

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# “Invasion” or “Liberation”? : Contested Commemoration in Cambodia and within ASEAN

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## Abstract

This article examines the meaning of Vietnam’s removal of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979—an event that recently became a point of contention between the Prime Minister of Cambodia Hun Sen and Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong. Since 1980, Vietnam’s removal of the Khmer Rouge has been adopted as Liberation Day by the Cambodian ruling political party. The article discusses three topics: (1) the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia during the 1980s and the resulting civil war, (2) three major changes in the Liberation Day narratives, and (3) reflections on Hun Sen and Lee’s recent debate. It demonstrates that Hun Sen and Lee’s contention reflects on how the legacy of Vietnam’s removal of the Khmer Rouge has continued to be very important and sensitive in Cambodia and within the ASEAN Community today. It also examines China’s successful approach to strengthening its relationship with Cambodia after more than a decade of the political confrontation and hatred during the 1980s.

**Keywords:** Vietnam’s Removal of the Khmer Rouge; Cambodia’s Liberation Day; Cambodia’s Relations with ASEAN and China; Lee Hsien Loong’s Remarks; Hun Sen’s Long Rule

## Introduction

“Only the victor can claim a righteous cause and write history”. This quotation, from Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, was displayed together with his smiling portrait at the inauguration of the Win-Win Monument in a suburb of Phnom Penh between 29–31 December 2018. The new memorial was primarily built to commemorate Hun Sen’s role in first bringing an end to the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) and, then, ending the civil war and threat of the Khmer Rouge insurgency during the 1990s. Hun Sen has been the winner in a series of military and political contestations since the mid-1980s. His domination over national politics has hardly been shaken by his political rivals since the removal of his co-premier, First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, through internal armed clashes in July 1997.

Hun Sen’s long years in power allow him to reconstruct a collective historical narrative that draws a direct and continuous connection between the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), formed after Vietnam’s removal of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, and his current regime. Through his annual Liberation Day commemoration, he has promoted the notion of Vietnam’s “liberation” of Cambodia, along with the role played by his Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), in ending the Khmer Rouge massacres and bringing peace and development to the country. The use of the term “Liberation” for the Vietnamese invasion remains controversial—both in Cambodia and internationally. However, over the past thirty years, many of Hun Sen’s opponents, including the royalist supporters, have gradually abandoned their criticisms of the Liberation Day celebration due to his narrative and consolidation of power.

Yet, the Cambodian public and media recently questioned this historical narrative’s validity when they started to quote the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong’s remarks from his letter of condolences sent to current Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha on the passing of former General Prem Tinsulanonda on 26 May 2019. Because Prem was in power between 1980 and 1988, when the

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five founding countries of ASEAN opposed Vietnam's military action in Cambodia, Lee recalled Prem's leadership in working with ASEAN partners to oppose Vietnam's "invasion" and "occupation" in international forums. Lee's deliberate use of these terms is contradictory to the discourse of Hanoi and its allies, which portrays Vietnam as the "liberator" who not only helped to bring an end to Khmer Rouge atrocities but also prevented its leadership from returning to power.

Hun Sen's and Lee's different views of events in Cambodia during the 1980s reflect the contested meanings of those events among different Cambodian political factions within the present, expanded ASEAN Community. These meanings have evolved both domestically and regionally through the post-Cold War years and during Hun Sen's consolidation of power from the late 1990s until today. A discussion of these contested meanings enables us to uncover the changes in the Cambodian ruling party's political identity, which has continued to draw on the legacy of Vietnam's action while gradually emphasizing Hun Sen's personal story as the master narrative of that legacy. The brief diplomatic brouhaha is also linked to Cambodia's long-term relations with the founding ASEAN countries and China, which actively denied the PRK's legitimacy for the entire 1980s. Although China now has become Cambodia's largest supporter and most trusted partner, the original ASEAN countries like Singapore, while pursuing bilateral and regional partnerships with Phnom Penh through trade and investment, have not altered their position on the earlier conflict.

The following discussion will focus on the complexities of the Cambodian civil war, examine three major changes in the Liberation Day narratives, and provide a historical contextualization of Hun Sen and Lee's recent heated debate. The article argues that their war of words demonstrates the continued importance and sensitivity of Vietnam's actions in Cambodia; it also shows how the strengthening of Sino-Cambodian relations has shaped the issues of commemoration.

### Beyond "Liberation" VS "Invasion"

Vietnam's launch of a full-scale military campaign of 150,000 troops on 25 December 1978 must be understood above and beyond the rhetoric of "invasion" versus "liberation". After years of military and ideological collaborations (but also tensions) between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge, conflicts between the two communist brothers broke out in the early 1970s; while still fighting against the Lon Nol regime, the Khmer Rouge leaders launched a series of military confrontations against the troops of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) to force them to leave Cambodian territory. In their war against the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam), DRV leaders needed Cambodia for the military bases and logistical lines.

Stephen Morris, whose book examines the political culture and the causes of the conflict between the two communist regimes, has explained the Khmer Rouge leaders' decision to confront Vietnamese communist troops as "a fanatical ideological zeal, whereby they imagine[d] that they would be proving the virtue of Khmer communism and their ability to outshine the Vietnamese communists" (1999: 59). The Khmer Rouge's capture of power on 17 April 1975, which preceded Hanoi's seizure of Saigon by two weeks, not only led them to boast that they had taken over the country on their own without acknowledging the role of the massive, direct Vietnamese communist military intervention (Morris 1999: 65) but also drove them to push their revolution forward, ahead of their more powerful communist neighbour as well as other communist regimes around the world. Their regime caused the death of hundreds of thousands of people within their 44 months and 20 days in power (Kiernan 2008; Chandler 1991; Chandler 2000; Vickery 1984).

Throughout the years in power, between 1975 and 1978, the Khmer Rouge government, officially known from early 1976 as Democratic Kampuchea (DK), never ceased to consider Vietnam as its most dangerous enemy. Military clashes over the territory along the border between the two neighbours took place from the early days of the regime. Although these confrontations temporarily calmed down after the two regimes tried to improve their diplomatic relations in 1976, these clashes demonstrated the Khmer Rouge leaders' mentality to go to war in the face of any threat—real or imagined—from Hanoi. Vietnam's closer ties with the Soviet Union and its reinforcement of military and political influence over Laos after 1975 made the Phnom Penh regime believe that Vietnamese leaders still maintained their intention to force Cambodia into what they viewed as an unequal friendship and cooperation.

Between April and December 1977, many military clashes and full-fledged incursions took place along the border, whereas Hanoi and Phnom Penh could not reach any agreement to calm the tension down. For Vietnamese leaders, the Khmer Rouge's aggressive behaviour essentially displayed a long-term threat to their security and stability both in and of itself and because Phnom Penh was the closest Southeast Asian ally of China (Ciorciari 2014; Mertha 2014), which was also on increasingly hostile terms with the SRV.

