

Cambod

The Ruler's rules

Nayan Chanda finds that with power finally firmly in his grip, Prime Minister Hun Sen seems bent on boosting his image as benefactor

CAMBODIAN Prime Minister Hun Sen is comfortable with power. And there are signs that he sees himself as a budding father-figure to the nationa position long held by the country's revered ailing monarch, Norodom Sihanouk. There's a paternal air about the former guerrilla fighter, who dropped out of school to join the left-wing insurgency after the then Prince Sihanouk's ouster as head of state in 1970 and became foreign minister of a Vietnamese-installed government nine years later at the age of 27.

But a lot of people don't love Hun Sen and security is tight at his Phnom Penh residence, scene of a grenade attack in 1998 that he claimed was an assassination attempt and that the opposition said was stage-managed. Hun Sen normally stays in a virtual fortress on the outskirts of town, but he seems at ease here as he welcomes a recent visitor and proudly steers him to a photo of his son, West Point graduate Manith, next to a portrait of his wife, Bounrany. Manith is with the World Bank in Washington, while three other offspring study in New York and the premier clearly dotes on his grandchilda baby girl.

Hun Sen spends much of his energy in promoting an image as an oracle, giver of bounty and friend of the common manmuch like King Sihanouk. And like Sihanouk he often refers to himself in the third person.

Listening to him, it's hard sometimes to know where Hun Sen ends and Cambodia begins. Political life revolves around him and he has a well-developed sense of his own importance for the future welfare of the nation that makes him hesitant about considering retirement.

Excerpts from the interview with Hun Sen:
Cambodia is often accused of having a culture of impunity, where people with high connections get away with committing crime. Is that an unfair accusation?

I will not use the word impunity. I use the word "not yet punished." We use the word not yet punished because we do not discover who is guilty . . . If we discover that someone is guilty and don't punish him then you can say that it is impunity . . . I have given orders to arrest one of my cousins and three of my nephews. I feel angry with some officials' children who use the power of their fathers and suppress other people and have not yet been punished . . . During the CPP [ruling Cambodian People's Party] plenum, I told all CPP officials that you have to take care of your familyyour wife, your childrenso that they do not commit any offence.

Have your relatives since been arrested?
Yes, they have been arrested and punished and some have even been put in prison. I also gave orders to arrest one of my nephews who was with a group that injured a Japanese tourist. But so far they have not been discovered. My nephew is not the one who committed the crime but he is among the group who committed the crime . . . The city police asked him to point out others who were involved in the crime, but we could not find the other people. If we discover them all will be brought to a court of law. I feel dissatisfied with officials who protect their children who commit offences and this issue gives me a headache. My relatives, especially my father, criticize me. They say I handle only my own children, nephews and nieces and can't tackle the children of other powerful men. I replied to him that we better take care of our own children, nephews and relatives. If they commit offences we'd rather bring food to them in prison than let them blacken our reputation. But, I believe all my children are disciplined children and would not commit any crime.

How widespread is corruption?
I admit that there is corruption in Cambodia. We have been cracking down on corruption in the army, in the police and in the administration because there has been what we call ghost soldiers, ghost police and ghost officials. We discovered that there were more than 15,000 ghost soldiers and more than 150,000 ghost dependents. Then we found more than 6,000 ghost officials and more than 4,000 ghost police. So this involves big sums of money . . . We must solve these problems [of petty officials taking bribes], but how to solve these problems? I personally feel we have to use the carrot and the stick. We must try to increase the salaries of workers and at the same time impose discipline on them.

When do you expect the special court for trying Khmer Rouge leaders to be set up?

Without any further disturbance from the UN, it could happen before the UN General Assembly [in September]. The preparations are subject to an agreement with the UN. If one wanted, it could be achieved within this year. I am also very concerned about the health of [infamous jailed Khmer Rouge leader] Ta Mok and others and I am afraid that they will die before the trial.



The arrest of Ta Mok was carried out with the clear goal of bringing him to trial. As to the others who surrendered, it does not mean that they are exempt from the trial, however we prefer to leave it in the hands of the court.

Ta Mok's detention without trial has been extended to three years. Will his trial take place within that time?

We have to make it before the three years run out [in 2002]. Otherwise we would be in difficulty. We would have to amend the law or get the permission of the National Assembly.

You recently allowed 24 montagnard refugees from Vietnam's central highlands to head for asylum in the United States after originally saying they would be sent back across the border. Why did you change your mind?

