



A virtually uncontested election has paved the way for reelected Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to hand over power to his son, Hun Manet. PHOTO: REUTERS

The old political playbook needs a major upgrade



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

One of the ways you realise that people are basically the same no matter which corner of the planet they are from is by looking at how they conduct themselves when they wield any sort of power over others. Leaders, especially in countries where terms like “accountability,” “transparency” and “good governance” induce allergic reactions among the political elite, follow the same playbook titled “How to remain in power for the next 100 years” and behave in almost identical ways to each other.

Cambodia’s recent election is a case in point. On July 23, Prime Minister Hun Sen’s ruling party won a landslide victory over, well, an obscure party he once crushed with military forces, whose name most Cambodians probably can’t even remember. With various ingenious moves, Hun Sen managed to get his only credible rival, the Candlelight Party, barred from the election over a technicality: they had provided a photocopy of a document instead of the original one while registering. And, naturally, this oversight was far more important than allowing the biggest opposition party to participate, which would have at least provided some legitimacy to the election.

Before that, Hun Sen allegedly used the age-old techniques of arresting and intimidating opposition party members and stamping on the media whenever it became too critical, crippling them financially by imposing massive tax bills. Al Jazeera reported of voters being too scared not to vote as they could be “blacklisted.” So fear, intimidation, and harassment with the help of state institutions to wipe out the opposition has been the traditional formula for a sure win in a virtually uncontested contest. One voter likened the situation to a boxing ring with only a lone boxer.

But it is the end result that counts for these leaders, and victory must be attained at all costs. The ruling Cambodian People’s Party won 120 of the 125 parliamentary seats.

Before that, in the 2018 election, Hun Sen managed to get rid of his main opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, which had won almost half the votes in the 2013 election. And now, with Candlelight out of the way, the path is as clear as it has been for the last 38 years. Criticism from human rights groups, US visa restrictions, and damning comments by the US Department of State may have put a damper on the victory after-parties, but did not dissuade him from paving the way for his son, Hun Manet, to rule – like a true monarch bestowed with a divine right, leading to another hundred years of sole power.

In keeping with the formula from the playbook, Hun Sen’s family has links with more than a 100 companies across all sectors of the economy – from agriculture to the media. There are allegations against his party’s elites living abroad, and of laundering money by buying huge properties in Australia.

There are many leaders who have joined this club of pseudo democracies – sometimes termed “hybrid democracies” – which have all the accoutrements that qualify them for the status of a democracy. These include things like national elections, voter lists, an election commission, human rights commission, judiciary and other constitutional institutions, not to mention an abundance of political rhetoric on how democratic the nation is. Despite having all this grand paraphernalia, a hybrid regime is one that has increasingly autocratic tendencies. Political opponents – the real ones – have to be steamrolled into total irrelevance by obstructing their

rallies, making arbitrary arrests, and incarcerating them. Institutions like the election commission and human rights commission have to be made toothless. Meanwhile, all security-related bodies – law enforcement, intelligence agencies, etc – are turned into the main weapons to crush political opponents, annoying critics from civil society, and the meddlesome media that is obsessed with corruption. Laws are enacted or amended to help punish anyone who makes the slightest noise that sounds rude to the powers that be.

Unfortunately, one cannot endlessly follow a playbook that has become as outdated as men’s baggy pants, and that paints an unflattering picture in front of the rest of the world: embarrassingly low rankings in democracy indices, threats of sanctions like visa restrictions on individuals, and generally being treated like the delinquent student who got caught changing the grades on his report card. For one thing, cronyism and nepotism, which are major spin-offs of following the old playbook, usually get out of control and even the leader cannot do anything to stop the leakage they incur. All kinds of goof-ups then occur. Obsequious party members may publicly boast of their involvement in manipulating the votes to help a candidate win, the police may chargesheet ghost opponents, banks may be bled dry, relief items may land up in local leaders’ homes, and public hospitals may end up with beds but no doctors (or vice versa) at the height of an epidemic. It’s a total mess.

Ultimately, it will become more and more difficult to get regular voters to go to the polling centres when there is, as they say, “only one boxer in the ring.” Being a constant bully is tiring – and lonely – because it is hard to know who your real friends are, or if you even have any, when you are surrounded by greedy lackeys.

Leaders would be wise to throw away the old playbook and get tips from democracies that provide leaders with the greatest power of all: the true mandate of the people, earned through an election that is deemed credible both at home and by the rest of the world.

Words of a fed-up Rohingya refugee

Pacifist Farooq
is an activist poet, community-based teacher, and educationist. He is a Rohingya refugee living in the world’s largest refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. He has used a pseudonym for security purposes.

PACIFIST FAROOQ

It has been close to six years since hundreds of thousands of Rohingya faced a deadly genocide by Myanmar’s military and fled the country in search of protection and refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh. The Rohingya population has been undergoing persecution, discrimination, arbitrary arrests, and atrocities in Myanmar for over seven decades. Their condition is alarmingly worsening in the squalid refugee camp in Bangladesh, and they are currently facing a significant risk of generational loss due to lack of access to formal education and the loss of their culture, traditions, and language.