Vietnam's military campaign against Cambodia in late December 1978 is usually seen by Western scholars as an invasion that was carried out essentially due to the Khmer Rouge's strong alliance with Beijing and hostility towards Hanoi (Chanda 1986: 5–7; Morris 1999: 229–234). More conservative scholars like Morris have argued that Vietnamese leaders also had a long-standing ambition to dominate their weaker neighbour as they did with Laos (1999: 229–230). The rapid fall of the DK government in early January 1979 enabled Vietnam to do so and, at the same time, thus liberate numerous people from being tortured and killed by the regime. For hundreds of Cambodian villages, as Nayan Chanda has accurately noted, “the Vietnamese invasion was greeted with joy and disbelief. The Khmer Rouge cadres and militia were gone.<sup>1</sup> People were free again to live as families, to go to bed without fearing the next day” (Chanda 1986: 370).

But after a new Phnom Penh regime, known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), led by Heng Samrin, was established, Vietnamese domination over all administrative, economic and political decisions led people to start questioning the Vietnamese presence. The euphoria and gratitude of the Vietnamese liberation gradually eroded due to the ways in which Vietnam exercised its tight control and imposed a new communist regime (Gottesman 2003: 57). This made the Khmer Rouge claims regarding Vietnam's ambition to dominate Cambodia become much more persuasive among the Cambodian public and the international community. The extended Vietnamese presence also changed the perception of “liberation” into a long-standing perception of “invasion” and “occupation”—as repeatedly proclaimed by leaders like Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Pol Pot, and Son Sann, who formed a military resistance coalition along the Thai-Cambodian border.

### ASEAN'S Opposition to Vietnam and the Question of Khmer Rouge Atrocities

Among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, which consisted of Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, Vietnam's military campaign against DK was collectively regarded as an invasion of Cambodia that proved a greater threat to peace and stability of the region. The ASEAN's view was essentially driven by a security concern of its member states, especially Thailand and Singapore,<sup>2</sup> which considered Vietnam's removal of DK a dangerous precedent to their own sovereignty and territorial integrity in the future. Immediately after Vietnamese troops took over the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh in January 1979, ASEAN condemned Vietnam for its military action and launched a campaign against Vietnam and the new PRK regime. ASEAN's campaign largely lasted until the late 1980s, whereas the question of the atrocities committed under the Khmer Rouge's rule between 1975 and 1979 remained a key issue in its political and diplomatic agenda.

The way in which ASEAN framed Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge can be further understood through the political agenda that its member countries tried to push forward in a series of meetings in 1979 and the early 1980s. In a closed-door, urgent meeting, initiated by Singapore's Foreign Minister

<sup>1</sup>Following Vietnam's seizure of Phnom Penh, not all DK cadres and officials ran to the Thai border. Many of them surrendered and joined the new Heng Samrin regime while many others reverted to private life. Within the first few weeks, many of the hardline DK officials were brutally lynched by locals out of revenge. I am grateful to Henri Locard and Martin Rathie for their comment on this aspect.

<sup>2</sup>Although Singapore was unlikely to face a direct Vietnamese threat, the way in which its leaders viewed Vietnam's military action can be understood through the words of Singapore's Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, S.R. Nathan, who stated in 1979, “The Kampuchean issue was central to Singapore's policy. The principle involved was that no foreign military intervention should be allowed to overthrow a legally constituted regime. If this principle was violated, it would create a dangerous precedent. Foreign forces could go into Thailand and depose the current Thai government and put up a region under the Communist Party of Thailand. Singapore had to work on the worst possible outcome. With this in mind, Singapore could not compromise” (Ang 2013: 5).

S. Rajaratnam (Ang 2013: 20), in Bangkok on 12 January 1979, ASEAN strongly deplored Vietnam's armed intervention against the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cambodia and called for the immediate and total withdrawal of foreign forces.<sup>3</sup> At the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting in New York on 12–15 January, Koh reaffirmed Singapore's position and argued that "all countries should be concerned when a stronger and more powerful country resorts to force in its international relations and intervenes in the internal affairs of a smaller and weaker country, in clear violation of the Charter of the United Nations. This concern is particularly felt by small and militarily weak countries such as my own" (Security Council Official Records, hereafter SCOR, 13 January 1979: 5).<sup>4</sup>

Koh asserted the following: "We hold the view that the Government of Democratic Kampuchea is accountable to the people of Democratic Kampuchea. No other country has a right to topple the Government of Democratic Kampuchea, however badly that Government may have treated its people" (SCOR 13 January 1979: 5). Singapore's position was similar to that of Australia, which had refused to have diplomatic relations with DK due to human rights violations, but now Australia gave full support to the same regime's rights to independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity (SCOR 15 January 1979: 3).

In response to ASEAN's opposition, which was vocally supported by China and the Western powers, the representative of Vietnam at the UN Council justified Hanoi's military incursion as an act of "self-defence" and emphasized the role of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Council (central administrative body of the PRK) in bringing an end to the DK regime, which he described as founded on nepotism and genocide (SCOR 15 January 1979: 15–16). However, Vietnam's justification failed to convince ASEAN. At another UNSC meeting in February, Koh asserted that "[he] deplore[d] the armed intervention by Vietnam in the internal affairs of Democratic Kampuchea, which violated the latter's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity... Vietnam has no right to send its armed forces into Democratic Kampuchea and to impose a régime on that country" (SCOR 25 February 1979).

ASEAN held a clear position that the Khmer Rouge's atrocities were not a justifiable rationale for Hanoi's armed intervention in Cambodia. Vietnam's removal of DK was a violation of the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, which state that "all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations".<sup>5</sup>

As ASEAN continued to increase its efforts to force a Vietnamese withdrawal and to delegitimize the PRK government in the international community, it was criticized for supporting the Khmer Rouge, which was widely accused of committing genocide.<sup>6</sup> The Khmer term genocide or *pralāy buj sās(n)* means to kill the lineage of a race. The use of the term to label the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime was

<sup>3</sup>Joint Statement of the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting on the Current Political Development in the Southeast Asian Region, Bangkok, 12 January 1979.

<sup>4</sup>Security Council Official Records are available in the online UN archives at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record> (accessed 10 June 2020).

<sup>5</sup>UN CHARTER art. 2(4), available at <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/> (accessed 29 June 2020). The Socialist Republic of Vietnam had been a UN member since 1977.

<sup>6</sup>The term "genocide" which is defined in the 1948 Genocide Convention as "...acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such..." has been vigorously debated for the DK case. While Ben Kiernan has argued for the use of the term as can be seen through many titles of his publications on DK (1988; 1990; 1993; 2003; 2008), Chandler has rejected it because he believes "the term crimes against humanity fits what happened in DK better than the highly charged and perhaps misleading genocide" (2008a: 260). Chandler bases his argument on the ground that racist motives were much lower on DK's agenda than was destroying its political enemies, a category of victims purposely omitted from the UN genocide (2008a: 260). The complete version of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide is available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CrimeOfGenocide.aspx> (accessed 29 June 2020). This definition is different from Raphael Lemkin-derived notion of genocide which has usually been associated with what happened during the Holocaust and in Armenia. These two cases primarily involved mass murder committed by a sovereign government against a particular ethnic group. DK's expulsion and execution of ethnic Cham and ethnic Vietnamese residents is, to a large extent, parallel to these earlier genocides, but Chandler argues that Khmer Rouge policy was carried out with a primary intention to eliminate its political enemies, rather than a systematic policy that aims to specially tackle these minorities due to their ethnic identity. The debate over the correctness of "genocide" as a characterization of DK policies notwithstanding, the term continues to be widely used.

introduced and largely popularized by the Vietnamese and the PRK government. The Khmer term is popularly used among the Khmer majority themselves to define their victimhood in relation to DK's crimes or to condemn the regime.

