

**The Politics of Nationalism in Cambodia's Preah Vihear  
Conflict with Thailand**

**The State, the City and the Border**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at The Australian  
National University

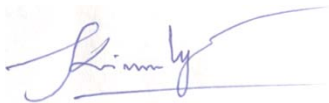
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## Statement of Originality

I certify that this thesis is my own work, except where otherwise is acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kimly", with a horizontal line underneath.

Kimly Ngoun

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the politics of nationalism in Cambodia during the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear Temple. Existing studies of the dispute between these two countries over Preah Vihear tend to adopt a top down approach. Many of them focus on the historical and legal dimensions of the contested claims and on Thailand's role in the conflict. However, none of them adequately addresses or explains the conflict from the Cambodian side, especially the politics of nationalism in relation to the border temple conflict. Therefore, this thesis examines the Preah Vihear conflict by exploring what it reveals about the nuanced uses of the politics of nationalism in Cambodia and the meanings of Preah Vihear to diverse Cambodian social actors.

The thesis demonstrates that Cambodians have had strong political stakes in the Preah Vihear dispute and the stakes are diverse. Investments in the temple in Cambodia as a nationalist rallying point have been multi-dimensional and reflect a range of interests. The thesis argues that to understand the dispute from the Cambodian side, we need to understand the different bases for nationalist investment in the conflict. Therefore, it proposes not one but four key explanatory approaches: the politics of postcolonial nation-building, political legitimation, the urban politics of empowerment, and the politics of pragmatism in the periphery. Examination of these four approaches reveals that nationalism can have complex uses and a diverse range of meanings. It serves as a political resource for different stakeholders and a productive way for them to secure their varied political objectives when alternative means are constrained or lacking.

The study adopts a qualitative methodology. In addition to relying on primary and secondary documents, I made observations, recorded informal conversations, and conducted in-depth and focus group interviews with a wide range of individuals and groups. The fieldwork was conducted in Phnom Penh and Preah Vihear province in two segments, from March to October 2012 and from December 2013 to January 2014.

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## Abbreviations

ACU	Anti-Corruption Unit
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party
CPK	Communist Party of Kampuchea
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CTN	Cambodian Television Network
DC-Cam	Documentation Center of Cambodia
DK	Democratic Kampuchea
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
IMF	International Monetary Fund
PAD	People's Alliance for Democracy
PPP	People's Power Party
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
RCAF	Royal Cambodian Armed Forces
RFA	Radio Free Asia
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SoC	State of Cambodia
TRT	Thai Rak Thai
UDD	United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VOA	Voice of America



Map 1. Preah Vihear Temple on Cambodia-Thailand border. (Map by Cartography Unit, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.)



Figure 1. Preah Vihear Temple. (Photo by the author.)

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1. The Setting, puzzles, and arguments

On 7 July 2008, at the World Heritage Committee meeting in Quebec City in Canada, UNESCO endorsed Cambodia's proposal to have the Preah Vihear Temple recognised as a World Heritage site. Shortly afterwards, the country's broadcast media aired a statement by Prime Minister Hun Sen, which described the temple listing as an impressive victory and a great pride for the Cambodian nation. State-sponsored nationalist celebrations took place in many places throughout the country. At some of these venues, the imagery of Preah Vihear Temple became synonymous with Cambodia's other grand national symbols: the national flag and the national anthem. Participants in the celebrations waved Cambodia's national flag, held up banners with patriotic messages, carried portraits of Preah Vihear Temple and Prime Minister Hun Sen, and sang Cambodia's patriotic songs. Through this performative narrative, the constructed symbolism of the ancient monument as representing the nation was manipulated to enhance the political legitimacy of Hun Sen and his government.

One week later, on 15 July 2008, public jubilation and celebrations were replaced by a different atmosphere. Local television programs started showing images of hundreds of black-uniformed Thai soldiers being deployed to occupy areas surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple. A tense military stand-off ensued as they were confronted by Cambodian soldiers. The dispute made headlines and received extensive coverage by local media outlets, which often portrayed the action of the Thai military as an act of aggression and a serious invasion of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty. The state-affiliated media appealed to all Cambodian people to rally behind the government to defend the border and the ancient temple.

