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Does Cambodia's Leadership Change Usher in a Generational Change?

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Introduction

The incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen's eldest son, Hun Manet is set to take over as the next Premier of the Kingdom of Cambodia in late August, after an overwhelming win at the general elections held in July in which the ruling Cambodian People's Party won 120 of 125 seats or 96 per cent of the total seats and 78 per cent of the popular vote. The royal decree issued by King Norodom Sihamoni, has named Hun Manet as the "PM of the Kingdom of Cambodia for the 7th legislature of National Assembly". It only remains for his father, Hun Sen to step down on August 22, and for the National Assembly to give its approval to the new government composition, before he steps in.

Hun Sen, 71, who lays claim to be the longest serving Prime Minister (38 years) intends to guide the nation for another decade until 2033. He would continue to head the CPP, and would get elected as president of the Senate in early-2024 and get appointed to the supreme privy council of the king. He is handing over the baton to his son Hun Manet, 45 who has been clearly groomed for the post. Hun Manet was educated in the United States and Britain, and got his military training from the US Military Academy West Point. Hun Manet has smoothly transitioned from a military role to a political career contesting and winning the Phnom Penh seat in this election, after serving as the Commander of the Royal Cambodian Army (a four-star rank).

The West has declared the July elections, in which the main opposition, the Candlelight Party was disqualified from contesting elections on technical grounds, a complete sham. Major opposition leader Kem Sokha was also disqualified by the incumbent regime from contesting the elections by putting him under a 27 years long house arrest on allegations of treason. The United States announced suspension of some foreign assistance programs to Cambodia and visa ban on Cambodian individuals.¹ Here it may be pointed out that the Cambodian constitution of 1993 has all the trappings of a modern democratic constitution. It introduced all the features

¹ Sebastian Strangio, "US Announces Visa Bans, Aid 'Pause' After Flawed Cambodian Election", The Diplomat, 24 July 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/us-announces-visa-bans-aid-pause-after-flawed-cambodian-election/>

typical to a modern liberal democracy, with human rights provisions included, and institutional safeguards thrown in. There is even a Constitutional Council with powers to enforce the Constitution. So, when there was a political deadlock after parliamentary elections in 2003, it was resolved by the adoption of an additional law to the constitution outside the regular amendment process. It was duly endorsed by the Constitutional Council to be on par with the Constitution.² The Preamble to the Cambodian Constitution speaks of building a country (an 'Oasis of Peace') "based on the system of a liberal multi-party democracy, to guarantee human rights, to ensure the respect of law, to be highly responsible for the destiny of the nation forever evolving toward progress, development and prosperity."

India-Cambodia Ties

India has deep historical and civilizational linkages with Cambodia besides mutual economic interests, defence and security collaboration and convergences on global regional issues. It may be recalled that Lieutenant General Hun Manet, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and Commander of Royal Cambodian Army paid a very fruitful visit to India from February 2- 4, 2023.³ The Indian Vice President Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar called on the Cambodian King during his visit to Cambodia to attend the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit and the 17th ASEAN Summit (11-13 November 2022). The King of Cambodia paid his maiden State visit to India (29-31 May 2023) to mark the 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries, which began in 1952.⁴ India sees both potential and impediments in the Indian-Cambodian relationship. Despite the civilizational linkages (including the undertaking to restore the Angkor Vat), and the fact that India considers Cambodia integral to its Act East policy, it is also true that New Delhi may have some concerns.

² Gerhard Robbers, ed, Encyclopedia of World Constitutions, Vol. I, Viva Books, New Delhi, 2010.

³ <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/1233024/stronger-bonds-lt-gen-hun-manets-india-visit-boosts-army-to-army-ties/>

⁴ "Visit of His Majesty Norodom Sihamoni, the King of Cambodia", MEA website, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36629/visit-of-his-majesty-norodom-sihamoni-the-king-of-cambodia>

The China Factor

People's Republic of China's construction of a secret naval base in Cambodia's Ream, in the Gulf of Thailand is contrary to both India and Vietnam's interests. India has an ongoing conflict on its land border with China, and an emerging threat in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean at large. The theory of String of Pearls is often cited to voice these concerns. The Chinese naval base is in close proximity to the Strait of Malacca. Likewise, Vietnam has reason to feel encircled too, having faced China on land (1979) and in the South China Sea, may well have begun to feel encircled by China.⁵