Responding to criticisms of its support of the Khmer Rouge, ASEAN gradually introduced mechanisms that—in theory—aimed at preventing the Khmer Rouge from returning to power and that were adopted by its powerful American and Chinese allies as well. For example, in the joint communique of its ministerial meeting in Manila in June 1981, ASEAN proposed a solution for the conflict through three major steps: (1) the dispatch of the UN peacekeeping forces; (2) the withdrawal of all foreign armed forces in the shortest time possible under the UN's supervision; and (3) the disarming of all factions immediately after the completion of the withdrawal of foreign forces.<sup>7</sup> ASEAN's proposal of dispatching UN peacekeeping forces, which was later adopted in the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, aimed to stabilize the region through neutralizing all types of military clashes in Cambodia prior to implementing other mechanisms to determine its future. Its suggestion was also presented as an intention to prevent the Khmer Rouge, which was then the strongest military faction, from recapturing power if Vietnam withdrew its troops. For Singapore, as Ang Cheng Guan has discussed, following DK's collapse, it did not want to see Pol Pot return to power given his regime's barbarous record (2013: 24).

ASEAN's most important political agenda during the 1980s was to gather international forces to condemn Vietnam's removal of DK and to force the withdrawal of its armed forces from Cambodia. Consequently, besides helping to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in 1982 and endorsing it as the legitimate Cambodian government at the UN General Assembly, ASEAN took a leading role in strengthening the non-communist resistance factions of Prince Sihanouk and Son Sann while China helped to rebuild Khmer Rouge forces. During those years, ASEAN endeavoured to keep the Cambodian conflict alive among the international community, to force Vietnam to reconsider its demands through making its occupation become increasingly more costly and to ensure that the PRK regime was not the internationally recognized Cambodian government. It was successful because the CGDK continued to occupy the Cambodian seat at the UN General Assembly until 1992, prior to its dissolution in 1993.

### PRK'S Responses through its Liberation Day

Encountering such a strong condemnation from ASEAN and the international community, the PRK and their Vietnamese mentors launched a series of public campaigns to legitimize their own existence and Vietnam's military action. These eventually turned 7 January 1979, the day that the Vietnamese troops took over Phnom Penh, into "Liberation" or "Victory" Day to utilize it as a core political tool and to mobilize both internal and international forces against the three Cambodian resistance factions that formed the CGDK in 1982. The PRK, together with its Vietnamese counterparts, fostered its commemorations of Liberation Day far beyond a public holiday or a social gathering among its combatants, comrades and villagers on every 7 January, from 1980 onward.

As noted by the PRK's leader Heng Samrin, Liberation Day was "not only the historic day of the collapse of the genocidal Pol Pot regime but also the defeat of other countries' imperialistic policy in Cambodia" (Nei Pena 2013: 152). The latter comment was an allusion to China, which supported DK during the 1970s and continued to do so, along with the USA and the ASEAN countries, during the 1980s; the "imperialist" label was directly attributable to Beijing's 1979 incursion into Vietnam. The statement also implicitly rejected accusations of Vietnam's invasion and occupation and of his Phnom Penh government as Vietnam's puppet regime.

Heng Samrin's description of the Khmer Rouge government, which he himself and many other senior PRK members used to serve, as the "genocidal Pol Pot regime" displays a broader PRK and demonstrates the Vietnamese effort to portray the atrocities committed by DK as the sole responsibility of a very few top Khmer Rouge leaders like Pol Pot<sup>8</sup> and his brother-in-law Ieng Sary, prime minister and foreign

<sup>7</sup>Joint Statement of the Fourteen ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Manila, 17–18 June 1981

<sup>8</sup>This term was coined by the Vietnamese, who consistently referred to the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary genocidal regime" [chế độ diệt chủng Pon Pot-Ieng Xa-ry].



minister of the DK, respectively. David Chandler, in his examination of how post-DK governments dealt with the Khmer Rouge memory, has described a series of activities carried out by the PRK: the pursuit of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in 1979 to indict the two leaders for genocide, the opening to the public of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge security prison S-21 designed by Vietnamese colonel and war museum expert Mai Lam in July 1980, the starting of the annual “Day of Anger” to let selected survivors of DK and PRK officials across the country recall their suffering and the evils of the Pol Pot time in 1983 and the construction of a Buddhist stupa filled with skulls visible through windows on all four sides at the former killing field of Choeung Ek in 1986 (2008b: 369–362). He has also noted the PRK’s establishment of a Genocide Research Committee in 1981 to exhume some 309 mass graves from the DK era, to collect first-hand information from thousands of survivors and to calculate over 3 million deaths under DK as proclaimed by PRK’s National Assembly in 1983 (2008b: 362–363). While this figure is rather exaggerated because 1.7 million is the figure that has been generally agreed upon, Chandler has made his point by characterizing these efforts as overwhelmingly politically motivated and favoured by the regime and its Vietnamese mentors (2008b: 358).

Similar to Heng Samrin’s remarks, primary and secondary school textbooks of the PRK depict Liberation Day as the liberation of Cambodia from the atrocities committed by the genocidal Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan (chairman of DK’s state praesidium) regime, which was supported by “imperialist” China.<sup>9</sup> One of the school texts, entitled *Pravattividyā Kampuchea Thnāk’dī Prāmpī* (eighth-grade history of Cambodia, thereafter *PKTP*), emphasizes the role of Heng Samrin, a former Khmer Rouge commander of Division Four of the Eastern Zone who defected to Vietnam in 1978, in mobilizing public forces to rebel against the DK regime. It recounts that, while leading the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS)<sup>10</sup>—newly established on 2 December 1978—and receiving support from the “volunteer” Vietnamese Army,<sup>11</sup> “the Revolution of 7 January occurred and became victorious” (*PKTP* 1987: 166–170). While highlighting the role of China in supporting the DK and causing the war between Cambodia and Vietnam, this depiction can be further elaborated in two ways.

First, the textbook’s portrayal of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan as the sole figures responsible for the destruction of Cambodian society and the deaths of the people displays Vietnam’s and the PRK’s political motivation in distancing themselves from their involvement in these atrocities. The text recounts Vietnam’s assistance in the Khmer Rouge revolutionary movement during the 1960s, which essentially led to its success in taking over Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, as the “liberation” and the “victory” of the peoples of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (*PKTP* 1987: 141–144). Interestingly, this depiction is very much similar in tone to that of the liberation of 7 January 1979. It also blames Pol Pot for a strong and deceitful antagonism towards Vietnam since the late 1960s and for eventually betraying Vietnam and the Indochinese Revolution after April 1975 by not only killing and torturing his own people but also launching military attacks along the border and murdering many Vietnamese (*PKTP* 1987: 145–153). It also accuses Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan of exploiting the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and holding all the power to abuse and kill people (*PKTP* 1987: 141–144).

