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Bopha Phorn and Neil Loughlin

Cambodia in 2024: Hun Manet Rules but His Father's Shadow Looms Large

Abstract: The end of 2024 marked the first full calendar year in power for Cambodia's new Prime Minister, Hun Manet. Manet inherited the position from his father, Hun Sen, in August 2023, fulfilling long-standing expectations of a dynastic succession within the Hun family (Loughlin 2023). Questions remain about the balance of power between Manet and his father, who continues to wield significant influence. Internationally, Cambodia sought to tread a path between its key ally and economic supporter, China, while tentatively improving relations with the United States and other countries. However, Cambodia's international relations were strained by its centrality to Southeast Asia's online scam epidemic. The economy showed signs of a post-pandemic recovery, but challenges remain, including the contraction of the Chinese economy, global inflation, and domestic struggles in important sectors like construction, as well as a growing personal debt crisis that could pose economic and political challenges in the future.

Keywords: Cambodia; authoritarian; developmentalism; China; crime; corruption; political economy

BOPHA PHORN is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political and Social Change, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University. NEIL LOUGHLIN is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in comparative politics at City St George's, University of London. Email: <neil.loughlin@city.ac.uk>.

POLITICS

The promotion of Hun Manet to Prime Minister in August 2023 was supposed to signal a new era of Cambodian politics. However, as 2024 unfolded, there was much to suggest continuity rather than change, with Hun Sen remaining a central political figure and exerting considerable formal and informal authority over the regime he built during his nearly four decades in power. Hun Sen's roles within the party and state institutions have allowed him to remain actively engaged in both domestic and international affairs throughout 2024. In April 2024, he was

unanimously elected President of the Senate (RFA Khmer 2024c). Additionally, his presidency of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) since 2015 ensures his continued control over the country's most influential political institution.

During his tenure as Prime Minister—marked by the suppression of critics and political rivals—Hun Sen frequently invoked the specter of a “color revolution” to justify crackdowns on dissent (Loughlin 2024a). This rhetoric was on display in 2024, including during a November speech to over 2,000 defectors who had recently joined the CPP (*Khmer Times* 2024). Many of these defectors had previously faced repression under the ruling party before switching their allegiance. On the international stage, Hun Sen maintained his influence by engaging with leaders and other foreign dignitaries from Japan, Vietnam, Kenya, and Nepal. In December 2024, he held a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The meeting was framed as one between party leaders (Niem 2024a), but this and other international engagements underscored Hun Sen's unofficial status as a figure akin to a head of state—a role formally held by King Norodom Sihamoni, but which also falls to Hun Sen as Senate President in the King's absence.

In the years leading to his appointment as Prime Minister, Hun Manet's rise was carefully orchestrated to secure the Hun family's dominance while balancing the interests of other CPP elites. This was intended to ensure regime cohesion and a smooth transition of power when Hun Sen finally steps back or dies (Loughlin 2021). Continuing this trend, in February 2024, Hun Sen's third son, Hun Many, a parliamentarian since 2013, was promoted to Deputy Prime Minister in addition to his role as Minister of Civil Service (Firn 2024). Hun Manith, Hun Sen's second son, became Deputy Commander of the Armed Forces in 2023 and holds a political rank equivalent to minister. Other members of the Hun family occupy key positions in Cambodia's political and security structure, while the family's substantial business empire is evident in the directorships and shareholdings held by Hun family members in the few conglomerates that dominate the country's economy (Loughlin 2024a)

The ascent of Hun Sen's children reflects a broader trend of dynastic politics within the CPP (Loughlin 2021). For example, the sons of prominent party officials Sar Kheng and Tea Banh inherited key positions as part of the transfer of power in 2023, with Sar Kheng's son Sar Sokha

inheriting his father's former role as Minister of the Interior, while Tea Seiha replaced his own father, Tea Banh, as Minister of Defense that year (*CamboJA News* 2023). Meanwhile, Sar Kheng and Tea Banh retained influence as senior CPP Central Committee members and members of the Supreme Privy Council. This process, alongside the promotion of scores of other CPP scions to government positions, has created a dynastic ruling class entrenched within the party-state structure, where political elders retain influence while a new generation, largely composed of the children and relatives of the post-1979 political elite, is tasked with the day-to-day running of government.