The Preah Vihear conflict captured the public mood and attention of Cambodian people. Amid concerns about the possibility of the outbreak of war between Cambodia and Thailand, many Cambodian people, especially those in Phnom Penh, expressed anger at the Thai state. In their view, the action of the Thai military was an attempt to regain control of Preah Vihear Temple and its surrounding areas. Based on my

observation at that time and subsequent interviews during my fieldwork, many people in Phnom Penh followed the news about the Preah Vihear dispute and discussed it with others in their multiple networks in various urban public spheres. Some city people donated to the Preah Vihear Border Defence Funds; others even materialized their sense of belonging to what Anderson (1983) calls the imagined community by organizing their own trips to Preah Vihear Temple to show their supports to Cambodian soldiers there. I was intrigued by the fact that many of the citizens of Phnom Penh who rallied around the temple and the Cambodian troops did not necessarily strongly identify with the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) or accept its legitimacy. Nor were their actions co-ordinated by the ruling party. Although stimulated by leaders' nationalist rhetoric and symbolism, many of these nationalist impulses appeared to come from below.

While people interested in these developments could find out through media reports something about the border conflict, mass protests in Bangkok, and the rhetoric of politicians and elites in Phnom Penh, little was known about Preah Vihear provincial residents. The reason was that local and international media preferred reporting on the military tension and fighting than on the daily lives and views of people living on the periphery. Images and live reports of gun battles and firing exchanges from artilleries and tanks between Cambodian and Thai troops would sell the news to the audience better than reports on the livelihood and opinions of a villager or a market vendor at the Preah Vihear borderland. Another reason was that to provide an insightful and well-informed look at the sophisticated values, behaviour, and responses underpinning the views of the border communities regarding cultural heritage, politics, state and nation would require journalists to spend extended time in the field and possess some linguistic and ethnographic skills.

Images seen in the media showing the severity of military tension at the border led many people outside Preah Vihear province to assume that the conflict has severely affected the lives of local residents. Furthermore, it was believed that the borderland inhabitants were outraged by Thailand's actions and viewed the conflict in a negative light. However, as I discovered during my fieldwork in the province, the military tension has had a silver lining effect on residents' livelihood and the local economy. The Cambodian government's investment in infrastructure and connectivity with and

within Preah Vihear province created conditions that transformed the spatial and socio-economic landscapes of this border province, which have benefited many local residents.

This study uses the Preah Vihear conflict between Cambodia and Thailand as a key to explore Cambodia's contemporary nationalist and political landscapes. It examines the complex interplay between the potent symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple and diverse stakeholders in Cambodia, namely state elites, Phnom Penh city people, and the residents of Preah Vihear border province. In this study, I argue that the Cambodian state elites manipulated the potency of Preah Vihear Temple and the conflict with Thailand to consolidate their political power. However, it was not the elites alone who monopolized the nationalist narratives of the Preah Vihear conflict. A wide range of other individuals and groups in the urban space of Phnom Penh and the Preah Vihear borderland also used the dispute to fulfil their diverse political, social and economic needs. With these arguments in mind, my study seeks to address three important questions. How has Preah Vihear Temple emerged from an obscure border temple complex to represent the Cambodian nation in Cambodia's nationalist discourse? How have various stakeholders—namely Cambodian state elites, Phnom Penh city people, and Preah Vihear provincial residents—invested in nationalism projects in the Preah Vihear conflict? And what were the important reasons underpinning their dynamic uses of the politics of nationalism?

This chapter begins by identifying gaps in the existing scholarly literature about the Preah Vihear conflict and the new insights I hope to contribute. It then discusses the relevant concepts and theories of nationalism, which can be used to support my analysis of the politics of nationalism in Cambodia. It is followed by an introduction to the four key explanatory approaches I use to illuminate Cambodian nationalist investments in the border temple dispute. This chapter closes with an explanation of my research methodology and a sketch of the study's contents.