While the school’s texts portrayal is largely accurate in the sense that DK did kill hundreds of thousands of people and send troops to attack Vietnamese towns and villages along the border beginning in 1975, it fails to acknowledge that the regime maintained political and diplomatic relations with Vietnam through the end of 1977. When Hanoi leaders hailed the first anniversary of the Khmer Rouge victory in April 1976, they sent a message congratulating Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea (General Secretary of the CPK) and Pol Pot on their respective roles as top leaders of DK (Morris 1999: 93).

The Pol Pot-Ieng Sary-Khieu Samphan label also fails to acknowledge the role of other key leaders, such as Nuon Chea, Son Sen (Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for defence) and many other

<sup>9</sup>These school texts include *Pravattividyā Thnāk’dī Prām* (fifth-grade history) 1986; *Pravattividyā Kampuchea Thnāk’dī Prāmpī* (eighth-grade history of Cambodia) 1987; *Bhūmividyā Pravattividyā Thnāk’dī Bīr* (second-grade geography and history) 1989.

<sup>10</sup>The KUFNS was renamed the Solidarity Front for Development of the Cambodian Motherland at its 5<sup>th</sup> Congress in April 2006.

<sup>11</sup>Vietnam has consistently referred to its forces deployed in Laos and Cambodia during successive Indochinese conflicts as “volunteer troops” (*quân tình nguyện*).

regional and army division commanders, who played a more direct role in cracking down on uprisings and torturing and killing thousands of DK members and innocent people. Excluding Nuon Chea and Son Sen from the narrative reflects Vietnam's intention to sow divisions within the Khmer Rouge leadership during the early 1980s, but those commanders were excluded from having any responsibility for the atrocities because they were now serving the PRK. The uncomfortable truth was that virtually all top PRK figures had, at some point, defected from the Khmer Rouge because they constituted the only critical mass of support for a pro-Vietnamese regime.

Second, the content of the textbooks and the depiction of the background of the PRK's Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) that K. Viviane Frings has examined (1997) show that the commemorations of Liberation Day by the late 1980s tended to emphasize the role of Heng Samrin (though not yet Hun Sen) and the collective effort of the anti-Khmer Rouge armed resistance from different places across the country. It also highlighted the significant role of Vietnamese troops, though they were portrayed as having "supported" the KUFNS in gaining victory over DK, rather than having been the main agents of that victory.

During the annual commemoration of Liberation Day during the 1980s, the PRK responded to the criticisms made by the international community, especially the neighbouring ASEAN countries, regarding Vietnam's removal of DK, the new regime's existence and the presence of Vietnamese troops. The themes of the commemoration, including the choices made for the content of the textbooks, were politically aimed to improve PRK's domestic and international legitimacy and, at the same time, to distance its leaders and Vietnam from any responsibility for the atrocities committed during the DK years. They were also part of the PRK's effort to portray a discontinuity between DK's leadership and its own—even though both regimes upheld the same communist ideology and that many former members of one now served the other. The Phnom Penh regime had some success domestically in these public campaigns but less so at the international level, where the CGDK remained the internationally recognized government for the remaining years of the 1980s, except by the Soviet bloc and India. The KPRP, which had launched a series of internal reforms since 1981, remained under Heng Samrin's leadership, but much power within the party and the government had increasingly been taken over by Hun Sen, a battalion commander in the Eastern Region of DK until his defection in June 1977, who was entrusted to take the PRK's premiership in January 1985.

### Post-Civil War Contention and Liberation Day

After Vietnamese troops' withdrawal in September 1989, the ASEAN countries started to lower their voices regarding Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia. In this respect, the Liberation Day celebrations had shifted the focus to domestic politics following a peace agreement. On 23 October 1991, Hun Sen signed the Paris Peace Accords with the three resistance groups. Moreover, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which was in charge of maintaining peace and organizing a democratic election, was established several months afterwards. In the same year, the KPRP was renamed the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) with Chea Sim—a key member of the KPRP's Politburo and President of the PRK's National Assembly since 1981—as President and Hun Sen as Vice-president. The Khmer Rouge boycotted the elections and continued to function as a resistance force, whereas Hun Sen's group and the two other military factions turned themselves into three political parties to compete in the election, which took place in May 1993. Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC faction was renamed the FUNCINPEC Party, which was led by his son Prince Norodom Ranariddh, while Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front was turned into the Buddhist Liberation Democratic Party (BLDP). After the election, a coalition government was formed and was led by Ranariddh as First Prime Minister and Hun Sen as Second Prime Minister.

The celebration of Liberation Day was officially suspended following a postponement in 1992 due to the objection of the FUNCINPEC and the BLDP, which also joined the coalition government. Both parties viewed 7 January 1979 as the day of Vietnam's invasion that started the civil war that moved toward its end only after the troops' withdrawal in 1989. While this suspension displayed a major CCP concession to its coalition partners, the decision happened when Sihanouk was reinstated as the King with the reinstallation of many national celebrations related to royal and Buddhist commemorations, including the

King's Birthday, the Royal Plowing Ceremony and the Visak Bochea Day (the celebrations of Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, respectively). It also coincided with the commemoration of Sihanouk's heroic moment, namely Independence Day (commemorating his declaration of Cambodia's national independence from French rule in November 1953, following his royal crusade for independence), and the newly instated national celebration of the 23 October peace agreement.

After about two years of the coalition government, Second Prime Minister Hun Sen saw the reinstatement of Liberation Day as a display of his political dominance over First Prime Minister Ranariddh and other coalition partners. Under the new post-civil war arrangement, to reinstate 7 January, Hun Sen needed either a royal decree signed by the King, who for years had publicly denounced Vietnam for sending troops to Cambodia and forming the PRK, or a government decree signed by himself and the First Prime Minister. When the request was made to the King, who obviously did not want to approve the revival and may have thought this change would be blocked by leaving it up to the government, Sihanouk wrote back to Hun Sen informing him that "issuing a decree by the government would be better than a royal decree".<sup>12</sup> On the same day, Hun Sen forwarded the holiday decree to Ranariddh, who was about to take an overseas trip, with a warning that he could leave the country only after the decree was signed. Ranariddh eventually signed the government decree, and, after the King endorsed it, Liberation Day was officially reinstated only two days before its 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 7 January 1996 (Phnom Penh Post 1996d). Hun Sen's success in reinstating Liberation Day proved his domination of the coalition government and significantly strengthened his leadership within the CPP, which continued to expand its forces by recruiting new members who had defected from the FUNCINPEC, the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge.

Right after the reinstatement of Liberation Day, criticisms and opposition commenced and the coalition government began to crack. Sam Rainsy, the president of the Khmer Nation Party during that time, released from Paris a letter of condemnation at the decision while all the members of the thirteen-member FUNCINPEC steering committee, except for Ranariddh, wrote a letter of concern to the King emphasizing that "7 January marked the day that foreign troops invaded Cambodia" (Phnom Penh Post 1996b). About three weeks afterwards, the FUNCINPEC Information Office released a letter to defend Ranariddh's signing the decree "to recognize it [7 January] as the day the Khmer people escaped from the Pol Pot regime". Simultaneously, the letter states "the FUNCINPEC party never forgets that January 7 is also the day of invasion and occupation of the Cambodian territory by 250,000 Yuon<sup>13</sup> [the Vietnamese] soldiers... prompting the flow of thousands of Yuon immigrants to reside in Cambodia"<sup>14</sup> (Phnom Penh Post 1996c).

