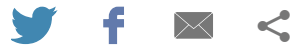




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Cambodia: July 1997: Shock and Aftermath

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What happened in Cambodia on July 5-6, 1997? Thomas Hammarberg, the United Nations Special Representative on Human Rights in Cambodia, made it clear in his October 1997 report to the UN General Assembly: the events of July 5-6 were a "coup d'état."

This seemed plain to those of us living through those tumultuous times in Cambodia, and has been confirmed by subsequent research. Through interviews at the time and in the years since with senior CPP and FUNCINPEC officials, senior military officials of the CPP, FUNCINPEC and KPNLF, diplomats, foreign military attaches, human rights workers, and residents of Phnom Penh who witnessed the fighting, the basic facts

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Minister Sar Kheng, Defense Minister Tea Banh, and head of the armed forces Ke Kim Yan, argued against military action and refused to mobilize their forces, causing deep strains in the party. After the coup, many senior CPP officials who refused to participate sandbagged their homes and put their guards on full alert, fearful that Hun Sen would then strike against them for their disloyalty.

Even without the support of much of his party, Hun Sen was able to put together enough military power to succeed. On July 5-6 his ad hoc forces, led by loyalists including Kun Kim, Mol Roeup, Sao Sokha, Hok Lundy, and Keo Pong, defeated the FUNCINPEC forces who had not been disarmed in the previous week. He then unleashed his forces to carry out a campaign of extrajudicial executions, primarily of FUNCINPEC military officers.

I and many of my colleagues at the UN human rights office had the unforgettable experience of digging up the bodies of men stripped naked to their underwear, handcuffed behind their backs, blindfolded, and shot in the head.

Executions and torture

In many cases it was clear who carried out these killings. One unit in particular, the "911" parachute regiment under Colonel Chap Pheakadey,

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...they are committed to the fight against impunity have simply dropped the issue.

What caused the coup? Many trace it back to the flawed power sharing formula after FUNCINPEC won the UNTAC-organized elections in May 1993. The CPP insisted on an equal share of power and refused to relinquish control of the security services. The international community and then Prince Norodom Sihanouk imposed a coalition with Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen as co-Prime Ministers. The CPP's successful threat to use force if its conditions were not met may have emboldened Hun Sen to use military force if his hold on power was ever threatened again.

One could also point to the failed coup attempt of July 2, 1994 against Hun Sen and Ranariddh - by members of Hun Sen's own party. This coup attempt was led by former Minister of Interior Sin Song and national police chief Sin Sen, both of whom were furious at Hun Sen for being left out of the coalition government. The coup attempt was backed by Thaksin Shinawatra's IBC TV, after his television contract was ripped up by the co-Prime Ministers. Ironically, Hun Sen was saved in part by Ranariddh and FUNINCEPEC forces under General Nhek Bun Chhay, who sent their forces to confront rebel CPP tanks motoring in from their stronghold in Prey Veng.

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protect his personal security. The price Hun Sen exacted from the CPP coup plotters and their patrons was greater control of the armed forces. He appointed his own man, Hok Lundy, as national police chief. Until then internal security had been Chea Sim's domain. Hok Lundy reported directly to Hun Sen despite the fact that his formal boss was Sar Kheng - a close confidante of Chea Sim and an internal party opponent of Hun Sen. Perhaps even more important, Hun Sen decided to build up his personal "bodyguard unit" into a de facto private army. All of this soon made Hun Sen the strongest physical force in the CPP. Hok Lundy and the bodyguard unit played key roles in the July 1997 coup.

One could also point to Ranariddh's decision in early 1996 to confront the CPP. The CPP had reneged on a promise to appoint FUNCINPEC members to half the district chief positions in the country, a key part of the 1993 coalition agreement. There was deep dissatisfaction in FUNCINPEC over the lack of real power sharing (and the opportunities for corruption that came with it) and the party's clearly second-class status in the government. Ranariddh had shown himself to be a weak and incompetent leader. His party was losing public esteem as it failed to implement any of its 1993 campaign promises on corruption, human rights or land. Ranariddh decided that FUNCINPEC should attempt to reach military parity with the CPP. It was a ridiculous idea to compete with Hun Sen and the CPP in military terms, "laughable," as many foreign military

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discerned as early as April 1996 by the UN political representative in Cambodia, Benny Widyono. Widyono warned in a cable to UN headquarters that Hun Sen was contemplating getting rid of Ranariddh. After meeting Hun Sen, Widyono concluded that Hun Sen was mapping out his "usual strategy: to patiently probe Prince Ranariddh's weaknesses and, when the time comes, to strike at those weaknesses, swiftly and aggressively." Widyono believed that Hun Sen was angling to arrest Ranariddh.

