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Cambodia's Killers

By [Michael Benge](#)

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While the radical Islamists held a scimitar to the throat of freedom of expression over cartoons, Hun Sen, Cambodia's dictator, was throttling those who dared speak out against his misdeeds and Vietnam's grab of a good portion of Cambodia's border. Prime Minister Hun Sen is the epitome of the old adage that a tiger never changes his stripes. First by a *coup d'état* in 1997 in which over 100 members of the Royalist Party democrats were murdered, then through rigged elections, and now through his kangaroo courts, Hun Sen has managed to intimidate and silence all opposition to his fascist regime in Cambodia.

In his most recent coup against democracy, human rights, freedom of the press and freedom of speech, Hun Sen took a page right out of communist Hanoi's playbook by silencing all opposition to his regime.

Hun Sen manipulated Cambodia's notoriously corrupt and incompetent court system to make it a criminal offense to criticize him or his regime. In February 2005, Hun Sen stripped parliamentary immunity from the leader of the main opposition party (SRP), Sam Rainsy, and two legislators, Cheam Channy and Chea Poch -- both SRP party members. Rainsy and Poch fled the country while Channy remained in Cambodia. In August 2005, Channy was given a seven-year prison sentence. Rainsy was tried in absentia by Hun Sen's kangaroo court and was given an 18-month jail sentence.

Next, Hun Sen had the publisher of the leading opposition newspaper arrested and the paper shut down for publishing articles critical of Hun Sen. He then had the director of the country's only independent radio station -- Behive FM -- arrested and charged with defaming him by broadcasting interviews criticizing Hun Sen for allowing Hanoi to gobble up a good portion of Cambodia's border territory.

Hun Sen then had several leading human rights advocates arrested and detained including Kem Sokha, the president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights and his deputy, the director of the Community Legal Education Center, and the president of the Cambodian teachers' association. Several others fled Cambodia, including a cousin and aide to Norodom Sihamoni, the new figurehead king. The latter acquiesced to Hun Sen's border gift to Hanoi that then gave it a façade of legality. Hun Sen has a history of giving land to the Vietnamese.

Hun Sen is a creation of Hanoi's leaders, who installed him to power after Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia in an attempt to colonize that country. After 52,000 soldiers were killed and 200,000 wounded in Cambodia, Hanoi's army was on the verge of revolt. Hanoi had promised its soldiers that there would be no more fighting once the U.S. left Vietnam and that soldiers would be rewarded with farmland. While Hanoi was withdrawing its army, Hun Sen stepped up to the plate for Hanoi and gave farmland in Eastern Cambodia to 100,000 demobilized Vietnamese soldiers and made them instant citizens.

Ironically, Kem Sokha and the other critics of Hun Sen received worse treatment during their incarceration than did notorious military chief for the Chinese-backed Pol Pot faction of the Khmer Rouge, the "Butcher" Ta Mok. The Butcher has a rather comfortable cell with a desk and bed and special meals, while the human rights activists shared crowded, vermin and mosquito infested cells with criminals and murderers. It is widely rumored in Cambodia that the reason that Ta Mok and the other Khmer Rouge leaders enjoy special privileges and have not been brought to trial is that they have threatened to "rat out" Hun Sen for his real role in the Khmer Rouge.

Hun Sen and another Cambodian communist party leader, Heng Samrin, were the Vietnamese-backed Khmer Rouge military leaders in charge of the Eastern Zone next to Vietnam that too was rife with "killing fields." Hun Sen was also in charge of enforcing the K-5 Plan during the Vietnamese invasion, also referred to as the "Petite Genocide," in which ordinary Cambodians were forced into the mine fields along the Thai border, and had the choice of either being blown up attempting to dig up the mines or being shot if they tried escape.

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Furthermore, Hun Sen has enlisted several notorious Khmer Rouge military leaders into his present army, and gave amnesty to Pol Pot's brother-in-law Ieng Sary, known as "Little Brother No. 2," who was cofounder and co-leader of Pol Pot's genocidal killing machine. Hun Sen rewarded Ieng Sary and his fellow murderers a fiefdom rich in gems on the Thai border, an area now filled with lucrative gambling casinos.