For the remaining months of Ranariddh's co-premiership, which was ended by Hun Sen through the July 1997 events, the Prince openly criticized Vietnam for ongoing encroachments into Cambodian territory. This criticism was an indirect attack against the CPP and Hun Sen, who tried to promote Vietnam's liberation of the country while simultaneously maintaining a good relationship between the two countries. Given the ongoing boundary dispute, Hun Sen's gestures were viewed as making an attempt to compromise with the Vietnamese (who had effectively put him in power) at the expense of Cambodian national interests.

The celebrations during the remaining years of the 1990s were mainly to re-affirm KPRP/ CPP's role, along with that of Vietnam, in liberating and protecting Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge during the 1980s. The main intention was to widen the gap between the CPP and the old CPK (which had in fact been named KPRP during the early years of its existence in the 1950s) and to construct its political identity through its assertion of the removal of the Khmer Rouge and its efforts to re-build a shattered

<sup>12</sup>Sihanouk's letter dated 5 January 1996 is quoted in Phnom Penh Post 1996a.

<sup>13</sup>The term has long been used popularly in Cambodia to refer to Vietnam or Vietnamese. It appears in many Khmer literary texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the most authoritative Khmer dictionary published by the Buddhist Institute in 1968. A derogatory meaning was added to the term particularly during the Lon Nol regime (1970–1975), which launched a series of propaganda attacks against the Khmer Rouge movement supported by North-Vietnamese troops. The propaganda often labeled the Khmer Rouge, together with their Vietnamese supporters, as *dmil* which means savage or nonbeliever. During the 1980s, while resisting the Vietnamese presence, leaders of the three military factions along the border often used "Yuon" in a negative sense.

<sup>14</sup>Note that this letter reflects the fundamental contradiction at the heart of this issue: the Vietnamese invasion represented both liberation from the Khmer Rouge and the beginning of a long occupation. One cannot be separated from the other.



Cambodia under the PRK regime. The Khmer Rouge insurgency continued into the 1990s, which was also part of the dynamic that motivated the celebrations, and the CPP attempted to use Liberation Day as a counterweight to the annual commemoration of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, which opened the way for the FUNCINPEC's victory over the CPP in the 1993 general election and power-sharing between Ranariddh and Hun Sen. It also aimed to challenge other parties that praised the Accords and vocally criticized Liberation Day for its commemoration of Vietnamese actions.

The Liberation Day celebrations usually took place at CPP headquarters and, as the *Phnom Penh Post* reporters observed in 1998, the commemoration in Phnom Penh that year was marked by a large crowd of more than 6000 celebrants "wearing identical white golf shirts emblazoned with the CPP logo roundly praised the day as a worthy occasion for a party" (Phnom Penh Post 1998). CPP's President Chea Sim delivered the keynote speech stating that "the Cambodian people consider 7 January as their second birthday [aside their actual birthday], the day that regained their rights and freedoms, as well as peace and hope for the future" (Phnom Penh Post 1998). Chea Sim's remarks were made six months after Hun Sen's decisive victory in ousting Ranariddh from power and during Hun Sen's efforts to bring to a complete end to the Khmer Rouge military threat.

However, Chea Sim's remarks, as well as the commemorations during those years and after, failed to emphasise China's support and collaboration with the Khmer Rouge (to be discussed below). The Chinese role in the Liberation Day commemorations during the 1990s was no longer mentioned whatsoever, partly because the CPP sensed that Vietnam had given too much blame to China in supporting the Khmer Rouge and had exaggerated that role during the 1980s. The normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations now meant that Cambodia no longer had to take the anti-Beijing line that Vietnam had expected of the PRK.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the role of Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan in the Khmer Rouge atrocities had disappeared from the commemorations because the two leaders had surrendered to the Cambodian government. Together with Nuon Chean, they were only arrested in 2007 for a trial in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, established a year earlier.

### CPP'S Expansion and Hun Sen's Imposed Narrative

Roughly from the 2000s onwards, Liberation Day has been more assertively commemorated in terms of its expansion, the way the government responds to criticisms and the imposition of Hun Sen's leading role in past events. Following his consolidation of power after the 1998 election and the arrest of Ta Mok, the last leading military chief of the Khmer Rouge in 1999, the Hun Sen regime has gradually consolidated its authority over the entire country. Thus, the celebration of 7 January, which was never recognized within the Khmer Rouge-controlled territory along the Thai border, now expanded nationwide. In January 2003, for the first time, Chea Sim presided over the commemoration with some 2700 former Khmer Rouge fighters and officials in attendance in Banteay Meanchey province's Malai district, a Khmer Rouge stronghold and battlefield since the 1980s (Cambodian Daily 2003). Even though some former Khmer Rouge soldiers criticized the commemoration and downplayed the values of Liberation Day, the CPP's celebration in the area demonstrated its widespread influence nationwide.

Furthermore, about two weeks before the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007, Sihanouk, who had abdicated in favour of his son Norodom Sihamoni in 2004, released a message on his website,<sup>16</sup> claiming that he was overjoyed when he learned about the creation of Heng Samrin's armed resistance against the DK in December 1978. The former King wrote, "My son N Sihamoni [the present King] and I exchanged in silence a broad smile of hope and joy for the birth and rise of the Liberation FRONT presided over by H.E. HENG SAMRIN".<sup>17</sup> This is a complete contradiction to his decision to flee the Vietnamese army along with the DK regime and his subsequent denigration of Heng Samrin as a number "zero" who could kill people but could not administer the country.<sup>18</sup> Sihanouk's new attitude towards the removal

<sup>15</sup>I am grateful to Bruce Lockhart for this thoughtful observation.

<sup>16</sup>norodomsihanouk.info

<sup>17</sup>Although Sihanouk's original message is no longer available on his website, it can be found in Cambodia Daily 2007.

<sup>18</sup>Sihanouk's words were extracted from a series of interviews that he gave in Chhang Sou On Palace near Pyongyang in 1979, see Schier and Schier-Oum 1985: 38.

of DK in this sense—made possible by the Khmer Rouge’s total disappearance from the political scene by this point—contributed to the CPP’s success in legitimizing 7 January as Cambodia’s second birthday.

