



## Hun Manet's Cambodia?

Manet's path to security in power will be difficult, as he is forced to carefully navigate the system his father built and, to a large degree, still controls.

By **Neil Loughlin**

For the first time in nearly four decades, Cambodia has a new prime minister. In August, Hun Sen, Cambodia's leader since late 1984, stepped aside to make way for his eldest son, Hun Manet. The succession represents a new era for the country in terms of symbolic change at the top, but in the medium term at least it appears to offer mostly continuity in change, as Manet inherits – and will be forced to navigate – the system that Hun Sen and his generation created and are attempting to pass to their children.

This is not without perils for the new leader. Manet must attempt to build his own support among the country's elite and ensure that he keeps a lid on discontent from below at a time of growing economic uncertainty, all while trying to assert his authority and emerge from his father's shadow.

### **Hun Manet and Cambodia's Elite Politics**

Hun Manet's ascension to the top job marks the realization of a process of hereditary succession that has been underway for several years. Power transitions in authoritarian regimes are potentially destabilizing, absent competitive elections and a democratic process through which power passes to a new generation of leaders. In systems like Cambodia's, where power has been personalized to a significant degree under Hun Sen, the threat of instability is enhanced. As personalist leaders consolidate their positions, they necessarily sideline competitors and seek to undermine institutions that could provide a counterbalance to their rule. As a corollary, this can leave a vacuum in power and potential for a chaotic grab for control among rival elites as the preeminent leader's time in power comes to an end. Hereditary succession, which promises continuity amid change, can provide the opportunity to ensure elite buy-in and smooth over the cracks in such a system, but it nevertheless must be carefully managed.

For a long time, it had been clear that Hun Sen was preparing the ground for Manet to take power. His approach balanced the interests of potential powerbrokers within the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and forestalled threats to Manet by also promoting the children of the elite into positions of power. The goal has been to ensure that all are invested in the system's survival, while maintaining the preeminence of the Hun family.

Preparation has involved maintaining the Hun family's control over the state's coercive apparatus. It is worth noting that Manet only made the transition to civilian politician a few months before the closed election in July 2023. He had never been an MP but spent two decades in positions of increasing authority in the military, culminating in five years as chief of the Royal Cambodian Army (RCA) – a position that saw him oversee the most important

“regime continuity” units in the country, including Brigades 911 and 70.

These, alongside the prime minister’s Bodyguard Unit (of which Manet was also deputy commander) and the Royal Gendarmerie, are among the best armed and trained in the country and are therefore important for regime survival. Notably, their commanders have a long history of loyalty to Hun Sen. Hun Manet’s brother, the military intelligence chief Hun Manith, was promoted to deputy of the RCA in May, in advance of Manet’s move to a civilian position. Today the RCA is commanded by Mao Sphan, the Brigade 70 commander long recognized as a close ally of the Hun family.

Beyond the promotion of Manet and members of the Hun clan and its supporters, the sons of the long-time minister of interior and the minister of defense have been promoted into their fathers’ respective positions. Sar Sokha, son of Sar Kheng, a one-time major rival to Hun Sen within the CPP, now heads the Interior Ministry. Tea Seiha, son of longtime Defense Minister Tea Banh, now heads the Defense Ministry. Thus, hereditary succession is being repeated broadly across government, with a dizzying number of new cabinet members having familial links to their predecessors. These appointments serve to institutionalize the political family as a factor in Cambodia’s governance structure, which has been further embedded through the intermarriage of the elite. Important military figures who are still young have been further ensconced in their positions of power, and their relatives have been granted a route to political prominence.

Though often overlooked in discussions of the transition, it is also notable that economic tycoons close to the Hun family have continued to enjoy exclusive economic benefits through crony-capitalist deals during the succession. These wealthy businesspeople form another key pillar of Cambodia’s elite that must be satiated. A slew of recent land deals in areas slated for development have been awarded to them and their children, with those children also playing increasingly important roles in the relatively few vast conglomerates that now overwhelmingly dominate much of the economy.

Administrative bloat, evident in the astonishing number of adviser and secretary of state positions recently appointed to serve the new cadre of leaders, highlight how government is being used as a tool of political patronage, and to smooth out any possible discontent at Manet's promotion by ensuring that loyalty and acquiescence is recognized and rewarded.

All this suggests that Hun Sen was aware that his son would have to walk a tightrope after entering office. If Manet is to succeed, he must maintain this fragile arrangement at the top.