The initial information I received was that this was an armed group who were fighting against the government of Vietnam . . . But later I received information that among the 24 people, only two spoke Vietnamese and the rest spoke the language of an ethnic minority. We are convinced that they are not an armed group fighting the government of Vietnam. They are refugees who fled because of some threat. Our information is that there were some corrupt officials who did not behave properly. Then the people complained against the corrupt officials and after complaining they felt threatened and worried and they fled. I told our Vietnamese friends that if it were me, I would arrest the corrupt officials and punish them rather than do anything against the people . . . I would rather have the corrupt people hate me than do anything against the people. Another factor that made me change my mind was my own experience when I took refuge in Vietnam [in 1977] and it was lucky that the Vietnamese did not arrest me and send me back home.

Your Vietnamese friends cannot be happy.

I feel that too, that our Vietnamese friends did not support my decision and are not happy. But I had no other choice. The UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] gave these people refugee status and third countries accepted them. I think it is the best choice, which is good not

only for Cambodia but also for Vietnam.

In July 1997 the coalition between your cpp and the royalist funcinpec party disintegrated in fighting. Critics claim you ordered the killing of some funcinpec opponents.

We could not ensure anyone's life in the fighting. Even my mother was affected by that event. She broke three of her rib bones. During the fighting, the bullets had no eyes . . . If I really gave an order for the killing of Funcinpec officials I think there'd be no Funcinpec today in Cambodia.

Has any Asian or western leader inspired you?

I have learnt from two leaders. One is the late prime minister and general secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, Kaysone Phomvihane. The second is Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister of Malaysia. What I learnt from Kaysone came from his experiences in solving problems, his ability in talking, his experience in forming the united front. So before I first held peace talks [in France in 1987] with then Prince Norodom Sihanouk, I had a meeting with Kaysone. Kaysone formed a front with Souphanouvongwho was also from a royal familyexperience from which I could learn. As far as Dr. Mahathir is concerned, I learnt from him in two areas. The first is his win-win policy, in which he used [the ruling party] Umno to bring people together to work within the government for a long period of time. The government of Mahathir is a coalition government formed from many political parties. In each state there is a state government, which is also a coalition of many parties. The second thing I learnt from him is the importance of development in rural areas, especially in the field of agriculture.

Right now I am following another person for whom I reserve my respect and from whom I have learnt a lesson. That is President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea. He was a victim of many regimes until the time when he was given the death penalty [in 1980 on rebellion charges]. When he came to power [in 1998] he did not seek revenge on any one. Everyone could live peacefully with him. This is the point that I learnt from him and I also convinced myself that this is the right point. When I won the war, I allowed everyone to live peacefully with me. I did not seek revenge on anyone including [former Khmer Rouge commander] Ke Pauk, who killed my uncle and my cousins.

Has any Asian leader given you a negative example, such as former president Suharto in Indonesia?

I better not comment on this one. Those countries have been resolving their problems. Before people talked about Suharto and right now it is [Philippine President Joseph] Estrada. And people are also talking about [Indonesian President Abdurrahman] Wahid. But I prefer not to comment. Sometimes I feel that people have overdone it. One day they say, "Long live! Long live!" to these people and right now they overthrow these people and arrest them. This could be an example to some leaders to stay in power and resist, because if they resign they could be treated badly. If leaving power would mean facing trial then one would resist while still in power. If you asked the Khmer Rouge to leave the jungle and then you put all of them in prison, who would leave the jungle?

You have been a leading politician in Cambodia for 22 years after rising from a junior position. What makes Hun Sen tick?

To be a leader one has to be strong and firm. No one can remain in power for long if they are not firm. Some people call me a strongman and they seem to think that I am strong because of the barrel of the gun. I believe that the gun barrel cannot solve the problem, the gun barrel cannot keep you in power for a long time. The Pol Pot [Khmer Rouge 1975-79] regime could exist only for three years, eight months and 20 days. The other strong point for me is that I have been in the country since I was a child and even now I am not very old. Another special factor that has enabled me to lead the country for a long time is that we have not allowed ourselves to be conservative. Keep learning, keep researching, keep writing all the time. I learnt from the experience of other leaders that after many years in power they become conservative. When one becomes conservative, one cannot keep oneself abreast with development in the world, in countries. Then you must leave that position so that you do not become an obstacle. When I refer to human-resources training, I never forget to train myself.