Two days later, reacting to a threat by FUNCINPEC to dissolve the National Assembly and call early elections, Hun Sen warned that he might use military force, declaring, "I have the forces to do it." According to another cable from Widyono, Hun Sen wanted to arrest FUNCINPEC generals, but was blocked by the opposition of CPP armed forces chief Ke Kim Yan. A further report from Widyono's office stated that at a secret April 30, 1996 meeting of CPP leaders, Hun Sen proposed taking military action against the FUNCINPEC "machinery." This was reportedly opposed by most CPP leaders, including Ke Kim Yan, Chea Sim, and Sar Kheng. General Pol Sarouen, Kandal deputy governor Kun Kim and Phnom Penh deputy governor Chea Sophara were reported to support Hun Sen. In June 1996 Chea Sim felt it necessary to publicly air his concerns, stating that there should be no confrontation between CPP and FUNCINPEC.

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together to defeat the CPP in the 1998 elections.

Political factions

In February 1997 fighting broke out between FUNCINPEC and CPP forces in Battambang province. An "Abnormal Conflict Resolution Committee" was established to prevent a recurrence. It was chaired by co-Ministers of Interior Sar Kheng and You Hokry (FUNCINPEC) and included Ke Kim Yan and Nhek Bun Chhay. None of these people had the power to block Hun Sen when he decided to use military force. At the same time, CPP officials say that Hun Sen was deeply concerned that the more moderate Sar Kheng was being promoted through the "Abnormal Committee" as his successor by some in the CPP, FUNCINPEC and some diplomats.

By this time Hun Sen's popularity was rapidly declining in the country and within his own party. There were frequent press reports about deep splits in the CPP between the Hun Sen and Chea Sim-Sar Kheng factions, with many in the party wanting to replace Hun Sen with someone they considered more palatable to voters.

Fearing the newly announced alliance between FUNCINPEC and Sam Rainsy's KNP, Hun Sen wanted to arrest Rainsy, who was busily building his new party. Minister of Justice Chem Snguon confirmed this to me,

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... killed 16 and injured more than 150, soon followed. Hun Sen reacted by ordering Rainsy's arrest. The demand was so outrageous - Rainsy was nearly killed in the attack - that the order was ignored.

In early April Hun Sen engineered a split within FUNCINPEC in an attempt to gain sufficient votes in the National Assembly to remove Ranariddh as Prime Minister. This was not difficult, as many FUNCINPEC MPs were deeply disaffected from Ranariddh. At one point Hun Sen claimed 22 FUNCINPEC "neutrals" would vote against Ranariddh. But after leaving Hun Sen's home at Tuol Krai Sang many of the MPs recanted, some going into hiding. The attempt to remove Ranariddh through "legal" means failed.

Coup rumors swirled. On April 28, 1997, Hun Sen announced that he had nothing to gain from a coup as he already held full power legitimately, but warned, "If I decide to hold a coup d'état, it can hardly be prevented." He was right.

Fallout factors

The FBI was sent to investigate the March 30 grenade attack because an American, Ron Abney, was injured and it was classified as a terrorist attack by the State Department. By May 15, the investigation had implicated Hun

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The lead FBI agent told the Cambodian police that things looked “very bad” for Hun Sen, especially since “Hun Sen’s people didn’t tell the truth.” This was reported back to Hun Sen.

On May 25, a large shipment of arms signed for by Ranariddh for his bodyguard unit arrived at Kampong Som port. The CPP-controlled military court opened a case against Ranariddh. Hun Sen accused Ranariddh of trying to import weapons illegally and destabilizing the government. It is unclear if this shipment was legal, but what is certain is that the CPP, like FUNCINPEC, was regularly importing arms and weapons without informing the other side. “This was routine and both sides knew about it,” a senior CPP official told me, a point confirmed by many other CPP and FUNCINPEC officials and military attachés from France, Singapore, Thailand, and the United States.

During this time both FUNCINPEC and the CPP began to move forces into and around Phnom Penh in anticipation of armed conflict. Both were also attempting to strike a deal with remaining Khmer Rouge forces in the north of the country (Ieng Sary and other Khmer Rouge forces in western Pailin and Malai areas had defected to Hun Sen, who outbid Ranariddh, in August 1996). Hun Sen accused FUNCINPEC of bringing Khmer Rouge soldiers from Khmer Rouge headquarters in Anlong Veng into Phnom Penh, giving massive air time to a former Khmer Rouge fighter named

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style, to the FUNCINPEC side.

