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BOOKREVIEW

Domestic and International Governance Lessons from a Paradigmatic Case of Nation-Building?

Michael Sullivan, *Cambodia Votes: Democracy, Authority and International Support for Elections 1993–2013*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies – NIAS Press
360 pp, ISBN: 978-87-7694-186-4 (hbk) ISBN: 978-87-7694-187-1 (pbk)

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This extremely comprehensive, and impressive, 360-page book, grew out of a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), supplemented by substantial field research in Cambodia. With a foreword by Koul Panha, the Executive Director of Cambodia's largest election monitoring organization, the Committee for Free and Fair elections (COMFREL), it covers, primarily in chronological order, 20 years of Cambodian voting experience. The timeframe runs from the landmark 1993 United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) elections, to the dramatic events of the 2013 elections when, for the first time since the time of UNTAC, the dominant Cambodian People's Party (CPP) looked like it was losing ground to the opposition. Sullivan (and Panha) claimed that the book is unique in treating this period, and all the elections contained within, as a continuum, rather than a series of discrete events (pp. vii and 9). Thus, this book seeks to understand and explain the impact that the 1993 UNTAC elections had on the subsequent development of electoral politics in Cambodia up to and including polls in 2013.

The Introduction serves as both a literature review and a theoretical framework of what is to come. Sullivan correctly identified the wider importance of the case study. He pointed out the unprecedented international involvement and control of the transitional elections process, and its continued technical and financial assistance for electoral development and engagement during much of the rest of the period considered (pp. 1-2). He viewed UNTAC involvement as a key variable in understanding the ensuing struggle for control over the processes and the outcomes of elections throughout the timeframe addressed (p. 2). The case study, therefore, provides key insights into the potential impact of, and roles for the international community (however this might be defined), in democratic transition and consolidation in post-conflict, conflictual, or conflict-prone states. Thus, in his address to UNTAC personnel quoted by Sullivan, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the then Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), said that it is "not just the future of Cambodia that hangs in the balance", but the "nature and scope of future United Nations mandates and operations all over the world" (p. 3).

The Introduction also refers to academic debates about the quality, depth, or “thickness” of democracy, including reference to the concept of “electoral authoritarianism,” as well as debates among the policy communities about the timing or sequencing of transitional and post-conflict elections and the provision of international assistance. Sullivan positioned the two sides of the policy debate as follows (p. 5): One group he characterized as those who fear that “first time” or transitional elections, introduced into particular configurations of social and political conflict like those found in Cambodia, could actually hinder the development of genuine democratic politics, and who therefore advocate building and supporting viable and strong states and civil societies, before considering international assistance for these types of elections. The opposing group, he identified as those who believe that a focus on elections need not come at the expense of other aspects of the democratization process, such as the strengthening of states, support for civil societies, and the rule of law, but rather elections can function as “windows to a broader understanding of social and political change.” He placed this book firmly in the second camp.

Sullivan returned to these central organizing themes in the Conclusion, reinforcing their importance to the volume as a whole. He again noted (pp. 291-2) that the major policy divide is between those who felt that the elections should only be held after the rule of law and democratic institutions had been firmly established and consolidated, and those who saw them as windows through which international donors and development professionals can assess shortcomings and target programs in the democratization process. Yet, even in the Conclusion, he remained somewhat on the fence, noting that “[e]lections in Cambodia hold out the possibility of positive social and political change. In the meantime, if the current regime continues to hold sway, the already accelerating negative social, political and environmental costs inherited by the next generation of Cambodians could well be irreversible” (p. 301). His ultimate findings appeared to be that, “[s]imply put...., Cambodian elections since 1993 have meant different things to different people” (p. 292). He noted therefore that “[w]hatever happens, Cambodia’s elections will continue to be key multi-dimensional sites of

contestation between those forces maintaining power and control to preserve and perpetuate self-interested agendas, and those striving to usurp them” (p. 301).

The intervening chapters do indeed serve as a comprehensive chronological review of 20 years of Cambodian elections. They fall broadly into four sections (although not identified as doing so in the manuscript itself). Chapters 1-3 assess the pre-existing conditions of the 1993 UNTAC elections, the actual processes, and the aftermath. Chapter 1, therefore, details the conditions under which these elections took place. These included the complications of interstate and intra-state conflicts, and the roles of members of the international community in bringing about the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements; the formation of UNTAC and its role in facilitating the construction of the Supreme National Council; the transformation of warring factions into political parties; the rise of Hun Sen; the importance of elections; and views of UNTAC from above and below. Chapter 2 deals in detail with the electoral strategies of the various parties and their relationships with UNTAC, as well as the implications and immediate aftermath of the election. Chapter 3 addresses the consequences of the UNTAC elections for the trajectory of the political system and electoral politics in Cambodia, as well as the future roles of international assistance.