The recent arrests were to silence the growing protest over the borderland giveaway, and to intimidate the opposition before the upcoming elections. The border protests were an embarrassment to both Hanoi and Hun Sen. After the U.S. and other donor countries intervened on behalf of Kem Sokha and the other critics who had been arrested, Hun Sen made a sham gesture and said he forgave them and ordered their release. However, soon after, Hun Sen's kangaroo court said it could not drop the charges and they would still be prosecuted. Hun Sen sent a message to opposition leader Sam Rainsy that he would be allowed to return to Cambodia if Rainsy wrote a letter asking for clemency.

According to many of his followers, Sam Rainsy acquiesced and surrendered his dignity in a pitiful letter to Hun Sen in which Rainsy confessed that all his accusations and criticisms were lies and begged forgiveness. For them, it's a shame that he fell into Hun Sen's trap and they now equate him to Neville Chamberlain, saying Rainsy has betrayed his country, his followers, and his friends, and has now destroyed the only functioning opposition in Cambodia. Others say it is better for Rainsy to return to keep a political toehold in Cambodia than be in exile in France. Hun Sen also had Parliamentarian Cheam Channy released from jail, and then Hun Sen asked, or rather directed, the figure head King Norodom Sihamoni to pardon both Channy and Rainsy.

As he did with Prince Ranariddh, the leader of the once viable opposition Royal Party, Hun Sen first emasculated the opposition with false charges, prison sentences, and pardons, and then invited them back to the political trough to share in the wealth of rampant corruption. The release of the jailed political critics and Rainsy's pardon are but a sham to soften next month's donors meeting. By his actions, Hun Sen is just thumbing his nose at the donors, for he knows they will keep doling out the money to fatten his and his cronies' bank accounts (e.g., the day Rainsy was sentenced, IMF forgave an 82 million dollar debt that Cambodia owed the fund).

Hun Sen owes all this to Hanoi, and he is a master of playing the donors, one against the others. Vietnam keeps a sizeable force of intelligence and other special forces in a compound near Hun Sen's to keep him in line and in power. Japan is Cambodia's largest donor, for it wants to be able to continue to access Vietnam's markets and cheap labor. Also China is the largest investor in Cambodia, and Japan wants to act as a counter balance to China's influence. If the present investors in Cambodia's garment mills go belly-up due to political unrest and declining economy, China will step in to bail them out in order to gain Cambodia's special garment quota to the United States.

Hun Sen has instilled a climate of fear in all opposition individuals and parties in Cambodia. In spite of this, at an independent forum in the commune of Rokar Khnong, one man said, "In the Khmer Rouge time, my father was served soup and they asked him if it tasted good," one man said. "'Tell the truth,' they said. And so he said it did not taste good, and they killed him. Now when we speak the truth, are we going to be jailed? Is Cambodia going back to the Communists again?"

As a way of consolidating his power, if an elected official speaks out against him, Hun Sen just strips them of their parliamentary immunity and replaces them with his cronies. He has replaced them with some of Cambodia's richest men who have built business empires and now represent the ruling Cambodian communist party (CCP) in the upper house of parliament. They include a casino owner, a teenage pal who owns a multi-million dollar palm oil plantation, a drug lord and tobacco tycoon who financed Hun Sen's coup in 1997, and a businessman responsible for most of the illegal logging in Cambodia.

Hun Sen and his cronies have set up a number of dummy companies through which donor funds are skimmed and sent to offshore bank accounts. The Hun Sen regime is the epitome of a Kleptocracy -- a government characterized by rampant greed and corruption. The only way that democracy will begin to flourish in Cambodia is for the U.S. and other donor countries to set up a tracking system for money laundering as that for Al Qaeda and for drug lords and begin freezing the bank accounts of Hun Sen and his corrupt cabal.

Michael Benge spent 11 years in Viet Nam, over five years as a Prisoner of War—1968-73. While serving as a civilian Foreign Service Officer, he was captured in South Viet Nam by the North Vietnamese and held in numerous camps in South Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos, and North Viet Nam. Mike is a student of

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