### **The CPP's Popular Fragility**

Manet must also be attentive to threats from below. In Cambodian politics, popular political challenges have sporadically burst into the open, usually around election time. The CPP lost the country's first multiparty election in decades in 1993 when it faced a shock defeat at the hands of the royalist Funcinpec party, but forced a power-sharing agreement on the threat of a return to violence and rejection of the United Nations' attempts to oversee an end to the then decades-long country's civil war. The election in 1998 was preceded by a coup de force in 1997 that violently ended that power-sharing agreement in the CPP's favor, hammering the opposition in the process. Indeed, even as the CPP consolidated political power in the late 1990s and 2000s, elections have revealed high levels of societal discontent, even if those challenges were ultimately defeated, often violently. The lone exception was the election in 2008, during which political opposition to the CPP was divided and rebuilding after sustained repression.

The repeated challenges to the CPP reveal the extent to which large sections of the population have never bought into its claim to be the only force with the right to govern, or its offer of tight political control justified in the name of headline-grabbing GDP growth. These framings form the core of the CPP's legitimacy-building narratives, alongside helping end the Khmer Rouge period in 1979 and the civil war in the late 1990s.

The economic system generating prolonged GDP growth is profoundly unequal. As officials within the party-state and its crony-capitalist tycoon dependents have amassed eye-watering

fortunes, perhaps most egregiously through murky land deals amidst a wave of dispossession that went into overdrive through the 1990s and 2000s (and which continues on a smaller but still significant scale today), ordinary Cambodians face numerous challenges. Wages remain below or barely at subsistence level in the country's important manufacturing, services, and agricultural sectors. The situation was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, and is now contributing to a personal debt crisis in the country's poorly regulated microfinance industry.

This economic inequality sits alongside longstanding questions around the CPP's nationalist credentials by virtue of its installation into power by the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1979, something which has been ruthlessly and often xenophobically exploited by the various opposition parties over the years.

The CPP's underlying inability to build a strong societal foundation of the like seen in other dominant party systems like Singapore, Vietnam, or until recently, Malaysia, remains a key weakness, and goes some way to explain why Hun Sen took no chances with the election in 2023, especially given the sensitive handover of power to his son. Manet was sworn in just weeks after the CPP rubber-stamped its control over the country in a flawed election in which the main opposition party, the Candlelight Party (CLP), had been disqualified. Manet's ascent, then, followed, the country's second non-competitive national election since the CLP's predecessor, the Cambodian National Rescue Party, was dissolved by the CPP-controlled Supreme Court in 2017, ahead of a national vote in 2018 in which the CPP won all 125 seats in the National Assembly.

Absent popular legitimacy, another constant of Cambodia's politics, and the key to explaining the CPP's longevity, has been the capacity and the willingness of the party to ruthlessly put down challenges to its power, utilizing violence by the military and security structures that sit at the core of the party's apparatus of power. This has been supplemented by legal harassment enacted by its politically controlled judiciary, itself often acting on laws passed in the one-party legislature. This coercion was vital in the eventual destruction of the opposition countermovement that emerged

around the time of the 2013 national election. The force of that opposition movement startled the CPP into action, resulting in a country that is more politically repressive now than it has been in decades.

In the run up to this year's election, Hun Sen's public speeches were peppered with violent rhetoric, and members of the political opposition have been detained or face lengthy jail terms should they return from exile. In September, a government critic was severely beaten by black-clad thugs in motorcycle helmets in a manner that Human Rights Watch noted resembled other beatings handed out to other opposition activists in recent months. When the independent news site CamboJA News reported on this, it was publicly reprimanded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, which threatened it with the same fate met by Voice of Democracy (VOD), a news channel that was forced to close in February. VOD investigative reports had implicated Cambodia's elite in land giveaways, scamming operations, and other activities that cast the government in an unfavorable light.

The reaction – to make thin-skinned denials and threats to eradicate what is left of the country's already much depleted independent media landscape rather than investigate an instance of alleged political violence – suggests that the new government is borrowing heavily from the tactics of old in trying to keep a repressive lid on the country's citizens.

### **Challenges Ahead for Manet**

There are therefore significant challenges ahead for Manet. He must show that he can manage elite interests, prevent the emergence of alternative centers of power that could diminish his control of the country's political and economic structure, and keep a lid on pressures from below.

