

Hun Sen's remarkable career has tracked the tumults of modern Cambodia. Throughout the 1970s Hun Sen fought for those "Khmers Rouges," or Red Khmers, as Sihanouk dubbed them. After taking power in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge established a network of brutal labor camps in the Cambodian countryside, which led to the death of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians — nearly a quarter of the population.

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, the regime soon started devouring its own ranks in a paranoid search for spies and wreckers. In 1977, Hun Sen, then a mid-ranking commander in the army, defected to Vietnam to escape the purges. When the Vietnamese army overthrew the Khmer Rouge in January 1979 and installed a socialist government in its place, Hun Sen became foreign minister. Largely self-taught, he quickly evolved into a loyal and reliable ally of the Vietnamese, who continued to occupy the country through the late 1980s. On Jan. 14, 1985, at the age of 32, the Cambodian legislature appointed Hun Sen prime minister.

Since then, Hun Sen has played a long list of roles: apparatchik and reformer, strongman and statesman, demagogue and freewheeling free-marketeer. If his career has had one constant, however, it has been his ability to bend with the political wind.

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Prime Minister Hun Sen's first act of political escapism came with the collapse of communism. Throughout the 1980s, Hun Sen's government, supported by Vietnam and the Soviet Union, fought a bitter Cold War proxy conflict against a Chinese- and U.S.-backed resistance coalition that included the Khmer Rouge. In October 1991, in the dying days of the Cold War, the warring factions signed the Paris Peace Agreements, which created the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), tasked with ending the civil war and holding democratic elections.

In the face of this challenge, Hun Sen urged the adoption of cosmetic political reforms. By aping the language of the new zeitgeist, he seemed to be arguing that his Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party could navigate the democratic transition and maintain its grip on power. And so, between 1989 and 1991, the party recalibrated itself for democratic politics: It abandoned Marx, released political prisoners, embraced "pluralism" and private property rights, and renamed itself the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

Hun Sen also saw through the democratic triumphalism of the age to the brittle political reality that lay beneath. Despite all the talk about bringing democracy to Cambodia, foreign governments had signed the Paris Peace Agreements to remove strategically unimportant Cambodia from the international agenda, not to deepen their entanglements. This became clear after the U.N.-organized elections of May 1993 — the first since the

early 1970s — when the CPP came second to the royalist Funcinpec party led by Sihanouk’s son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh. In response, Hun Sen and other CPP figures threatened violence and strong-armed their way into an equal share of power. In a wholly undemocratic arrangement, Hun Sen became “second” prime minister to Ranariddh’s “first.” The United Nations, having already declared the election a success, packed up and left.

In the years that followed, the two prime ministers vied for supremacy. The final reckoning came in July 1997, when security forces loyal to Hun Sen defeated Funcinpec’s military wing in street battles, murdering many of the prince’s key commanders and driving Ranariddh into exile in Bangkok. The prince returned to contest a new election in 1998. Yet this time, in a climate marked by violence and politically motivated killings, the CPP won, gaining 41.4 percent of the vote to Funcinpec’s 31.7 percent. The two parties again formed a coalition — but Hun Sen ruled alone.

Since then, Hun Sen has used guile and force to neutralize his remaining opponents and extend his control over the country’s courts, parliament, and armed forces. As a former soldier, Hun Sen has long understood power as a function of force and interests, a tool to be employed in the pursuit of political objectives; everything else — whether democratic principles or human rights — is window dressing. “Hun Sen is known for creating his own reality and then living in it,” said Gordon Longmuir, Canada’s ambassador to Cambodia in the mid-1990s.

Today, power in Cambodia resides not in the democratic institutions imported by the U.N., but in the channels of influence linking Hun Sen with the country’s powerful business and political elite. But Hun Sen has stopped short of doing away with democracy altogether. The government has maintained a mirage of pluralism in order to placate the foreign governments that still provide it with roughly \$500 million in aid per year (around 14 percent of Cambodia’s national budget for 2015). To an international audience, Hun Sen is a skilled peddler of promises, fluent in donor-speak.

Domestically, he projects a different image: that of a wise and benevolent ruler, raining blessings on the people. His name is attached to thousands of schools bankrolled by friendly oligarchs; his personality finds its full expression in long, Castro-esque speeches in which he jokes, scolds, threatens political opponents, and recounts episodes from his childhood. With Hun Sen a son of the soil, his grasp of his people’s hopes and fears has allowed him to manipulate them effectively, portraying the CPP as the only thing standing between Cambodia and a return of the horrors of the past. In his first speech of 2015, Hun Sen brusquely declared that anyone opposing him is “an ally of the Pol Pot regime” — which is now long defunct. This blend of threats, charity, and strongman bombast has helped the CPP win the past four elections.

Hun Sen’s supporters point out that he has presided over an extended period of political stability and economic growth, rare commodities in Cambodia’s troubled history. Between 1998 and 2007, Cambodia’s GDP grew nearly 10 percent annually, one of the fastest growth rates in the world. But though these achievements are real, it is less clear

whether his reign has any aim beyond its own perpetuation. This is the verdict of Sam Rainsy, the French-educated former investment banker who has been Hun Sen's main political rival since the 1990s. "He is a genius, but a genius for himself," Sam Rainsy said in an interview in March 2014. "His only achievement is that he has managed to cling on to power for so many years."

After the 2013 election, however, the future for Hun Sen does appear slightly grimmer. The CPP's majority plummeted from 90 to 68 of the parliament's 123 seats, its worst electoral showing since 1998. There were many reasons for the turn against Hun Sen. One was demographic: Most Cambodians are too young to remember the Khmer Rouge.

But it is also stemmed from the widening gap between what the government promises and what it delivers. To maintain their loyalty, the government has allowed businessmen and the political elite to strip the country of its resources and fell its once-abundant forests. Little of the revenue has reached the poor, who have suffered land grabs, violence, and other abuses. On paper, Cambodia has seen poverty levels drop: By 2011 one out of every five Cambodians was living in poverty, compared to one in two in 2004. But many people still live on a knife edge: If the poverty line were raised by just 30 cents, the poverty rate would double, according to the World Bank.

After 2013's election, Hun Sen promised change. Ministries have been reshuffled; reforms have been launched in education and environmental policy. At the same time, the government has ruled out any possibility of a new administration. After opposition supporters and unions took to the streets in December 2013 calling for Hun Sen's resignation, security forces fired at striking garment workers on Phnom Penh's outskirts on Jan. 3, 2014, leaving five dead. Politicians and protesters have since been hauled into court on spurious charges.