

THE 5TH COLUMN

Return to Angkor

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There are three types of leaders: clean and competent, competent and corrupt, corrupt and incompetent. In Cambodia, there are none of the first

Thomas E. Dewey had always wanted to see Angkor. He got his wish after he lost his 1948 presidential bid to Harry S. Truman. He and his host, King Norodom Sihanouk, talked about Cambodia's 1947 election. In his *Journey to the Far Pacific*, he concluded his "Angkor" chapter by saying that what the kingdom needed was "better political leadership." We should bear these words in mind as we look back to Cambodia's elections this summer.

An ancient Khmer prophecy foretells that Cambodia would go through such turmoil that blood would reach the elephant's belly before peace returned. In May 1993, the tide of blood seemed to have crested. After 23 years of ordeal, 90% of registered voters went to the United Nations-organized polls. Funcinpec, founded by King Sihanouk and led by his son Prince Norodom Ranariddh, won, but Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, which maintained a larger fighting force, bullied its way into government. The world winked at the shotgun marriage. And the partners slept with each other as enemies until their violent divorce in July 1997.

At the beginning of the coalition government, there were some efforts to support economic growth and political stability. Unfortunately, the unnatural alignment was overly politicized. Party interests would be served first, through a corrupt and incompetent apparatus. The judiciary became an instrument of the executive and the National Assembly a rubber-stamp parliament. Other problems mushroomed: illegal logging, drug trafficking, money laundering, Aids. Donor countries continued to provide assistance, hoping to improve the little progress that had been made. But one election does not a democracy make.

A genuine election usually comprises four phases: pre-election (voter registration, campaigning), polling day, vote counting (appeals, adjudication) and the transfer of power. The lead-up to this year's vote was fundamentally flawed, leading perhaps inexorably to a less-than-credible result. There was registration fraud, intimidation, violence and unfair media access initiated by Hun Sen's CPP. Indeed, the National Election Commission was staffed heavily with its supporters.

Still, the high voter turnout of about 90% was a tribute to the Khmer people. They wanted democracy and understood the sanctity of the ballot. This was amplified by King Sihanouk's message on the secrecy of the vote and the confidence of voters seen at polling stations. When asked about their vote, Cambodians giggled. Most would say "I don't know" or "I voted for the party I like." One woman wouldn't even tell her

husband. And one said, "Hun Sen." Why? "I hate him, but fear a war if the CPP lost." The few hundred international observers could be present at only 10% of the polling stations. Yet overall, they saw a polling day that went relatively smoothly.

But the post-voting period has been pregnant with problems. Serious charges of irregularities by the opposition haven't been properly addressed. The CPP got 41% of the vote, less than Funcinpec's 32% and the Sam Rainsy Party's 14% combined. It was judged the winner. Then there was the violence. In early September, peaceful demonstrators, including Buddhist monks, were beaten and shot by government forces. These acts, which must be strongly condemned, make a mockery of Cambodia's national motto, "Nation, Religion, King." Leaders who don't understand the virtue of give-and-take divide the nation, pay no respect to religion and don't listen to the king.

For now, there is a danger of rushing into business as usual. The international community should not abdicate its responsibility to protect Cambodia's democratic gains. When people turn out *en masse* the message is that they want change. All voices must be heard, and not only the powerful minority. As such, recognition of the new government should be conditional on how the post-election phase evolves.

Cambodia's hunger for democracy and human rights will not die. There will always be different opinions. And in the age of the Internet and mobile phones, the truth will out. Cambodia has come far but still has a long way to go. Khmer leaders must learn to heed opposing views, bearing in mind that those who agree with them are not always their friends, and those who disagree are not necessarily their enemies.

Some of us in the United States observer delegation called on King Sihanouk in Siem Reap. We discussed Cambodia, arriving at the conclusion that there are three types of leaders: clean and competent, competent and corrupt, corrupt and incompetent. In Cambodia, there are many of the third group, few of the second and none of the first. Until leaders begin to put the interest of the people above theirs, Cambodia will never have a clean and competent leadership, and will continue to suffer.

Later, as we took off into the sunset, the incredible towers of Angkor Wat suddenly appeared above the jungle. Fifty years after Dewey's visit, Cambodia still needs "better political leadership." ■