However, this achievement does not mean that Liberation Day has been celebrated without contestation.<sup>19</sup> Over the last twenty years, criticisms and protests have widely spread within and outside the country, and, whenever they occurred, the government responded with a counteraction. Responding to the opposition’s criticisms at the 30<sup>th</sup> year anniversary in 2009, Hun Sen attacked the critics as “extremists” and “unethical groups”. Such people, he said, “must recognize the truth [of 7 January]. If you don’t dare to accept the truth you are not human beings, you are animals” (Cambodia Daily 2009). Another noteworthy case took place shortly before the general elections in July 2013, in which then Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) Deputy President Kem Sokha’s recorded remarks were posted on the Council of Ministers’ website,<sup>20</sup> claiming that the DK Security Prison 21 or S-21 was a conspiracy created by Vietnam following its seizure of Phnom Penh in January 1979. Although Kem Sokha claimed that his words were taken out of context and the allegations were aimed to disturb him during the election campaigns, both the government and S-21 survivor Chum Mey considered the remarks as an insult to those who died at the prison and appealed for Kem Sokha’s apology. Following the Prime Minister’s warning of nationwide mass demonstrations, Chum Mey’s lawsuit, CPP-backed rallies and protests against Kem Sokha, a new law against the denial of the crimes committed under DK was quickly passed and put into effect. Under the new law, which shares some parallels with the Holocaust denial laws in Europe (Hennebel and Hochmann 2011), those who deny DK’s crimes could face up to two years in jail (Agence France-Presse 2013). Although, so far, no one has been punished by the law, its existence could be used for political purposes and simultaneously present a threat to the freedom of speech, especially any discussions related to the DK era and after.

The most striking development of the commemorations over the past two decades is the insertion of Hun Sen’s life story into the Liberation Day narrative. The story highlights Hun Sen’s struggle to oppose the Khmer Rouge regime through his defection to Vietnam in 1977 and emphasises his leading role, along with Heng Samrin and Chea Sim, in overthrowing DK in January 1979. Historically speaking, Hun Sen’s role in the anti-Khmer Rouge Salvation Front of the KUFNS was undeniable, but Vietnam-trained Communists Pen Sovan and Heng Samrin were the most important figures in the Front and the PRK during the early years. Based on Gottesman’s discussion, although Vietnamese officials attempted to bolster Pen Sovan’s power behind the scene, they publicly used Heng Samrin’s image as the figurehead of the Front and the PRK (2003: 46). Hun Sen’s prominent role in the PRK only evolved after the December 1984 death of Chan Sy, another Vietnam-trained Communist who took the premiership after Pen Sovan’s removal in December 1981 for having displeased the Vietnamese. The insertion of Hun Sen’s narrative has gradually emerged after the Prime Minister’s success in eliminating Khmer Rouge holdouts through his so-called “Win-Win Policy” in the late 1990s and the establishment of the Khmer Rouge tribunal in 2006. This narrative first appeared in the English edition of a biography published in 1999 (H.C. Mehta and J.B. Mehta 2013 [1999]), followed by a widely circulated radio drama in 2001 entitled *Son under Moonlight*, which depicts Hun Sen’s heroic sacrifice to bring peace to the country.<sup>21</sup>

After the inauguration in 2013 of the December 2 Memorial Monument to commemorate the establishment of the KUFNS in 1978 in the Kratie province, the government launched another major memorial project in Phnom Penh’s Chroy Changva district in February 2016 to commemorate Hun Sen’s achievements. Named the Win-Win Monument, the 54-metre high memorial was inaugurated by the Prime Minister on 29 December 2018. Having attempted to enshrine Hun Sen’s legacy, particularly his success in ending the civil war in the late 1990s, the construction was entirely devoted to his life story since 1977, which was cast into the bas-reliefs of the monument’s lower panels. The museum inside the memorial details the historic events of Hun Sen’s long escape to Vietnam in 1977 as well as the major accomplishments under his premiership.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of the long and heated dispute of interpretation of Liberation Day between the ruling party and its rival political parties, see Ou Virak 2017.

<sup>20</sup><http://pressocm.gov.kh/en/>

<sup>21</sup>The radio drama can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozcsdt9yZwI&list=PLAOmpTK8U3kTPXuFeiSf-mUUyL7icT4qx> (accessed 20 August 2019).

<sup>22</sup>This observation is based on my own visits to the Monument on 30 October and 29 December 2018.

Furthermore, a few days prior to the 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Liberation Day in 2018, a documentary titled *Marching Towards National Salvation* was extensively screened on televisions and social media, including the Prime Minister's Facebook page. The film features Hun Sen's video that describes his journey across the Vietnamese border in 1977 and his return with Vietnamese troops to take over Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979.<sup>23</sup> It is worth mentioning that the new CPP headquarters, which cost 30 million US dollars, was inaugurated on 28 June 2020 and named "The 7 January Monument".

This insertion indicates how Hun Sen has endeavoured to strengthen the unity of the CPP since assuming its presidency following Chea Sim's passing in June 2015. Through Vietnam's arrangement in 1978, the KUFNS was created by combining at least five major anti-Khmer Rouge factions including Heng Samrin and Chea Sim's armed group, Pen Sovan's Hanoi-based faction, Bou Thang's group, Say Phouthang's group and Hun Sen's faction.<sup>24</sup> These factions came from different political backgrounds and combat experiences. Within the party, factionalism based on loyalty and patronage remained strong during the 1980s and early 1990s.

After Hun Sen's consolidation of power in 1998, the CPP's division remained clear between Chea Sim's faction and Hun Sen's group. A major clash between the two camps took place in July 2004, in which Chea Sim disagreed with Hun Sen over the political deal that the latter made with Ranariddh. The clash resulted in the dramatic exodus of Chea Sim from the country for ten days (Phnom Penh Post 2004). Therefore, the insertion of Hun Sen's story into Liberation Day has been an attempt to strengthen the unity of the party by magnifying his role in events from 1979 onwards and presenting his sacrifices and accomplishments for the party and the country as the master narrative. Although it also aims to discard different views about 7 January, Hun Sen's life story has become a key ideological message that the CPP uses to mobilize support during the election seasons and other important occasions.

The CPP's assertion of its Liberation Day commemoration and the insertion of Hun Sen's life story into it represents a way to maintain his dominance in the political landscape of Cambodia. Sebastian Strangio, the author of *Hun Sen's Cambodia* (2014), has described this new narrative as "an episode of historical mythmaking whose purpose is less to provide an objective narrative of history (to the extent this is possible) than to burnish Hun Sen's personal story and justify the CPP's continued rule of Cambodia" (Phnom Penh Post 2018). Since the early 1990s, unlike his political rival Ranariddh, whose political legitimacy drew heavily on the legacy and popularity of his father Sihanouk (Norén-Nilsson 2016: 65–115), Hun Sen had little choice but to cultivate his legitimacy based on his party and the political struggle that he had faced. His removal of Prince Ranariddh from power in 1997 was widely criticized inside and outside the country because it was seen as a violation of the result of the UNTAC democratic election of 1993 and a direct attack on the FUNCINPEC party, whose key leaders were royal family members and their followers. The annual commemoration of CPP's Liberation Day and the promotion of Hun Sen's personal story can be seen as a justification of his political actions, including his military actions against Ranariddh, by asserting himself as the only legitimate leader who can maintain peace and bring development to the country. They can also be understood as a promotion of his leadership over the CPP and the country as the supreme political institution, given the decline of the Palace's political role and legitimacy over the last two decades.