I was part of a team of UN staff who interviewed alleged Khmer Rouge soldiers captured after the coup. We found only a few who may have been Khmer Rouge, but most were farmers from Prey Veng or Svay Rieng who had been offered money to come to Phnom Penh for work. This is not to say there were none. In May 1997 I saw two Khmer Rouge soldiers guarding a safe house for FUNCINPEC "neutral" MPs in Phnom Penh. They had the look of jungle fighters and said they were from Malai. There were other anecdotal reports of Khmer Rouge forces coming to join FUNCINPEC. However, no credible evidence of the presence of significant numbers of Khmer Rouge members from Anlong Veng has ever been produced. French, Australian and Singaporean military attaches told me the claims were unfounded. On the other hand, as many as 300 former Khmer Rouge fighters fought in the coup on Hun Sen's side under the command of Khmer Rouge defector Keo Pong.

Blood feud

In mid-June, forces under the command of Hok Lundy and FUNCINPEC deputy Minister of Interior Ho Sok fought along Norodom Boulevard in Phnom Penh. Two FUNCINPEC troops were killed. The tension in Phnom Penh was intense, with many expecting armed conflict to break out at any

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In late June, Hun Sen again attempted to convince CPP leaders to back his plans to take power by force. Those present at the meeting say that this was strongly opposed by Ke Kim Yan, Tea Banh, Chea Sim and Sar Kheng. They argued that FUNCINPEC was not a military threat and that while it might have been bringing some Khmer Rouge into Phnom Penh, the number was not significant. They argued that the country had made too much progress since the Paris Peace Agreements to put it all at risk, and that they would be blamed by the international community and Cambodians if they used force to solve political problems.

On June 29 Hun Sen announced that he would no longer cooperate with Ranariddh. He demanded that members of the Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh surrender to his forces or face tough action. On the same day, CPP General Pol Sareoun told a foreign historian that unless Ranariddh was arrested, there was soon going to be a "little war" with FUNCINPEC. That same day, the Washington Post quoted an FBI report alleging that Hun Sen's bodyguards were involved in the March 30 grenade attack.

Credible reports began to come in that CPP tanks were being positioned around Phnom Penh, while FUNCINPEC consolidated its forces in Taing Krai Sang. One western military attaché with close contacts in the CPP told me that he briefed his embassy on how the tanks would be deployed into Phnom Penh, how they would take FUNCINPEC military installations, and

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On July 1, the military court asked the National Assembly to lift Ranariddh's parliamentary immunity so it could charge him with illegal weapons smuggling. On July 2, CPP forces seized FUNCINPEC's Prek Ta Ten base along route 5 north of Phnom Penh, killing one FUNCINPEC soldier and wounding three.

On July 3, Ranariddh returned to Phnom Penh from Kampong Cham by helicopter after he was told that an operation was afoot to arrest him en route. His bodyguards drove to Phnom Penh. Along the way, pro-Hun Sen troops stopped them and gave them the choice of being shot or disarmed. According to an American official, the CPP forces involved said they hoped to provoke a fight and were unhappy that Ranariddh's bodyguards did not take the bait. Ranariddh fled to France the next day, July 4, after being warned by his security officials that Hun Sen would try to arrest or kill him.

Negotiations throughout that night between Nhek Bun Chhay and CPP military leaders, including Ke Kim Yan and Tea Banh, proved fruitless. FUNCINPEC military figures wanted assurances that if they grouped in Taing Kraisang they would continue to be recognized as members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and would not be harmed. Hun Sen demanded that they disarm, but Nhek Bun Chhay refused, fearing that he and his forces would be killed - which is what happened to many after the

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officers like Nhek Bun Chhay and Chau Sambath, FUNCINPEC party headquarters, and Ranariddh's home in central Phnom Penh. By the end of the next day, FUNCINPEC's forces were routed.

Aftermath

The 1997 coup has been by far the most important event in Cambodia since the 1993 UNTAC elections. It shattered all illusions that the country was on the path to democracy. It showed that violence was still an acceptable political choice for the country's leaders. It showed indifference to the lingering trauma and fear that so many Cambodians retained after the Khmer Rouge period and the bloody 1993 UNTAC elections. It made clear that commitments to human rights were just words on paper.

The widespread and planned post-coup extrajudicial executions of FUNCINPEC military figures carried out by Hun Sen's forces took place under the international community's noses and underlined continuing impunity for the most serious human rights violations. Even the most blatant abuses, such as the murder of Ho Sok in the custody of the forces of Hok Lundy in an interior ministry office, have gone uninvestigated and unpunished.

More than anything, the coup and Hun Sen's successful navigation of the

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... almost total dominion over political and military power in Cambodia. No one now believes (as a few did at the time), for example, that if an opposition party obtained more votes than the CPP that Hun Sen would relinquish power.

The coup, therefore, stole something intangible yet essential: it stole hope from people who had just begun to dare to dream that their future would be decided by the ballot instead of the bullet.

Brad Adams is Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

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