The key to this will be his ability to maintain the growth necessary to sustain the elite patronage system built up by his father, which is now to a significant degree fed by Chinese investment. Hun Sen has positioned himself as the conduit for much of this investment, rewarding loyal tycoons with contracts that are typically signed at elaborate public ceremonies. In February, Manet joined his father

on a trip to China, where a number of such deals were signed, and since coming to power he has reaffirmed Cambodia's commitment to China and called for even greater investment. Manet has described the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce, a body made up of the country's richest businesspeople who have donated to the CPP and whose current president is a CPP senator, an indispensable partner in the country's development, with their private sector growth key to expanding the economy. This suggests that the current closed-knit economic system will remain unreformed.

Cambodia's economy is both recovering and fragile. A slowdown in Chinese investment resulting from Beijing's current economic difficulties would be painful for Cambodia, including to the millions of Cambodians who rely on this investment to propel the country's employment in the manufacturing, agricultural, and construction industries. However, the two countries continue to sign big-ticket projects including a recently agreed expressway linking Phnom Penh to Bavet on the Vietnamese border.

The real estate boom that resulted in a frenzy of urban development, particularly in the capital Phnom Penh and the coastal city of Sihanoukville, is in trouble. The country's vital tourism industry has also faced significant turbulence over the past few years in the wake of the pandemic and its impacts on international travel, and particularly the reduction in Chinese tourists. This has been made worse by Cambodia's reputation as a global center for online scamming and human trafficking. Transnational criminal syndicates have now seemingly gained a foothold in the country, frightening off potential tourists and drawing condemnation from the United Nations and calls for action from Cambodia's partners in ASEAN and beyond.

While steadily recovering, manufacturing has also come under pressure, some of it linked to the country's deepening authoritarianism. This is because Cambodia's economy still relies on trade with Western countries, with the United States its largest export market. Preferential tariffs with the European Union and the U.S. have been reduced because of Cambodia's suppression of political and labor rights.

Manet, who was educated in Britain and the U.S., may wish to improve relations with the West from their current nadir and reset relations. He has certainly been active in meeting leaders on the world stage. He has taken advantage of the photo opportunities to buttress his international credentials and appears to have been somewhat warmly received by governments, including the United States. Only a few months ago, Washington was criticizing the undemocratic election that paved the way for Manet's appointment, but more recently the U.S. has made some conciliatory moves, including unfreezing some development aid. This suggests there may be some appetite for rapprochement by governments wary of doing business with Hun Manet's father. But how far that engagement goes, and the extent to which it could ever result in a reinstatement of preferential tariffs, would surely be contingent on Cambodia taking concrete steps back toward democracy, something that does not appear likely under current circumstances.

In terms of addressing the longstanding societal grievances with CPP rule, in public speeches Manet has echoed his father's emphasis on the need to maintain stability in the face of a vaguely defined "color revolution" and outside forces intent on destabilizing the country and fomenting popular dissatisfaction with the party. This narrative has provided cover for the suppression of political opposition, organized labor, civil society activity, and expressive rights in general. Manet's embrace of this notion, including the central emphasis on "peace and stability" in his recent policy platform, suggests coercion will continue to play a primary role in securing his hold on power.

That does not mean that reform is absent from his agenda. Politically, alongside his youngest brother, Many, Manet has worked to build up the CPP's youth network, which will be vital to adapting an aging party to a country with a youthful population. These reforms seem intended to revitalize the party by attracting younger, urban Cambodians, who voted in substantial numbers for the opposition in 2013, but are less directed at rural or impoverished youth, who have tended to be politically marginalized.

Government priorities under Hun Manet look to continue to be mostly developmental, with Manet's new policy platform including economic development and growth, livelihood improvements, and a strengthening of social protections as focus areas. These are laudable and necessary for Cambodia's future prosperity, and in tune with longer-term CPP commitments to developmental growth. But Hun Manet remains constrained by a political system that relies on nepotism, corruption, and rent-seeking to stabilize its elite pact and maintain its post-conflict political settlement – maybe even more so now, given the sensitivity of the current power transition. Cambodia's new leader may have to show a willingness to tackle at least the worst excesses of this system if the dividends of any reforms, such as they may be, are to be realized and shared equitably.

Real change, if it comes, will come slowly. Even now, while Manet is prime minister, he governs under his father's tutorship. Indeed, Hun Sen continues to exercise significant formal power as CPP president and a National Assembly member, and he looks likely to be appointed the next Senate president in February. His running commentary on his son's performance signals that he has not relinquished ultimate political control. All this suggests that Manet's path to security in power will be difficult, as he is forced carefully to navigate the system his father built and, to a large degree, still controls.

## The Author

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