As an educator and poet hailing from the Rohingya community, I have had the opportunity to closely observe the students and people living in the refugee camp. I have noticed that the students prioritise learning English and Bangla over Burmese. In fact, for the first three years after arriving in Bangladesh, they exclusively studied English. It took considerable efforts from teachers to get them back on track with the Burmese curriculum taught in community-run schools. Meanwhile, the adults in the camps have taken to watching Bangalee TV shows, listening to Bangalee Islamic preachers, and frequently conversing with one another in Bangla, instead of watching lectures by Burmese scholars and speaking in Burmese. This is quite normal for the people who have encountered bad experiences and fled their homes, as they may wish to turn away from everything that reminds them of “Myanmar.” At the same time, it is important for us not to break the chain of our ancestors, in order to be able to exist as a culturally and historically unique and enriched community on this planet.

Due to our isolation from our motherland for more than five years, we are gradually losing touch with our cultural practices that have been passed down from one generation to the next. The traumatic experiences that we faced have left us feeling hopeless and disheartened, with many of us lacking the motivation to preserve our traditions or learn more about them.

Our children and youth have adapted to the local culture to varying degrees, and their lifestyles have changed significantly compared to what they were in Myanmar. For instance, they now wear trousers instead of the traditional *longyi*, which may be due to dress code restrictions imposed by NGOs and INGOs. Rohingya individuals are not permitted to work officially while wearing *longyi*, and even wearing traditional clothing in public can result in mockery and devaluation. Upon my arrival in

the standard of education is quite low. There are no high schools available, except for a few middle schools run by NGOs in some camps. Unfortunately, the teachers in these schools are often not adequately qualified, with many of them not even high school graduates. This is a significant problem that needs to be addressed.

Another issue that we face is that the government has shut down many community-based schools, including the one where I used to teach. My colleagues and I had established this school using our own funds, with the aim of advancing the education of our generation by having qualified instructors teach the Myanmar curriculum. Unfortunately, our school was also shut down by the government, with their reasoning being that if we taught at our school, students would not attend the schools run by NGOs. So, the lack of encouragement and support for education is yet another factor that contributes to the generational loss of the Rohingya.

This disregard for our culture and traditions in the refugee camp has resulted in a generational loss for our entire ethnic group. And what I mean by generation loss is the loss of our traditions, practices, terminology, heritage, and legacy inherited from our forebears, which we embraced and cherished in Myanmar for centuries. Our language, which serves as a crucial marker of our existence in our homeland, is currently facing the threat of extinction.

Most importantly, all stakeholders have failed to ensure access to advanced studies for us, in Bangladesh and abroad, despite receiving millions of dollars in funding from countries such as the US, the UK, Japan, and Canada. None of this funding has been used to support higher education initiatives. There are numerous students who have passed their matriculation exam in Myanmar and are currently enrolled in community-based schools. It is disheartening to see their potential being wasted within the confines of the refugee camp. They are not recognised and have no prospects for continuing their education or developing specialised skills. This puts us at risk of not having knowledgeable leaders for future generations.



Due to their isolation from their motherland for close to six years, the Rohingya say they are gradually losing touch with their cultural practices. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**

1 Hands over

6 Is ominous

11 Bring together

12 Pastoral poem

13 Pick up the tab

14 Handle

15 Small bit

16 Binary base

18 Pluto, for one

19 Swelled head

20 Horror’s

21 Chaney

22 Lyricist

Gershwin

22 Lease signer

24 Privy to

25 Deluge

27 Manhattan area

29 Foot parts

32 Verb for you
- 33 Brief time

34 Series-ending abbr.

35 Bathroom, in brief

36 Bat wood

37 Question of identity

38 Irritated

40 Cheering loudly

42 Dance’s de Mille

43 Nary a soul

44 Squalid

45 Tenth president

DOWN

1 Patrol boat

2 Infuriate
- 3 Failed at an early stage

4 Greek vowel

5 Homesteader

6 Plains grazers

7 Dedicated poem

8 Deep-rooted

9 Corrida critter

10 Catchphrase

17 Frets

23 Overly

24 Co. abbr.

26 Charm

27 Latin dances

28 Grove fruit

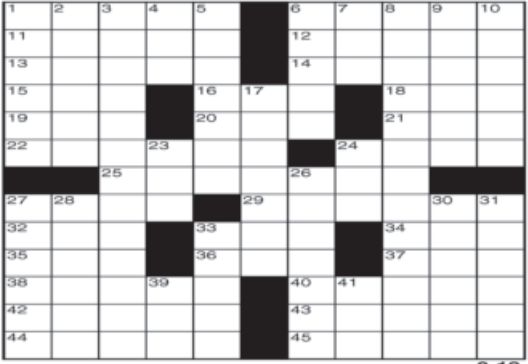
30 Flammable gas

31 Sports official

33 Fresh

39 TV’s Danson

41 Singer Orbison



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsopinion@gmail.com.