Courtesy: The online edition of the Far Eastern Economic Review.

The Philippin

Mob power

CESAR BACANI AND
RAISSA ESPINOSA-ROBLES

THIS was People Power gone tragically awry. Slum dwellers in Manila's Pandacan district started marching toward Malacañang presidential palace. "Erap is with us," shouted their leaders, invoking the nickname of imprisoned former president Joseph Estrada. "Take Malacañang!" As the marchers approached their target at dawn, small children with tear gas canisters slipped out from the slums around the palace to join them. Three more huge groups arrived.

The mob pressed closer to the palace gates, as President Gloria Arroyo called an emergency cabinet meeting. Barricaded inside, she and her advisers heard the crowd chanting. The presidential guard fired into the air, but the protesters wouldn't go home. Finally, the security forces, using tear gas and water hoses, dispersed the angry crowd around noon. During the bloody night, one policeman and three rallyists were killed in the cross fire.

The tawdry Estrada saga had finally come to this: class war on the streets of Manila. Just a little more than 100 days ago, hundreds of thousands of mostly rich and middle-class Filipinos forced Estrada to step down. Last week's equally massive crowd, this time from the underclass, agitated for the return of their disgraced leader. Fifteen years ago, the Philippine people swept strongman Ferdinand Marcos from power in a peaceful People Power movement. Estrada's ouster in January was hailed as People Power II.

Now the terrifying consequences of mob-style democracy are coming home to roost. By installing two presidents through protests rather than the ballot box, the Philippines has extended an open invitation for anyone to make a bid for power, provided he or she can draw a big enough crowd. The mobs were a legacy of Estrada's divisive rule and another sad reminder that the country hasn't grown out of its chaotic political traditions, characterized by poverty, goons, strongmen, and lately, attempted coups.

In the chaos, Arroyo is struggling to prevent further violence and save her presidency. She declared a state of rebellion, allowing police to detain alleged ringleaders without a warrant of arrest. Arroyo's next major challenge, assuming she can keep control of the streets, is the May 14 senatorial election. Although the Supreme Court has ruled that she is the legitimate president, Arroyo needs to demonstrate that she has the country's mandate. A landslide will give her that. But before the violence last week, only eight of her candidates were likely to win the 13 seats that will be up for grabs, according to respected pollster

Social Weather Stations. Estrada, playing the victimized underdog, is hoping to gain sympathy votes for his candidates, including his wife.

It always was unlikely that Estrada would fade quietly into the night. But the former movie actor has played the political crisis like a pro. Estrada toured the country, turning to his traditional supporters among the poor. When he was finally arrested, the TV images boosted his case: Hundreds of policemen surrounded Estrada's mansion then hauled the humbled man off to jail, took his fingerprints and mugshot, and jailed him in a narrow cell. Never mind that a series of scandals had erupted during his presidency, or that he was charged with economic plunder, allegedly using his office to amass more than \$300 million in cash, stocks and mansions for himself and his mistresses. The heavy-handed treatment infuriated Estrada supporters and won sympathy from the general public, too. "I didn't like seeing President Erap in jail," says 26-year-old laundry woman Alicia Morales. "The rich also steal. Why single him out?"

Estrada has long masterfully portrayed himself as protector of the poor insisting that the charges against him are all orchestrated by the rich. In a country where 56% of the population describe themselves as poor, the rhetoric works well. "There is only one thing we are fighting for," Estrada said through his son Jose, who was also arrested. "The Constitution." Estrada's supporters came out in force, backed up by pro-Estrada homegrown Christian sect Iglesia ni Cristo and the Roman Catholic offshoot El Shaddai. Analysts say the demonstrators were incited to go on a rampage. "These are the disorganized poor, and their level of disorganization allows them to be manipulated," says sociologist Randolph David. "Many [demonstrators] were on drugs," says Arroyo. "It was as if they were programmed to hate."

Arroyo has won praise for her firm handling of the crisis, even though the Integrated Bar of the Philippines is questioning the legality of her declaring a state of rebellion. Her government may emerge the winner in the latest political fight between one group of the rich and another of the wealthy. But her challenge will be to really try to do something about the country's desperate poverty. The country is still semi-feudal, with a handful of landowning families controlling most of the economy. The richest 10% in which Arroyo and Estrada are chartered members own more than a third of the country's wealth.

Courtesy: Asiaweek.