## **2. Identification of knowledge gaps**

Existing scholarly literature in English on the Preah Vihear conflict between Cambodia and Thailand predominantly adopts a top down approach by analysing the dispute at the national, regional or international level (see, for examples, Cuasay 1998;

Thayer 2009; Silverman 2011; Wagener 2011; Pou 2013; Sok 2014; Lee 2014). These studies have different focuses on the dispute. Some focus on the implications of the conflict for ASEAN; others on legal dimensions; still others on history. Some studies explore the role of domestic politics and nationalism in Thailand. These bodies of literature have vastly advanced our knowledge and understanding of the Preah Vihear conflict. However, they all share one thing in common. They tend to treat the border temple conflict as something concerning the political elites. They provide few insights into investments in the dispute by other stakeholders. In the sections below, I present some examples of the arguments that have been put forward and highlight their limitations.

One body of literature focuses on the implications of the Preah Vihear conflict between Cambodia and Thailand for ASEAN (Thearith and Vannarith 2008; Haywood 2011; Pavin 2013; Phan 2015). Thearith and Vannarith (2008) looked at the implications of the conflict on the construction of the Southeast Asian community. They argue that the conflict may have “an adverse impact on the establishment of the community” (Thearith and Vannarith 2008, 15). Pavin (2013) used the conflict to examine ASEAN’s dispute settlement mechanisms. He concludes that ASEAN is weak and incompetent in the management of regional disputes (Pavin 2013, 65). Phan (2015) explored ASEAN’s role in the Preah Vihear conflict. According to this author, ASEAN was successful in preventing the conflict from escalating further, but it had limitations in resolving the dispute because “problems of institutional design reduce its effectiveness in managing conflicts and settling disputes” (Phan 2015, 8). These studies have identified the challenges the Preah Vihear dispute poses to the existing institutional, regional, and international relations architecture; however, they fail to provide systematic insights into the local political concerns, stakeholders and drivers of the dispute.

Another body of literature focuses on the legal dimensions of the Preah Vihear conflict (Johnson 1962; Thornberry 1963; Chan 2004; Bora 2009; Monticha 2009; Buss 2010; Tanaka 2012; Shulman 2012; Chesterman 2015; Kattan 2015). Bora (2009) and Monticha (2009) presents legal documents and other aspects of the law to support their respective arguments in regard to who owns the Preah Vihear Temple, Cambodia or Thailand? Buss (2010) used the case of the Preah Vihear temple dispute to explore



how regional customary laws and regional principles can be included in modern international law. The author calls on the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to consider them in its adjudicating of territorial disputes between states. Chesterman (2015) studied the ICJ's 2013 Decision and interpreted its 1962 Judgement in the Temple of Preah Vihear case to explore the Court's evolving role in Asia. The author argues that the ICJ plays an important role in settling disputes "concerning subjects that cannot be divided or traded—such as a temple" (Chesterman 2015, 1). Such studies provide rich insights into the understanding of the Preah Vihear temple dispute from legal perspectives and its relevance to the broader frameworks of international law and international legal institutions, ideas, and practices. However, they fail to shed light on sophisticated local dimensions, for example, domestic politics and nationalism that have created, intensified, or made the conflict difficult to resolve.

There also have been studies that explain the Preah Vihear conflict through a historical lens (Singh 1962; Kelly 1963; St John 1994; Osborne 2008a; Pavin 2012; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013). Many of them argue that the border temple conflict can be explained by looking at the historical animosity between Cambodia and Thailand. Osborne (2008a, 1) wrote that the dispute reflected "much older historical problems between the two countries". Pavin (2012) examined factors underlying the endurance of the Thai-Cambodian "historical embeddedness". He argues, "Historical embeddedness has been sustained by the myth of 'lost territories', by distorted historical textbooks and by a provocative media" (Pavin 2012, 81). Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin (2013) also refer to history as an important source of the Preah Vihear conflict. They write, "Today, Thai-Cambodian relations are still largely moulded by the powerful, yet dangerous, sentiment of nationalism, which has its deep roots in the bitter historical intercourse between the two kingdoms" (Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013, 1). There is a risk with such studies because they position the Preah Vihear dispute in historical contexts and overlook the contemporary contexts, conditions, concerns, processes and actors that have driven it.