Hun Manet's early tenure as Prime Minister through 2024 has been marked by the ongoing closure of political space in the country and an emphasis on authoritarian developmentalism, blending repression of critics with a focus on infrastructure development.

The Senate and local elections held in February and May 2024 respectively reflected Cambodia's shift from competitive authoritarianism to a more closed system. This transformation can be traced back to the 2013–2018 political crisis, which exposed widespread dissatisfaction with the CPP among large segments of the population. In response, the CPP dismantled the main political opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), in 2017, and cemented its hold on power through rubber-stamp national elections in 2018 and 2023.

In the 2024 Senate election, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) secured 55 of the 58 elected Senate seats, in addition to the two seats appointed by the King, and two more awarded by the National Assembly, where the CPP holds all 125 seats. Under Cambodia's constitution, most senators are elected by commune councilors—a system overwhelmingly controlled by the CPP, which holds 11,622 commune council seats compared to the 2,198 held by the Candlelight Party (CLP). The CLP, formed from remnants of the dissolved CNRP, was barred from fielding candidates for the Senate election due to restrictions imposed by the partisan National Election Committee ahead of the July 2023 national election (*Al Jazeera* 2023). These restrictions were later extended to the Senate vote in 2024, effectively excluding the CLP from putting candidates forward. The CPP attempted to further tilt the scales in its favour, with opposition councillors claiming that financial incentives, gifts, and promises of political support were offered to those

who abstained from voting or supported CPP candidates (Human Rights Watch 2024). Despite these obstacles, the Khmer Will Party (KWP)—which many CLP councilors pledged to support in the absence of their own party on the Senate ballot—managed to win three Senate seats (Hang 2024).

In May's city and district elections, the CPP secured over 86% of the vote (RFA Khmer 2024a) in an atmosphere of repression against opposition parties, activists, and independent journalists. Sun Chanthy, leader of the newly formed National Power Party (NPP), was arrested on charges of "inciting social disorder" and placed in pretrial detention, highlighting the regime's continued use of the judiciary to silence dissent (Cheang and Peck 2024).

Throughout 2024 the CPP maintained its crackdowns on opposition figures, activists, and journalists. High-profile cases included the sentencing of 10 environmental activists in July for raising concerns about river pollution, accusing them of plotting against the government (Ng 2024). In September Mech Dara, an award-winning journalist known for exposing cyber scams and corruption involving Cambodia's elite, was charged with incitement based on Facebook posts and released on bail only after issuing a public apology, which was broadcast by government-aligned media (Wright 2024).

The government's reach extended beyond Cambodia's borders, targeting critics abroad and their relatives. For instance, Nuon Toeun, a Cambodian maid in Malaysia, was deported and imprisoned for Facebook posts critical of the government, facing charges of incitement. Similarly, Hay Vanna, a vocal critic based in Japan, saw his brother arrested after Vanna criticized the regime. Following his brother's detention, Vanna issued an apology and subsequently joined the CPP (RFA Khmer 2024a).

The CPP has long emphasized its developmental credentials as reason for its right to rule the country, and this has continued under the new administration. Hun Manet's focus on economic development as a political priority was evident in early 2024, when he announced a masterplan comprising 174 infrastructure projects utilizing foreign investment, part of a broader effort to elevate Cambodia to middle-income status by 2050 (Haffner 2014). This follows Cambodia's

pentagonal strategy set out by Manet early in his tenure in 2023, which builds on earlier triangular and rectangular strategies aimed at infrastructure development and economic growth.

To help achieve his government's economic goals, Manet has committed to reforms and combating corruption. This has translated into the arrest and jailing of corrupt government officials, typically at lower levels. Notable cases included the arrest of Kep City Governor Kheng Yuan in January, as well as the detention of a former advisor to Hun Sen on fraud charges in October (RFA Khmer 2024c). However, Cambodia is ranked 158 out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2024) and the country's centrality to the online scam epidemic engulfing Southeast Asia, in which several members of the country's political and economic elite have been implicated so far without sanction by the government, suggests Manet's reforms are superficial, and belie the reality that corruption remains deeply embedded within Cambodia's political settlement (Loughlin 2024b).

INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

In 2024, Cambodia's international political landscape reflected a strategic balancing act, as the country sought to maintain its deep ties with China while also diversifying its relationships with other global partners.

China remains Cambodia's closest ally and largest economic supporter. Hun Manet's first official visit as Cambodia's leader was to China in September 2023, signaling the importance of the relationship (Phoung 2023), and throughout 2024 Manet made several trips to Beijing to further enhance the two countries' deep economic, political and security ties. However, challenges in the relationship between the two countries have emerged. China's economic slowdown, exacerbated by the lingering impacts of COVID-19, has affected Cambodia's economy, which heavily relies on Chinese investment and tourism. The Funan Techo project, a \$1.7 billion infrastructure initiative initially backed by a Chinese company, has faced funding issues (Radio Free Asia 2024a). As a result, attempts by Manet to court closer relations with the

US and others in 2024 can be read as an effort to balance his country's overdependence on China.

Hun Manet's charm offensive appeared to bear some fruit in 2024. In June, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Phnom Penh to discuss defense cooperation and the possibility of resuming joint military exercises suspended by Cambodia in 2017 (US Department of Defense 2024). Similarly, a visit by USAID head Samantha Powers signaled the potential for improved development cooperation and support, but this remains somewhat contingent on Cambodia addressing US concerns over human rights and democracy, something Powers raised when she noted the detention of a slew of government critics during her visit (USAID 2024).

However, the ongoing expansion and renovation of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, funded by China, has drawn international scrutiny, including from the US (Cheang 2024; Turton and Phorn 2024). Satellite images from 2024 revealed the presence of two Chinese warships at the base, heightening concerns about a potential Chinese military foothold in Southeast Asia. While Phnom Penh and Beijing have denied such claims, the development of the base has alarmed the US, as well as regional players like Vietnam.

Cambodia made efforts to re-engage with the European Union in 2024. Hun Manet's visit to France in January saw him meet with key EU leaders to address longstanding criticisms regarding human rights and democratic governance (Nimol 2024). The discussions focused on trade, investment, and the potential restoration of the EU's "Everything But Arms" (EBA) trade preferences (Kijewski 2020), which had been partially withdrawn in 2020 due to human rights concerns. However, as of late 2024, it appears that Manet's efforts were ineffective, as a November resolution by the European Parliament recommended further reductions in Cambodia's trade preferences if the country does not take steps to combat human rights abuses, including the repression of political opponents and activists.

Hun Manet has consistently reaffirmed Cambodia's commitment to ASEAN, including during meetings in Jakarta and Laos in 2024. However, relations with regional partners have been strained by disagreements over how to engage with Myanmar's junta following the 2021 coup

that plunged that country into civil war (Niem 2024b), as well as differing approaches to the South China Sea dispute, in which Cambodia is generally perceived to follow China's position in this and other disputes with ASEAN members (Feigenbaum, Chong, and Noor 2024).

In September 2024, Cambodia informed Laos and Vietnam of its decision to withdraw from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle Development Area (CLV), a 25-year economic cooperation initiative (Torn 2024). This decision followed public protests in Cambodia that the project could lead to territorial losses, while disproportionately benefiting Vietnam. The decision to withdraw was likely driven by domestic concerns in Cambodia over border issues, which has typically been a problem for the CPP, which is often portrayed as too close to Hanoi. Hanoi has also raised concerns over the security, economic and environmental impact of the Funan Techo Canal, which has the potential to reduce Cambodia's reliance on trade routes through Vietnam, impact river flows in the Mekong Delta, as well as raising anxieties over China's influence and strategic interests in the region (Radio Free Asia 2024).

Meanwhile, cybercrime has emerged as a critical issue tarnishing Cambodia's international reputation, with the government's denials doing little to address growing global concerns that continued to reverberate in 2024. A landmark 2024 report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP 2024) revealed that individuals from 66 countries have been trafficked into these illicit operations. Countries such as India, Vietnam, and China have issued warnings to their citizens about seeking employment opportunities in Cambodia.

Reports of human trafficking and forced labor linked to cyber scam activities have drawn condemnation from the US, the EU, and regional partners. For example, in 2024, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Cambodian businessman Ly Yong Phat for his involvement in these activities (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2024). The scale of the scamming industry and its linkages to Cambodia's elite likely explain the government's failure to get a grip on the industry and address the widespread international concern (Loughlin 2024b).

