

Misruling Cambodia

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If schools are a reflection of society, then they show Cambodia to be a limp and defeated nation. On the first day of class, Cambodian children learn they must bribe their teachers to get good grades, a practice that continues for the 3% of them who make it to college. Teachers, struggling on salaries of less than \$100 a month, take their cuts and pass the money up to the principals. The principals then pay off local education officials, and so on to higher circles of government. In the end, those who give the largest bribes eventually win promotions—giving them access to even bigger cash flows.

In this system, students learn few useful skills except how to survive under a corrupt regime, writes journalist Joel Brinkley. For the lucky few who pay, and sometimes even murder, their way to the top of the government, life is good. But for the ordinary farmers and laborers, kickbacks are simply an expensive roadblock to economic and social advancement.

"These demands are humiliating. It pushes a lot of smart kids out to the rice fields instead of helping our country," Sok Sopheap, a high school student who was kicked out of class because he didn't pay a bribe, told me. "This is why Cambodia stays poor."

Mr. Brinkley's depressing book is a mostly illuminating, though sometimes lopsided, chronicle of the politicians and bureaucrats who have plagued Cambodian society for the past 30 years. After the Khmer Rouge regime oversaw the deaths of 1.7 million people and was unseated in 1979, a new group of opportunists took their place. That wily clique, installed by the invading Vietnamese, includes current Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) solidified its hold on power in part by manipulating foreign governments and keeping the country poor. Its first big target was the United Nations, which took advantage of the end of a Cold War stalemate in 1989 to attempt a democratic transformation of the country. In 1992, U.N. peacekeepers tried to rebuild the country by launching the most expensive peacekeeping operation at the time—total cost \$1.6 billion—and overseeing elections that attracted a remarkable 90% voter turnout.

Mr. Hun Sen lost those elections but refused to step down; four years later, he ended the U.N.'s dream of democracy for Cambodia when he ousted his democratically elected co-prime minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, in armed clashes. Since he has consolidated power, Mr. Hun Sen has repeatedly sued and pushed his critics into exile, and has attempted to stall progress of the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

Nevertheless, foreign governments funded the CPP-led government with \$18 billion in aid and soft loans after U.N. peacekeepers departed. The leaders squandered much of this largesse on mansions, luxury cars, private security forces and political pandering—all to further their power. Today, the country loses \$500 million a year to corruption, USAID reports.

Mr. Brinkley won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980 for covering Cambodian refugees, and he weaves the details of the nation's underbelly into a compelling argument, interviewing powerful figures and foreign officials involved in politics, courts, hospitals, land development, forests and schools. Particularly engrossing is his account of the country's infamous 2010 anticorruption law, something the West pushed Phnom Penh to pass since the early 1990s, which would force government offices to face tougher audits.

For 15 years, Mr. Hun Sen repeatedly promised donor countries and organizations that he would pass the law. But while the donors complained every year that he still hadn't, they nonetheless assented to his requests for more money, raising their annual aid pledges from \$770 million in 1994 to nearly \$1.1 billion by the time Mr. Hun Sen acceded to their requests in 2010.

But the new law hardly meets international standards. It does not require officials to publicly disclose their holdings, the heart of any anticorruption law, and allows them to offer gifts in exchange for favors "in accordance with custom and tradition." The saga becomes yet one more example of the ineffectiveness of foreign aid, and Mr. Brinkley rightly wonders what foreign officials are up to. When he visits the new anticorruption office, he finds that it sends complaints directly to the institutions that the complainants accuse, with their names attached—leaving them open to threats and intimidation.

Such gifted storytelling makes up for some shortcomings, including some minor errors of fact. For instance, Mr. Brinkley writes that a 1997 grenade attack on an opposition rally occurred at a park across from the National Assembly that is named after Mr. Hun Sen. While the location of the blast is correct, it is actually a separate, nearby park that is named after the premier.

More troublesome are Mr. Brinkley's historical arguments. He suggests, for example, that leaders can act with impunity because most Cambodians will not change centuries-old attitudes. Kings traditionally awarded posts to mandarins who paid kickbacks, a scheme that Mr. Brinkley asserts continues uninterrupted.

It is true that Cambodians do not have a history of popular sovereignty, which may help explain why democracy-building faltered. The Khmer language reflects the fact that most Cambodians have low expectations of their leaders: The verb translated into English as "to govern," for example, literally means "to eat the kingdom."

But that fact is a long distance from Mr. Brinkley's sweeping conclusion that Cambodians, timid and wavering by upbringing, accept tyranny because they see no

alternative. "They carry no ambitions. They hold no dreams," he writes. "All they want is to be left alone." The first two statements are patronizing and disproven by the growing number of entrepreneurs. The third gives short shrift to the recognition of many Cambodians that democratic government is the surest path to domestic tranquility.

Mr. Brinkley's grim assessments on issues such as corruption and the ineffectiveness of donor aid ring true. Nevertheless, Cambodia is fast shedding its image as a lawless mafia state. The society is, despite all its problems, becoming more stable. Its economy is improving, thanks to limited regulation and taxation. Once pited as a basket case, Cambodia may yet prove its critics wrong, despite its governance curse.