More attention to localised contemporary factors can be found in studies that explore the Thai involvement in the conflict. However, most of these are about elite level politics in Thailand, showing how different groups of political elites manipulated nationalism in the temple dispute to win national power (Pavin 2009; Chambers and

Wolf 2010; Croissant and Chambers 2011; Strate 2013; Puangthong 2013; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013). Pavin (2009, 447) argues that the Preah Vihear conflict occurred as a result of power struggle between two important political factions in Thailand: the supporters and the opponents of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Croissant and Chambers (2011) and Puangthong (2013) argue that the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) exploited the Preah Vihear issue for their political agenda to bring down the elected government of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, who was perceived as a Thaksin's proxy.

In contrast, little has been written to explain the Preah Vihear dispute from Cambodia's perspectives. The few available studies written in Khmer language by Cambodians provide inadequate explanations because they focus mainly on the history of the temple construction and the history of the dispute. Moreover, they are outdated and scarcely academic because they are generally biased against Thailand (see, for examples, Pen Nuth 1958; Tranet 2009).

The existing literature presented above is not sufficient to help us grasp the complexities of Cambodia's contemporary politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict for two main reasons. First, as shown above, many of them tend to analyse the issues of politics and nationalism in the dispute at the elite level. They tend to treat the political and nationalist phenomena surrounding the border temple dispute as the elites' monopoly, giving very little attention to the roles of other stakeholders. Moreover, many of them view nationalism as ideology or sentiment constructed by the elites (see, for examples, Croissant and Chambers 2011; Strate 2013; Pou 2013). For example, Strate (2013) situated the Preah Vihear conflict within the Thai state-sponsored nationalist discourse on national humiliation, which ingrained into Thai people the belief that their country had lost territories and was being made a victim of Western imperialism.

Second, some of these studies tend to suggest that the nationalist discourse in the Preah Vihear temple conflict derived from primordial historical origin—in other words, we have to go way back to the past to understand the current tension (see, for examples, Croissant and Chambers 2011; Pavin 2012; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013). Croissant and Chambers (2011) writes, “The roots of the current temple controversy reach far back into Thai-Cambodian history.” Pavin (2012, 81) also writes,

“The current state of Thai-Cambodian relations has been ostensibly moulded by the powerful, yet dangerous, sentiment of nationalism which has its deep roots in the bitter historical relations between the two kingdoms”.

I do not reject these studies but feel that none of them adequately explain the Preah Vihear conflict. If you break Cambodia’s nationalism in the temple dispute down, you will find that it is multifaceted, discontinuous, not unitary, not flowing from one primordial source, but emerging from different sources. Nationalism in Cambodia is a joint project because Preah Vihear Temple obsesses different stakeholders and the investment in its nationalism is promoted by different interests.

I also feel that the literature on politics and nationalism in Thailand relating to the Preah Vihear conflict cannot be transplanted to explain the Cambodian side. Those studies are largely about the manipulation of nationalism by right wing political elites against populists. They are about nationalism of legitimation against the populist politics of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies (Pavin 2009; Chambers and Wolf 2010; Croissant and Chambers 2011; Puangthong 2013). In Cambodia, nationalism associating with Preah Vihear Temple is about nation-building, but not necessarily about elites. It is also about the masses. It is about urban as well as the periphery.