Chapter 4, detailing as it does Hun Sen’s coup d’état in 1997, and developments leading up to the subsequent elections, marks something of a transition from the multi-party liberal democratic aspirations of the first section of the book, to a growing recognition, and even acceptance among the international community of de facto “electoral authoritarianism” in Cambodia. This chapter includes analysis of the implications of the demise of the Khmer Rouge and the ongoing engagement of members of the international community. Chapter 5 examines the 1998 elections in detail. Although far from a forgone conclusion, Hun Sen’s victory is also described in terms of a consolidation of electoral authoritarianism, as the mechanisms of control and intimidation were brought to bear.

In what can be considered the third of the chronological sections of the book, Chapters 6 and 7 consider the further evolution of Hun Sen’s electoral

authoritarianism in the 2002 Commune elections and 2003 Parliamentary elections respectively. The 1998 election had created, for the first time a stable, if not necessarily legitimate governing coalition. Chapter 7 shows how the 2002 decentralization and de-concentration of political and financial powers to commune authorities via elections represented a potential challenge to the government, and opportunity for the opposition (pp. 163-5). Nevertheless, “[t]he 15-day campaign period from 18 to 31 January was overshadowed by more reports of violence, intimidation and last-minute vote buying” (p. 190). Hence, Hun Sen managed to satisfy the demands of donors in staging the elections while at the same time ensuring victory. A similar pattern of opportunity, international ineffectiveness in ensuring democratic consolidation, and eventual Hun Sen victory is replicated in Chapter 7 in the 2003 Parliamentary elections. Hence, Sullivan claimed that “[a]fter the 2002 and 2003 polls, it was doubtful that ordinary people’s grievances would be heard in a meaningful way in future elections” (p. 229). Yet, he included an important caveat that the opposition and civil society groups “would nonetheless continue with the struggle to establish a freer and fairer electoral system” (p. 229).

Chapter 8 introduces perhaps the most meaningful part of the book. Not only does it address the Cambodian elections which have perhaps been the least heralded and studied, but it also uncovers the major contradiction around which the central premise—namely, the need to study the process of how Cambodia votes as a whole rather than electoral snapshots—is built. The contradiction in question is that although given the landslide victories during the timeframe covered by this chapter (2004-2008), it seemed that the power of authoritarian elections had been consolidated, and therefore the actual elections themselves could be seen as increasingly meaningless; this was also a “period of rapid and sustained economic growth that was transforming state–society relations in complex and uncertain ways” (p. 231). Thus, socio-economic change was in the air but the political system only brought more of the same, with further entrenchment of Hun Sen’s dominance. Hence, Sullivan seemed to suggest that the dramatic events described in Chapter 9 as the

“voter backlash in the 2013 elections” should perhaps have not come as such a surprise.

This book, therefore, will be invaluable to those readers seeking a comprehensive overview of the historical chronology of Cambodia’s voting experience. A great deal of the relevant literature is covered, and is supported by some useful fieldwork. Unfortunately, the book does not quite live up to its analytical promise. In part, the deficiencies are structural and/or methodological. On page 10, Sullivan noted that a “chronological approach makes it easier for the reader to follow what at times can be a difficult and complex narrative.” This contains two assumptions, one explicit, and the other implicit. The first of these is that the approach used in this book does indeed make it easier for the reader to follow. The second is that the benefits gained from a chronological approach outweigh what is lost in terms of analysis. I have reservations about both of these assumptions.

The chronological approach used in this volume is not a particularly accessible one. Throughout, there is a lack of sufficient sign-posting for the reader, and transition from one section to the next or from each chapter to the one following. There is a degree of flow and connectivity, but not enough. Chronological narratives are at their most informative when attempting to show evolution or development of central themes. “Cambodia Votes” does not clearly identify such central themes (although as mentioned above, I think one of the most interesting ones which could be drawn out of this work is how, despite the authoritarian consolidation in terms of election management, underlying currents of transition were building to deliver the “shock” of 2013). As the themes are not clearly identified, it is perhaps not surprising that they are not consistently referenced in each chapter. The chronological framework as it is used further imparts a degree of confusion. This begins with the chapter overview in the Introduction, which is confusingly laid out and related. It is also not helped by the structure of the chapters themselves. In chronological narratives consisting of a series of episodes (such as chapters in this book), in order to demonstrate trends or evolution, it is helpful to treat all the episodes as comparative case studies, wherein the structure of the analysis for each episode is repeated to facilitate comparison. In

this book, each episode is discussed as a distinct case (rather than one to be related to other cases), and each therefore follows a unique system of analysis and headings. This also somewhat undermines the holistic claims made earlier.

