

ANALYSIS

SITTING PRETTY

Despite the government feeling threatened by a 'secessionist' movement, observers say the leadership has little to fear



Speak up: Amnesty International considers Mam Sonando (left) a prisoner of conscience; Heng Chantha, 14, was killed during an eviction in May

By Faine Greenwood

Despite its huge strides in the last decade, Cambodia remains a country beset by social and political turmoil. Forced evictions, corruption and land concessions abound and, to the observer's eye at least, such widely reported dysfunction might be the touch paper for people-oriented social change along the lines of the 'Arab Spring'.

Indeed, given the recent detention of Mam Sonando, an independent radio station owner jailed on four counts related to stoking a so-called secessionist movement in Kratie province earlier this year, it would seem that the Cambodian government is at pains to crush any whimpers of discontent even before they have the chance to grow into a low rumble.

But perhaps there is no need for them to raise the alarm just yet. With many Cambodians enjoying a standard of living unimaginable 30 years ago, rocking the boat is not on the agenda according to some seasoned Cambodia-watchers.

GDP growth is projected at 6.5% in 2012, according to recent figures from the Asian Development Bank, and may get higher in 2013. Although the Cambodian economy's scope remains rather limited, such levels of growth are certainly good news. Comfort – even if it is relatively meagre – is not the stuff of social revolution, especially in a nation only just growing accustomed to the finer things in life.

"The bulk of the population has never known anything different," said Joel Brinkley, author of *Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land*. "Unless they come to seize someone's land, the government is not very visible out in the countryside, where 80% of the people live. [Cambodians] still, in many cases, live by nature and that's all they've ever known."

Cambodian journalist and blogger Kounila Keo agrees. "We have what we call a 'civil-war-shattered generation'

of my parents and other people their age, who want to see no more war but peace, and try to keep their children safe by reprimanding them for showing any sort of rebellious behaviour, at home or in public," she said.

A June 2011 study by Berkeley's Human Rights Centre, which focused on the Khmer Rouge tribunal, backs up the assertion that most Cambodians appear more interested in fulfilling day-to-day needs than they are in the passage of justice. With 83% of respondents prioritising daily concerns over addressing the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, it is quite possible this pragmatic attitude is also applied to the question of political change.

"The government has been relatively successful in delivering the economic goods," observed Carl Thayer, a politics professor at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy. "Everyday life may be

marked by police corruption and arbitrary behaviour by state officials, but it is not truly repressive."

"Egyptians and Syrians and Libyans must wonder: 'What's the worst that could happen?' as the old order collapses," said Bill Herod, a retired former information officer of the NGO Forum who has lived in the Kingdom since 1994. "Cambodians know."

Those Arab states gave social media a proven track record in instigating change, and although internet penetration rates in Cambodia are low – a 2010 World Bank report found that just 1.3% of citizens were online – the rate of use is growing every year. Cambodians, true to global trends, are also taking to Facebook in increasing numbers.

An embrace of the internet will eventually have considerable implications for the knowledge-base of the average citizen, according to Thayer.

"Literacy and internet usage are closely related," he said. "If Cambodia over-produces educated secondary and tertiary level students who are underemployed or unemployed, it is likely the internet will facilitate networking. This could spark protest blogs and copycat behaviour based on social protests outside Cambodia."

Even if Thayer's speculation became an actuality, the government has proved it is not afraid to bare its teeth in the

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Carl Thayer, Australian Defence Academy

face of a possible insurrection – and the average citizen has likely noticed.

As the July arrest of so-called "secessionist" and Association of Democrats president Mam Sonando highlighted, Cambodian security forces are by no means resting on their laurels.

Having discussed and broadcasted news of a lawsuit, received by the International Criminal Court, brought against the Cambodian government for crimes against humanity, the following day a warrant was issued for his arrest in relation to a separate incident – a May land eviction protest in Kratie.

Among the charges levelled at Sonando were "insurrection" and "inciting people to use weapons against authorities". The action taken sent a formidable message to anyone even contemplating dissent: don't.

Sonando's treatment was roundly criticised in the Western media

as yet another example of the kind of strong arm tactics, corruption and cronyism with which it likes to tar the Cambodian government. Yet an arrogant mistake commonly made by the West is the assumption that other cultures will share their beliefs and values.

As a case in point, Bill Herod pointed out that popular attitudes in Cambodia towards governmental corruption often differ markedly from those in the West. “High-level corruption is seen as an indication of just how clever the leaders are to take money away from wealthy corporations and governments,” he said.

The West’s negative reports surrounding the Prime Minister largely ignore the

“For all his faults, Hun Sen has brought the nation stability,” said Brinkley. “It’s not a stability [some] would find acceptable, but the Khmer Rouge is gone, and there’s no insurgency there [Cambodia] any longer.”

Hun Sen is positively associated with Cambodia’s improving economy, although the status quo might change rapidly if that economy, which is heavily intertwined with China, unravels.

“With the Indian economy slowing and the Chinese economy showing cracks, there has to be some concern that the [Cambodian] regime couldn’t maintain legitimacy should a new economic crisis take hold in Southeast Asia,” said

Support for opposition groups such as the Sam Rainsy Party and the royalist Funcinpec contingent is dwindling and no charismatic figurehead has emerged to convincingly fill the void.

“It is a maxim of dictatorship that you don’t allow anyone to become a major voice to compete with your own,” said Brinkley. “Hun Sen has been very skilful at that. So there is no one who has widespread political support around the country.”

Furthermore, even a new leader is likely to come from the ranks of the CPP, according to Carl Thayer. “Replacing Hun Sen only leaves the CPP regime in power,” he said.



Bright lights: young Cambodians living in the country’s main cities enjoy a higher standard of living than their parents’ generation did 30 years ago



reality of Hun Sen’s popularity, especially among those living in the countryside.

June’s commune elections saw his ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) win local seat after local seat – and although the elections were by no means spotless, observers from the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia found “no serious irregularities, violence or otherwise, which would have led to the obstruction of the electoral process”.

Eddie Walsh, a non-resident fellow at the Pacific Forum Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

“It’s not just bilateral trade with China that you have to worry about, it’s the web of interdependency. If China’s economy slows, other economies upon which Cambodia depends will suffer.”

Even if the bottom did fall out of the economy, a lack of viable political alternatives remains in the CPP’s favour.

While change is always a possibility as nations grow and modernise, the chance of a popular revolt in Cambodia remains minimal. “As much as any other state, Cambodians need to stand up to their government, but I just don’t foresee that happening in the near future,” said Brinkley. “When people get really angry, they’re willing to take the risk. In Cambodia, most people are not really angry.” ■

The negative reports surrounding the Prime Minister found in the West also largely ignore the reality of Hun Sen’s popularity



Man of the people: Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen and his wife Bun Rany tour Cambodia’s provinces

Photos: Bloomberg, Pring Samrang