Due to the inadequate nature of the existing literature, my study aims to address the gaps by proposing to study the Preah Vihear conflict from the Cambodian perspective. I argue that to understand the dispute, we need to also understand the Cambodian side. And to understand the Cambodian side, we need to understand the different stakes. A closer examination of these stakes will reveal that, for a wide variety of reasons, diverse stakeholders have invested in Preah Vihear Temple. Therefore, I propose in this study a more multifaceted account that will include elites and masses, urban and periphery, past and present. To understand the Preah Vihear conflict, I propose not one but four explanatory approaches. The first key dimension of Cambodia’s investment in Preah Vihear conflict is the politics of postcolonial nation-building. The second area of Cambodia’s investment in the temple dispute concerns political legitimacy. The third area is about urban politics of empowerment. The fourth area concerns the politics of pragmatism of the Preah Vihear borderland residents. Without understanding each of these four key dimensions, we cannot gain a complete picture of the politics of

nationalism and the politics of Preah Vihear in Cambodia. In all the four cases, nationalism is neither a constructed sentiment nor a phenomenon of primordial historical origin. It is rather a political resource of different kinds for the different stakeholders. It is a resource that can be renewed, recycled and enjoyed for variant purposes by diverse stakeholders at different space and time.

### **3. Conceptualizing nationalism**

Because my study of the Preah Vihear conflict concerns the politics of nationalism, it is necessary to examine some general concepts and theories of nationalism. Nationalism is very difficult to study because it is interdisciplinary and encompasses a wide range of subjects. Its meanings, forms and ways of expression are complex, diverse and fluid (Hutchinson and Smith 1994, 3). Moreover, the key concepts of nationalism do not have sufficient and agreed definitions (Ibid, 3–4).

It is also important to know that there are disagreements among prominent scholars of nationalism on when, how and what contribute to the emergence of nation and nationalism. Nevertheless, their different arguments and theories can be categorised under three paradigms, namely primordialism, modernism or constructivism, and ethno-symbolism. The primordialists emphasise the ancient temporality and naturalness of nations established on the foundations of primordial attachments such as race, kinship, language, religion, territory and custom (see Shils 1957; Geertz 1994). The modernists hold that the emergence of nations and nationalism as ideology and movement is a relatively recent phenomenon starting from around the eighteenth century as a result of socio-economic and political transformations in Europe. They also argue that nations and nationalism are not natural but constructed (see, for example, Gellner 1983; Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). The ethno-symbolists do not agree with the primordialists and the constructivists. Therefore, they proposed a third approach, which is a ‘midway’ between primordialism and modernism (Özkerimli 2000, 167–170). The ethno-symbolism paradigm argues that the formation of many modern nations occurred in the pre-modern period and on the basis of “pre-existing ethnic ties and sentiments” (Smith 2000, 13).

Many scholars have studied the politics of nationalism. In their studies, nationalism is variously seen as an ideology (Kedourie 1960; Billig 1995; Sutherland 2005;

Sutherland 2012), as a movement (Brand 1978; Jwaideh 2006; Aspinall 2007), as an instrument of politics (Brass 1979), as a form of politics (Breuilly 1982), as a new political process developing in response to globalization (Kaldor 2004), as rhetoric (Levinger and Lytle 2001; Kimly 2016), as a potent form of spatial territorialisation (Penrose 2002), as national identity or collective cultural phenomenon (Smith 1991), or as everyday practices (Edensor 2002; Surak 2013).

In this thesis, I propose to study nationalism as an ‘alternative political resource’. Using this concept, I frame nationalism as a political resource that is relatively available and accessible to a wide range of people including elites and non-elites, who may rely on it to obtain their political objectives when access to other available resources is constrained or lacking.<sup>1</sup> Nationalism is a resource that can be tapped by the powerful and the weak alike to augment power and achieve desired political outcomes. As a mode of influencing others by appealing to what is shared in common, its effects are achieved through means as varied as discourses, symbolism, propaganda, images, campaigns, performances and enactments.

