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Cambodia's Curse

Joel Brinkley

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The Modern History of a Troubled Land

This year Arab leaders have been caught off balance by their citizens, who have shown unexpected courage and come out in force to demand democracy and an end to corruption and cruel inequities. Those protests are proof that the truism that Arabs needed "strongmen" to rule them was wrong. In just weeks, the nonviolent demonstrators overthrew the ruling tyrants in Tunisia and Egypt, inspiring other uprisings in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria. Now, no matter how these revolts play out, Arabs have broken out of racial and cultural stereotypes that said they were unfit for democracy.

In his new book "Cambodia's Curse," the former New York Times journalist Joel Brinkley comes very close to offering a similar dead-end theory to explain why he thinks the people of Cambodia are "cursed" by history to live under abusive tyrants. In his telling, Cambodians are passive Buddhists who have accepted their stern overlords since the days of the Angkor Empire. "Far more than almost any other state, modern Cambodia is a product of customs and practices set in stone a millennium ago," he writes, blaming that history for the ability of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to squash meaningful dissent against his corrupt regime.

As a young reporter, Brinkley won a Pulitzer Prize in 1980 for his coverage of the Cambodian refugee crisis. Returning to the region 30 years later, Brinkley - now a professor of journalism at Stanford - chose his subject well. Hun Sen deserves a thorough examination. Along with his cronies, he has amassed extraordinary wealth selling off the country's assets to the highest bidder. Everything is up for grabs - land wrested from peasants to be sold to corporations and turned into plantations or tourist resorts, young girls and boys sold into prostitution, and dense forests cut down and the lumber sold abroad. Corruption is everywhere. Underpaid schoolteachers demand bribes from their students, judges issue rulings based on the amount of money paid on the side or the dictates of the government, businesses flourish by paying handsome bribes for licenses and to avoid unwelcome regulations.

Brinkley admirably highlights nearly all of these crimes and demonstrates that Hun Sen's administration has been a disaster for many Cambodians. His portrait of the businessman Mong Reththy is a gem, showing how businessmen enrich themselves through corrupt government concessions and then underwrite charities or schools in the areas impoverished by their corruption.

Yet there are only two types of Cambodians in these pages - either victims (passive,

poverty-stricken Cambodians for whom Brinkley shows great sympathy) or villains (cruel, selfish politicians and businessmen). Missing are normal Cambodians who work day jobs and study at night to get ahead; Cambodians who return from abroad with dreams of a better life; Cambodians who promote human rights or flourish in the arts and sciences.

The few people painted in full, heroic strokes are American diplomats who served as ambassadors to Cambodia. Brinkley focuses on them and the foreign community of aid groups and governments who spend billions of dollars to improve the lives of Cambodia's poor. He correctly asks whether much of that money has gone to waste or into bank accounts of corrupt officials, and chastises foreign governments for not demanding real reforms for the aid.

Undermining his reporting is his thesis that thousand-year-old traditions are to blame for this state of affairs rather than 21st century realities. Brinkley fails to track the extraordinary sums of foreign investment fueling official corruption. Crooked signing bonuses and commissions, money laundering, selling off government land to foreign investors, human trafficking - these modern plagues are hardly confined to Cambodia. International businesses are pouring billions into Cambodia. China and South Korea are at the top of that list, giving them an outsize influence in Cambodia, yet they barely appear in Brinkley's book.

To retain control over all that money, Hun Sen has amassed a monopoly on power through the army and police, buying off or killing off dissidents. His path to power has been anything but democratic: Trained as a young Khmer Rouge officer, Hun Sen defected and was installed as prime minister by the Vietnamese occupiers; later he bullied the United Nations into appointing him a co-prime minister even though he lost the country's first election, then rigged subsequent elections.

Brinkley makes the blanket claim that Cambodians accept this because they are a people who "could not, would not, stand up and advocate for themselves," forgetting Cambodia's history of revolts or movements against French colonial rule, King Sihanouk's autocracy, the corrupt Lon Nol regime, the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam's occupation and Hun Sen himself. In more recent times, Chea Vichea led a free-trade union movement and became a serious challenger to Hun Sen's power until he was gunned down by thugs. Brinkley mentions Vichea's murder in a short paragraph without fully describing his impact or the courage and skill he showed organizing Cambodia's textile workers.

And countless Cambodians have fought back when soldiers and police have thrown them off their lands. Cambodian activists like Dr. Pung Chhiv Kek have been so successful defending against human rights abuses that the government issued a draft law in December to effectively put them under government control. Brinkley might have also given greater weight to Cambodia's short experience with fully free elections and the legacy of the Khmer Rouge revolution, which could put a damper on anyone's desire to revolt again.

Further clouding his book are frequent errors. He describes the United Nations' 1993

peacekeeping operation as an "occupation," and then compares it unfavorably to the Allied occupation of Germany. He claims it is "rare to see Cambodians laugh." He confuses the Hindu faith with the Hindi language. He has China invading Vietnam in 1989, rather than in 1979. And why does he make the exaggerated claim that Cambodians are "the most abused people in the world"?

By arguing that Cambodians are passive and that the "Buddhist notion of individual helplessness" is a central factor holding them down, he dismisses the possibility that Cambodians could reform their own country. Instead he concludes that the country's best hope is in the hands of foreigners. He challenges the foreign governments to withhold aid money until Hun Sen lives up to his promises to enact reforms and respect human rights. "Maybe, just maybe, after 1,000 years, Cambodia's rulers might finally be forced to give the people their due," he writes.

Or maybe Hun Sen doesn't need that money so desperately and those donor governments are not such disinterested parties.

Brinkley may blame the legacy of Angkor kings for Hun Sen's ability to keep down Cambodians. But the Cambodian leader's recent actions suggest otherwise. When Egypt's Hosni Mu- barak started tottering under the demands of protesters, Hun Sen shut down the opposition websites in Cambodia.