition leader Sam Rainsy is in self-imposed exile overseas to avoid a politically motivated jail sentence. Political power is monopolised by a small elite and minority rights – in particular freedom of expression for the opposition and non-governmental organisations – are dramatically jeopardised. Compared to Vietnam, an 'honest' autocratic regime, Cambodia might appear as a 'dishonest' democracy in which room for political freedom is limited.

To maintain his dominance, the prime minister has created an ultra-personalised leadership style with carefully crafted connections, obedience and loyalities. Most commanders in the police

"In Cambodia, the 'politics of survival' prevails over concern for morality and justice"

and armed forces are loyal to Hun Sen and not to the formal position of the prime minister. The judiciary is under control of the executive branch, while many see the two legislative bodies – the senate and the parliament – as rubber stamp assemblies. Hun Sen, whose family is extremely wealthy, maintains excellent relations with Cambodia's leading entrepreneurs. Corruption is rampant and it seems that personal enrichment at the cost of the public and the plunder of national resources are more common than ever. Compared to the 1970s, violence is largely non-existent in Cambodia, but few would say the 'rule by fear' maxim that has governed the country during the last two decades constitutes a 'peaceful society'.

The process of democratisation has always been challenging. The setbacks in Cambodia have been alarming because they seem to parallel a line of politics that serve a few. Numerous cases of land grabbing throughout Cambodia illustrate how people suffer under an elite with such an extensive claim to power. Without a change of policies, societal conflicts over income distribution will become more common. To avoid instability, Western donors have stood close to Hun Sen for years, but it seems they are losing confidence. Cambodia's attempt to secure a seat as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2013 and 2014 is an opportunity for the international donor community to demand concessions in domestic policies. A more responsive style of government that generates benefits for all citizens would be an important push for the spirit of the Paris Peace Accords. ■

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