Before any further discussion of this concept can take place, it is essential to address one important question, that is, why is nationalism powerful and appealing? Or why do many people identify themselves with it? The answer to this apparently simple yet difficult question is rather long and complicated. Anderson (1983) argues elegantly that nationalism’s appeal to moderns lies in its evocation of sentiments of commonality or identification. Smith (1991) grounds his analysis of the political appeal of nationalism as deriving from its representation of shared experience, or “collective cultural phenomena”. Greenfeld (2006, 205) argues that nationalism has potency because it is based on “the principles of popular sovereignty and egalitarianism”. For Hutchison (2003, 71), nation, whose shadow is nationalism, is a powerful notion because of its wide recognition as “the hegemonic cultural and political unit of the modern period”.

In searching for the reason for nationalism’s appeal, it is also beneficial to study nationalism as a political resource. Briefly I would argue that politics is a negotiation for control over available resources (Stoker 1998; Deutsch 1961). The resources are diverse, including material, financial, coercive, ideological, symbolic,

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<sup>1</sup>Here I do not discuss whether or not the use of nationalism as an alternative political resource is relatively more effective than others. There is no one political resource that is the most effective in advancing political goals. It depends on many factors and circumstances.

communicational and organisational power (see, for examples, Giddens 1981; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Lipsky 1968). Access to them is available through a variety of political strategies: through seizure of the state in coups or elections; mass mobilisation politics (Deutsch 1961; Lipsky 1968); patron-client politics (Scott 1972; Powell 1970; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007); informal politics (Chatterjee 2004; Bayat 1997); network-based politics (McCargo 2005a); politics of gift (Hughes 2006); politics of judicialisation (McCargo 2014); money politics (Kang 2002; Weiss 2016); populist politics (Calhoun 1988; Dix 1985; Roberts 1995; Weyland 2001); political legitimation (Alagappa 1995; Beetham 1991; Barker 2004); weapons of the weak or everyday resistance (Scott 1985); or everyday politics (Kerkvliet 2005), to name a few. However, all these political strategies have their limits in that access to resources remains socially situated and is unevenly distributed in relation to one's capacity and socioeconomic situation (Mann 1986; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Moreover, desire for such resources is situationally constructed: resources may be differently valued in relation to one's particular social position, desires, needs and concerns (Bourdieu 1990; Yuval-Davis 2006; Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, and Vieten 2006).

Hence, in the negotiation over control for resources no matter how advantaged a social actor might be, political ambitions are frequently frustrated. A well-connected elite may lack a constituency over whom to exert influence; a leader who seizes power may lack capacity to gain approval; materially well-off people may be frustrated by a lack of control or sense of belonging; geographically or socially marginal groups may be excluded from access to services. In such circumstances, nationalism presents itself as an alternative means for mobilising, controlling or attracting desired resources. In this sense, I regard nationalism as an alternative political resource, one which individuals or groups may resort to when their ambition to obtain control over resources by various other available political means is thwarted.

This conceptual framework is highly appropriate for the study of the politics of nationalism, especially for analysing Cambodia's contemporary nationalism. It helps us to understand the discursive contexts of individuals or groups who have identified themselves with national symbols, identities, and imagery. It is a particularly useful concept for the study of the politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict. By treating nationalism as an alternative political resource, we can better understand why

diverse stakeholders manipulated nationalism during the border temple dispute. We can also gain better insights into the nuances of what nation and nationalism mean for different political, social, and spatial segments of contemporary Cambodia. In adopting this conceptual framework, I situate nationalism between the constraints or limitations and the aspirations of each political and social actor or group. In contemporary Cambodia, where access to financial, organisational and institutional resources and other mechanisms are constrained, political elites and non-elites alike often employ nationalism as an alternative and convenient political resource in their pursuit for political, social and economic empowerment.

### *Elite nationalism: A top down approach*

To assess investments by Cambodia's state elites in the Preah Vihear conflict, it is necessary to consider some relevant concepts which are useful for understanding the nation and nationalism from the 'view from above' approach.