ECONOMY

Cambodia's economy in 2024 reflects a blend of recovery, resilience, and ongoing structural challenges as the country navigates global and domestic headwinds. While growth projections remain optimistic—with the World Bank forecasting a 5.8% increase (World Bank 2024) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicting 5% growth—the economy remains somewhat vulnerable due to external dependencies, internal structural weaknesses, and socio-political factors (International Monetary Fund 2024).

Steady growth in garments, the country's leading export earner, employing as many as 750,000 Cambodians, provided welcome economic stability in 2024 (World Bank 2024). However, the sector is highly susceptible to external shocks and persistent challenges such as high electricity costs, skill shortages, and reliance on coal-based energy continue to hinder its competitiveness as major buyers sourcing from Cambodia have committed to reducing coal in their production processes. Moreover, the potential loss of tariff preferences under the EU's EBA scheme proposed by the EU parliament in 2024 poses a significant threat to the industry (European Parliament 2024), which heavily depends on Chinese firms offshoring manufacturing operations to leverage these benefits.

Tourism, another cornerstone of Cambodia's economy, has shown signs of recovery but remains far below pre-pandemic levels (World Bank 2024). Chinese tourists, who made up over 35% of international visitors before COVID-19 (Turton and Phorn 2020), have been deterred by China's economic slowdown and the rise of organized crime activities in Cambodia. Reports of organized crime, human trafficking, and fraud targeting foreign workers have prompted travel warnings from several countries, while the release of the Chinese blockbuster *No More Bets*, (Marsh 2023) which depicts cyber scams in Southeast Asia, has further tarnished Cambodia's image (Turton and Yan 2023).

The construction and real estate sectors, once thriving, continued to experience a significant downturn in 2024. Real estate prices have plummeted by as much as 50% (Hin 2024), and activity in the sector remains stagnant. This slowdown has reverberated across related industries, weakening domestic demand and reducing private consumption.

As noted above, the \$1.7 billion Funan Techo Canal project is intended to enhance trade, but it also exemplifies the complexities of Cambodia's infrastructure goals. Initially planned with

Chinese backing, the lack of firm financial commitments from Chinese entities has left the project in limbo. In response, Cambodia has sought alternative financing mechanisms, including bonds, and leaned heavily on domestic tycoons and state-owned ports to stump up some of the money to finance its early stages (Radio Free Asia 2024b). However, without the commitment of additional funding from China, the fate of the project is unclear.

Most worryingly for Cambodia, reports in late December suggested China had frozen its lending to Cambodia in 2024, marking a significant shift from its position as the country's top creditor in previous years (Reuters 2024). Cambodian finance ministry data showed that no new Chinese loans were approved during the first three quarters of the year, compared to \$212 million during the same period in 2023. This may indicate a more cautious approach from China following a series of underperforming infrastructure projects in Cambodia.

Cambodia's microfinance industry, initially established to address poverty, has become a subject of concern due to its unintended negative consequences on borrowers. With over 3 million active microloans in a country of approximately 3.6 million households (Hutt 2023), loan penetration is notably high. The average loan amount exceeds \$4,000, significantly outstripping the nation's annual per capita income and diverging from microfinance's original intent of providing accessible, small-scale credit.

A prominent issue is the use of land as collateral. Borrowers face the risk of losing their land if they default, creating profound social and economic challenges, particularly for rural and indigenous groups who depend on land for their livelihoods. Although high repayment rates are often cited as a success metric, they can conceal underlying hardships. Many borrowers resort to informal lenders or extreme measures, such as selling land or pulling children out of school, to meet repayment deadlines. This debt cycle has been linked to malnutrition, forced migration, and even child labor among affected families (Bureau of International Labor Affairs 2023; LICADHO 2024). As result, microfinance in Cambodia has shown limited success in alleviating poverty, with one study released in 2024 suggesting that that only a small percentage of borrowers—around 6%—report substantial improvements in living conditions, a figure notably lower than in other Asian countries (*60 Decibels* 2024).

Without meaningful changes, the situation may escalate into broader social and political challenges for Cambodia's government, given the widespread reach and consequences of these loans.

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