### Lee's Remarks and a Reflection of Cambodia's Relations with ASEAN and China

When Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sent his condolences on Prem's passing, the letter was posted on Lee's Facebook page on 31 May 2019 and recalled the years of Prem's premiership during the 1980s as follows:

[...] His time as PM coincided with the ASEAN members (then five of us) coming together to oppose Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and the Cambodian government that replaced the Khmer Rouge. Thailand was on the frontline, facing Vietnamese forces across its border with

<sup>23</sup>The film was made by the Commission of History Research and Press Quick Reaction Unit of the Office of Council of Ministers of Cambodia in 2017 and released in January 2018.

<sup>24</sup>More about the PRK members during its early years, see Vickery 1999: 216–253.

Cambodia. General Prem was resolute in not accepting this *fait accompli*, and worked with ASEAN partners to oppose the Vietnamese occupation in international forums. This prevented the military invasion and regime change from being legitimised [...].<sup>25</sup>

Lee's Facebook post reflects a message that the Hun Sen government and the CPP have tried for years to eliminate, particularly the use of the terms Vietnam's "invasion" and "occupation". Even though the Western countries would talk about "the D-Day invasion of Europe" and "the Allied-occupation of Germany" with no derogatory implications, both the Vietnamese and the Cambodian governments see these terms as pejorative and as denying the legitimacy of Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge and PRK presence.<sup>26</sup>

The remarks reflect a long-standing view among leaders of Singapore towards the Cambodian conflict. In fact, even before the release of the condolence letter, Lee made similar remarks in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 31 May 2019, which was Asia's premier defence summit, in which all the ten ASEAN defence ministers were in attendance. Here, Lee stated "Vietnam had invaded Cambodia, thus posing a serious threat to its non-communist neighbours. But now Vietnam joined ASEAN, together with Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. It was a case of beating swords into ploughshares".<sup>27</sup> Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh said he had spoken with Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen about Lee's remarks and asked Ng to request Lee to rectify the statements. Tea Banh stated, "It is not true because he [Mr. Lee] said Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia. We wish for him to make corrections. It is not true." (Khmer Times 2019). Moreover, on 4 June, in a diplomatic note sent to the Singapore Embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam's foreign ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang expressed Vietnam's regrets over Lee's statements claiming that they did not reflect history objectively, causing negative public opinions (VnExpress International News 2019).

Lee's use of the term "invasion" reflects the perspective not only of Singapore but of other ASEAN countries as well.<sup>28</sup> The remarks help to reinforce the solidarity among the five founding members because they evoke an important time when ASEAN actively united in a single voice to tackle the Cambodian conflict at regional and international forums. However, the statements are seen as an offence by the newer members Vietnam and Cambodia, which have vigorously continued to emphasise their removal of the Khmer Rouge from power to indicate their legitimacy and authority.

Lee's remarks constituted an indirect attack on Liberation Day from the leader of another country—something that the CPP did not encounter in its commemoration and celebration of Vietnam/PRK's liberation over the past thirty years. What made Lee's statements even more offensive to the CPP was their appearance on Facebook which, as of 31 December 2018, had some 6,300,000 Cambodian users.<sup>29</sup> This figure represents over forty per cent of the entire population of 15.28 million<sup>30</sup> and constituted some half of CNRP supporters which, according to the result of the 2017 communal election, received 43.8 per cent of popular votes while the CPP got 50.7 per cent (COMFREL 2017: 144). Lee's post on his official page went viral in Cambodia and Vietnam after it appeared in the public sphere of online social media on 31 May.

<sup>25</sup>Lee's Facebook post on 31 May 2019 (accessed 19 August 2019).

<sup>26</sup>Although Vietnamese has a neutral term for "invasion", "*đổ bộ*", the English term is generally rendered as "*xâm lược*" or "*xâm lăng*", both of which mean "aggression". In Vietnamese these terms are consistently used to characterize attacks by other countries against Vietnam and are therefore seen as provocative if used to describe Hanoi's actions against Cambodia. "*Xâm lược*" or "*xâm lăng*" is equivalent to the Khmer word "*jhlan ban*" which also means "aggression". Thus, Western-language references to the "Vietnamese invasion" of Cambodia will consistently be translated as "Vietnamese aggression". Similarly, the word for "occupy" (*chiếm*) has negative connotations associated with invasions and colonialism. I am grateful to Bruce Lockhart for this linguistic observation.

<sup>27</sup>Lee's full keynote address can be viewed at <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2019> (accessed 20 August 2019).

<sup>28</sup>More about Singapore's policy towards the Cambodian conflict during the 1980s, see Ang 2013.

<sup>29</sup>Internet World Stats "Internet Usage in Asia" <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm> (accessed 20 August 2019).

<sup>30</sup>This number is based on the report of the latest census released by the Ministry of Planning of Cambodia on its Facebook page on 7 August 2019. See [https://www.facebook.com/mop.gov.kh/posts/1188191388030041?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=K-R](https://www.facebook.com/mop.gov.kh/posts/1188191388030041?__tn__=K-R) (accessed 20 August 2019).

It took one week of heated debates on Lee's remarks in Cambodia before the Cambodian Prime Minister reacted. On 7 June, on his official Facebook page, Hun Sen posted:

I deeply regret to learn of the Facebook post of H.E. Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, on 31 May expressing his condolences on the passing of General Prem Tinsulanonda [...] His statement reflects Singapore's position then in support of the genocidal regime and the wish for its return to Cambodia. Singapore was the host of the tripartite meeting that led to the formation of the coalition government of the Democratic Kampuchea, which had prolonged the war and the suffering of Cambodian people for another 10 years. It's an act against the survival of the Cambodian people. His statement is also an insult to the sacrifice of the Vietnamese military volunteers who helped to liberate Cambodia from the genocidal regime. His statement reveals to the Singaporean people and the world that the leader of Singapore had indeed contributed to the massacre of Cambodian people. Finally, I shall ask whether H.E. Lee Hsien Loong considers the trial of Khmer Rouge leaders legitimate?<sup>31</sup>

Hun Sen's response to Lee's post, followed by hundreds of reactions on social media from the Cambodian public, whose views were more divided than those expressed by the government and CPP supporters, shows a strong hostility towards Lee. His mention of Singapore's role in forming the CGDK and his accusation that Singapore and the world contributed to the massacre in Cambodia recalls the PRK's foreign policy during the 1980s, in which antagonism towards Singapore and other supporters of the CGDK was strong in tone and actions. The term "massacre" in this regard probably alludes to Cambodian deaths during the civil war of the 1980s, for which, according to Hun Sen, ASEAN countries should be blamed. However, his post also displays how severely Lee's remarks went against the CPP's political identity and legitimacy, which has drawn heavily on the legacy of Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge. He equates support for the CGDK with responsibility for the violence of the civil war.

Although the contention between the two leaders quickly faded away, the incident suggests how the regional political confrontations over forty years ago have evolved until today, even after both Vietnam and Cambodia joined ASEAN. At a time of ongoing disagreements among member countries in dealing with conflicts between themselves and with China, especially over the South China Sea, Lee and Hun Sen's disagreement is significant in two important ways.