There are two views on the Chinese base being constructed in Cambodia. According to one view, the Chinese base raises concerns about strategic encirclement and may prompt closer linkages in the Indo-Pacific and a strengthening of the Act East policy and the Indo-Pacific policy.⁶ The second view (represented by Former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Arun Prakash) states that it should not be a cause of alarm for India because it is only part of China's policy to become a true Superpower by 2047. According to Arun Prakash, "India has neither the need, nor the means to enter a naval race or competition with China. India's fortuitous geographic location dominates the Indian Ocean and its compact but robust and professional navy is quite capable of protecting its maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific."⁷ No less significant is the fact that two Indian Navy ships, INS Satpura and INS Delhi, after participating in the first-ever ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME 2023), had docked in the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville (11 to 14 May 2023).

⁵ David Hutt, "China stokes encirclement fear in next-door Vietnam", Asia Times, 13 September 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/09/china-stokes-encirclement-fear-in-next-door-vietnam/>

⁶ Devesh Kumar "China's new military base in Cambodia threatens India's maritime security- Here's why", The Mint, 5 August, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/chinas-new-military-base-in-cambodia-threatens-indias-maritime-security-heres-why-11691234289762.html>

⁷ Devesh Kumar, "China's naval base in Cambodia is 'not a cause of alarm' for India: Former Navy Chief, The Mint, 5 August 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/chinas-naval-base-in-cambodia-is-not-a-cause-of-alarm-for-india-former-navy-chief-11691247538752.html>

The construction of the Chinese base, moreover is contrary to the Cambodia's own Constitution. Will the accession to power of Hun Manet bring about a much more needed balance and a generational change in Cambodia's foreign policy? Article 52 of its Constitution states: "The Royal Government of Cambodia shall commit itself resolutely to preserve and defend the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia..." Article 53 states: "The Kingdom of Cambodia shall not join in any military alliance, nor conclude any military agreement which is incompatible with its policy of neutrality." It further states: "The Kingdom of Cambodia shall not authorize any foreign military base on its territory, nor have its own military bases abroad, except within the framework of a United Nations request." But it goes on to say: "The Kingdom of Cambodia reserves the right to receive foreign assistance in military equipment, armaments, ammunition, in training of its armed forces, and other assistance for self-defense and for ensuring public order and security within its territory." Article 55 states: Any treaty and agreement incompatible with the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, neutrality and national unity of the Kingdom of Cambodia shall be abrogated."⁸

Conclusion

The ongoing political transitions within Southeast Asia do not appear to improve the prospects for democracy within the region.⁹ With three of the ten ASEAN States (Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand), seeing democratic decline, ASEAN's principle of noninterference in internal affairs, is again being questioned. ASEAN's Five Point Consensus on Myanmar seems to be making no headway in Myanmar, as the SAC extends the emergency and pushes the proposed

⁸ See Constitutional Council of Cambodia website for the text of the 1993 Kingdom of Cambodia Constitution (together with the 'Additional Constitutional Law' promulgated in July 2004), https://www.ccc.gov.kh/detail_info_en.php?txtID=791

⁹ "ASEAN's Ailing Democracy", Jakarta Post, 26 July 2023, at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/07/26/aseans-ailing-democracy.html>

elections to a distant future. Cambodia has been accused of human rights violation and suppression of democratic rights of the people. In Thailand, almost three months after the elections (14 May) which were expected to overthrow the existing Prime Minister former army chief Prayut Chan-o-Cha the country has not been able to elect a PM because of the peculiar provisions of Thai Constitution which require not only a majority in the popularly elected lower house of the parliament but a majority in both houses (including a nominated Senate).¹⁰ As far as Cambodia is concerned, it remains to be seen whether the upbringing and western education of Hun Manet will bring about any positive change in Cambodia's outlook, or whether it will always keep turning back.¹¹

¹⁰Isaac James Manayath, "Still no Prime Minister three months after polls; making sense of the Thailand stalemate", The New Indian Express, 6 August, 2023 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/explainers/2023/aug/06/still-no-prime-ministerthree-months-after-pollsmaking-sense-of-the-thailand-stalemate-2602396.html>

¹¹ David Hutt, "How Hun Manet will differ from his father", Asia Times, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/07/how-hun-manet-will-differ-from-his-father/> Also see Charles Dunst, "How Hun Manet will differ from his father", East Asia Forum, 13 January 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/02/28/hun-manet-cambodias-rising-son/>