In terms of the implicit assumption that the structure followed in the book is preferable to other potential approaches, I am also not entirely convinced, and at times it seems that neither is Sullivan. As discussed above, Sullivan emphasized in both the Introduction and Conclusion the contrast between two schools of thought on elections; those who emphasize the need to create supporting infrastructure first, and those who see elections as “windows” upon conditions in the country. I think a more accurate bifurcation would be between those who put infrastructure before elections, and those who see elections as a prerequisite to the establishment of a consolidated democratic state. Nevertheless, leaving this aside, even the author’s distinction leaves open the possibility of analysis of evidence in a systematic way to see which school of thought is best supported by the case study. Other potential analytical frameworks introduced by the author, but not pursued in a systematic way, include the role of international agency (supportive of democratic or authoritarian trends?); the extent to which Cambodia is democratic, and the direction Cambodian electoral politics is taking (as suggested by the lengthy discussion of different interpretations and models of what it is to be democratic in the Introduction); and implications for other case studies. None of these are followed through in a consistent way. It may be that they lie outside the scope of this book, and are best left to further research and future publications. Yet without such analytical frameworks, there is a danger that the chronological becomes merely the descriptive. One potential framework which is introduced, and is then scarcely referred to thereafter, and which I think does fall outside the purview of this book, is that of the geostrategic operating environment, which is given rather too much attention in the Introduction.

There are a few stylistic, referencing, and formatting issues still remaining, and which should probably have been picked up in the reviewing and editorial processes. For instance, for most of the book (up to and including Chapter 7) the date last accessed of internet sources is

not given, in Chapter 8 it is sometimes given, and in Chapter 9 and the list of references it is always given (although only the month, not the actual date). I have no preference regarding whether or not to include date last accessed in book chapters (although it should always be included in journal articles), but whatever the preference, it should be consistent, and complete (i.e. using date as well as month). In addition, it seems to me that some of the sources likely to have come from the Internet do not have the URL provided, and it could be very beneficial for the reader to have ready access to this material. Finally, on this subject, where both URL and date have been provided, it seems that many of the sources have not been checked since 2013 or 2014. This is rather incongruous for a book published in 2016. Indeed, there is relatively little literature cited after 2014. It may be that there has, in fact, been little produced in this time, but the book is also rather light on analysis of post-2013 elections, and what is to come.

At times, Sullivan further laid himself open to accusations of being somewhat derivative. There are numerous lengthy sections from a single source, cited with multiple *ibid*’s, or the equivalent of “*op cit*’s”. I would have preferred to see multiple sources at these junctures. Take, for instance, the discussion of “electoral authoritarianism” on pages 8 and 9. Sullivan noted that “[b]y the mid-2000s, scholars of political transitions had developed the concept of ‘electoral authoritarianism’” yet the only scholar referenced is Schedler. Likewise in Chapter 1, Evan Gottesman’s work is perhaps overly-depended upon, and that of Steve Heder on pages 200 and 2001. Dependence upon official reports from the likes of the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the State Department of the United States, and so forth elsewhere in the manuscript are perhaps more understandable, but I am not convinced that all of the lengthy passages reproduced in their entirety are, strictly necessary. On the other hand, there are lengthy sections of text full of claims with no citations backing them up. As a general guide, every claim should be backed up with evidence, and every piece of evidence supported by a full citation. A further problem is the over-reliance on the stylistic tool of “For a detailed/concise/further description/analysis refer to....” While this has the advantage of introducing other literature

on the subject which may be of interest to the reader, overuse of this structure gives the impression of a rather casual approach to academic exactitude.

To conclude then, this book is a very impressive resource for understanding one of the most important, perhaps even a paradigmatic case, of international involvement in democratic transition and state-building in a post-conflict or conflict-affected state. Its literature review and supporting research material is substantial. Its comprehensive nature, and the fact that it addresses all of the elections of a 20-year period as a procedural whole means that it will be invaluable for students of contemporary Cambodia, the roles the international community can play in domestic political affairs, and

even comparative politics. It will also be of interest to policy-makers at the national and international level. It could have been even more ambitious and influential if it had been written in accordance with a strong theoretical framework, with clearer signposting and linkages to guide the reader, or referencing other case studies (linkages with UN state-building in East Timor or the international involvement in Myanmar spring most readily to mind). Perhaps, this last would properly be a project best embarked upon through future research and publication, either by Sullivan or somebody inspired by this book to take the next step in assessing the implications of how Cambodia votes.