Firstly, within Cambodia, the meaning of Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 has changed over time, suggesting how contemporary issues have shaped the understanding of the event. More importantly, it is clear how Hun Sen's long years in power have formulated the narratives and framed the commemorations of the event to strengthen his leadership within his party and over the country. The annual commemoration of Liberation Day displays the government's effort to impose the "founding moment" (Alev Çinar's term (2001: 368)) of the country to remind everyone about Cambodia's new life, which only started after Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. This indicates that even though Cambodia has dramatically changed, particularly in its economic and political developments and foreign relations, the country's accomplishments today are partly understood as the result of the 7 January event.

This important moment was vocally condemned by ASEAN for the entire 1980s and has gradually been buried in their collective past since the Paris Peace Accords in 1991. In other words, within ASEAN, the 7 January event has changed from being publicly criticized as the cause of the military conflicts and instability in the region to a point unworthy of mention because member states, particularly Thailand and Singapore, no longer see Vietnam as a threat. Following Hanoi's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in September 1989, the terms "invasion" and "occupation" were no longer mentioned in the Joint Communiqués of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, and the Cambodian conflict was off the table at the organisation's annual meetings from 1993 onwards. Yet, Lee's and Hun Sen's respective positions demonstrate that leaders of Singapore, Cambodia and Vietnam remain "stuck" in their original positions despite numerous changes in their countries' domestic politics and regional and international relations since the early 1990s.

<sup>31</sup>Hun Sen's post consists of Khmer and English versions, and the direct quote here is the English version. See Facebook page "Samdach Hun Sen, Cambodian Prime Minister" on 7 June 2019 (accessed 19 August 2019).



Secondly, because the Cambodian conflict also involved China, which joined hands with the ASEAN countries to oppose Vietnam and the PRK, this diplomatic spat reminds us of how China has shifted from supporting Hun Sen's enemies during the civil war to becoming his most trusted ally in recent years. Beijing's role in supporting DK was vocally denounced by the PRK while China's aid to the Khmer Rouge military faction continued until the early 1990s. Under the new post-civil war and larger post-Cold War era, however, China ceased this support. Following the formation of the coalition government in 1993, China maintained a closer connection with FUNCINPEC than with the CPP due to the royalist party's victory in the election, the key role of Sihanouk (who enjoyed warm ties with Beijing leaders) and his party's capacity to counterbalance Hun Sen's dominant role, about which China was not yet certain (Jeldres 2012: 85). China only began to forge an alliance with Hun Sen and the CPP after a series of events between 1994 and 1996, including FUNCINPEC's sympathy it developed towards Taiwan (Jeldres 2012: 86–87). After removing Ranariddh from power in July 1997, Hun Sen made a quick move to gain China's trust by shutting down the Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Phnom Penh and expelling all the Taiwanese diplomats (Jeldres 2012: 88–89).

China's involvement in Cambodia is mainly concerned with enhancing its security interests in Southeast Asia, supporting its one-China policy and securing natural resources and agricultural lands (Heng Pheakdey 2012). Beijing's large-scale investments, loans and assistance have presented an important offer to the Hun Sen government to turn to and consider China as its most important partner in key areas of bilateral cooperation, including the military aspect. Phnom Penh's shift has also been a reaction against criticisms and demands by the Western countries regarding the Hun Sen government's handling corruption, human right abuses and democracy. Through Beijing's policy of non-intervention, the Hun Sen regime has seen Beijing as a much easier partner with whom to work. This also allows Cambodia to steer a more even course between China and Vietnam to avoid becoming overly dependent on the latter.

ASEAN has not attempted to build this kind of mutual trust with Hun Sen. For countries like Singapore, Cambodia was no longer of crucial interest after the Paris Peace Conference in 1991 (Ang 2013: 168). After accepting Vietnam as its seventh member, ASEAN granted Cambodia and Laos observer status in 1995 and formally accepted Phnom Penh's application for full membership in the following year. However, the admission was delayed due to the July 1997 events, after which an urgent special meeting among ASEAN Foreign Ministers was held in Kuala Lumpur to review the situation. The joint statement of the meeting described the events as "unfortunate circumstances which have resulted from the use of force" and announced a delay of Cambodia's admission into ASEAN.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, China immediately announced its recognition of the new Hun Sen government, along with almost \$10 million worth of assistance and loans within the same year to compensate for Western donors' assistance which was temporarily suspended. This strategic move allowed China to open up its new era of relations with Cambodia, which has gradually become "an extension of Beijing's foreign policy—repaying Chinese economic favours by vetoing any effort by ASEAN to criticize, let alone counter, China's appropriation of the South China Sea" (Emmerson 2017: 5). Beijing has pursued a similar strategy with Laos and, to some extent, Myanmar—two other countries which, like Cambodia, have no claims in the South China Sea and thus have less motivation than other ASEAN members to oppose Chinese actions there.

Therefore, while the Phnom Penh regime viewed both China and the ASEAN countries as during the 1980s, China moved much more quickly than ASEAN in gaining trust from Cambodia after many years of political and diplomatic confrontations. Lee and Hun Sen's disagreement over the question of Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge more than forty years ago is an impact of these regional Cold War confrontations; however, Phnom Penh's trust in Beijing has obscured these confrontations today.

## Conclusion

The article has concentrated on key factors that led to Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, ASEAN's condemnation of that action and its mechanisms to handle Khmer Rouge atrocities as well as on how the PRK regime and Hanoi responded to ASEAN's criticisms through its Liberation Day. These factors are the historical context of Hun Sen and Lee's contention while they reflect a critical

<sup>32</sup>Joint Statement of the Special Meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers 1997.

moment of Cold War confrontations among Cambodia, Vietnam and the ASEAN countries, with the involvement of superpowers like China. Then, this article tracked the changes in the meaning of Liberation Day, which the PRK and its Vietnamese counterparts vigorously used to foster the regime's national and international image since 1980, including through the 1990s and the period following Hun Sen's consolidation of power in the late 1990s. A reflection on these changes has examined the increasing rhetoric of the CPP's Liberation Day commemoration over the last two decades, along with the insertion of Hun Sen's story. Another aspect of these changes, together with the recent controversy, is China's conscious efforts to improve its relationship with Phnom Penh after the end of the Cold War political confrontation.

Hun Sen and Lee's contention also reflects how both Cambodia and the ASEAN have continuously politicized Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge from power. Contested interpretations of this event between the CPP and its opposition parties have profoundly shaped the contemporary Cambodian political identity, which can largely be characterized as an arena between those who promote Liberation Day and those who seek to undermine it. Promoters of the two competing political myths have consequently closed off any critical discussion of the event among the Cambodian public (Ou Virak 2017). Although Vietnam has continued to emphasise its "liberation" of Cambodia, Singapore has stuck firmly to its original position based on the ASEAN perspective of the 1980s. The collapse of the DK regime was undeniably a victory—to the extent that it brought an end to the Khmer Rouge massacres—and the PRK/CPP was the biggest winner. However, history written by the winner may not be history but instead pure propaganda. Although leaders of Cambodia, Vietnam and Singapore have agreed to disagree over the issue, they should leave the debate on the meanings of this historic event to historians who are capable of grounding their argument in sources and critiques rather than specific political agendas.

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