Scholars have elaborated on the notion of nationalism as a form and an instrument of elite politics. Brass (1979, 40–41) argues:

Whether or not the culture of the group is ancient or is newly-fashioned, the study of ethnicity and nationality is in large part the study of politically induced cultural change. More precisely, it is the study of the process by which elites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups.

Breuilly (1982, 1–2) writes:

To focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class or modernisation is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics, and that politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is primarily about control of the state.

What are the mechanisms and conditions that have allowed elites to utilise nationalism to advance their political agenda? Historians have uncovered several distinct sets of processes and conditions. Eric Hobsbawm's conception of nation and nationalism as 'inventing traditions' shows elites' roles in constructing and reconstructing ideas of nations and national identities. Hobsbawm (1983, 1) argues, "Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented." Elites, through ceremonial manifestations and state rituals, control the reproduction and interpretation of ancient materials to suit their new

purposes. They invent “traditions” to instil in their countrymen’s mind a sense of their nation’s continuity with the past (Ibid, 1–3). Through this process of ‘inventing tradition’, elites can claim power and construct popular legitimacy for themselves as guardians of national and cultural heritage.

Benedict Anderson’s conception of a nation as “an imagined political community” also demonstrates elites’ prominent roles. According to Anderson (1983, 6), the nation “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Anderson emphasises the important roles of printing technology and print-capitalism as significant factors contributing to the emergence of nation and nationalism (Ibid, 37–46). Print media and, later, revolutionised media technology in the forms of broadcast media, such as radio and television, are controlled by elites and often carry elites’ perspectives. In this sense, elites play an important role in influencing ideas of nation and its associated phenomena.

Thongchai Winichakul’s concept of a nation as having a potent “Geo-Body” reveals elites’ predominant roles in the construction of the ‘Body’ of a nation. According to this concept, elites engage in negotiating and drawing of boundary lines between states. Moreover, they control the production of maps and empower them with potent national meanings. Thai elites also used state boundary lines to create national identity for Thai people separating them from the “others” living on the other side of the border lines (see Thongchai 1994). In this sense, the Geo-Body of the Thai nation has become a new ideology for Thai elites to mobilise mass support and gain loyalty from the country’s ethnically diverse population (Ibid). Thongchai’s concept is useful for understanding the nationalist sentiments that pervaded the Preah Vihear border conflict. When elites apply history and modern ideas of statehood onto this body of a nation, they effectively create nationalist discourses of ‘territorial loss’ in which the neighbouring country is portrayed as the ‘historical enemy and invader’. Elites can exploit these nationalist discourses to rally mass support for their political agenda.

In constructing national ideologies in the forms of inventing tradition, imagined community, or geo-body, elites need to maintain, promote, naturalise and institutionalise these ideologies through mass media, national cultural institutions and state educational system. Another way of sustaining national ideology is through what



Michael Billig calls “banal nationalism”. By banal nationalism, he means that elites inculcate the aura of nation and national identity in their countrymen through embedding the belief in the existence of nation in people’s daily routines and practices such as the hanging of national flags in public places (see Billig 1995).

I synthesise these arguments by proposing to study nationalism as ‘an alternative political resource’. I argue that in the case of Cambodian elites, nationalism is not only a form and an instrument of politics but also a political resource to be exploited when their accesses to other political resources are constrained or lacking. In this sense, when we analyse contemporary Cambodian state elites’ nationalism in the Preah Vihear dispute, we need to take into consideration the constraints or challenges they were facing, and their political goals. We need to situate nationalism between their constraints and their goals. In this thesis, I investigate what were the respective constraints of two Cambodian leaders – Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen – who ruled respectively from 1941 to 1970 and from 1985 to the present. I also examine how they manipulated nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict as a political resource to overcome those challenges to achieve their political objectives.

### *Popular nationalism: A bottom up approach*

Although we may gain much from examining the Preah Vihear conflict from the perspective of Cambodian state elites, I also propose that investigation of the popular stakes in the conflict, or nationalism from below, provides a fuller understanding of the complexities and nuances of the politics of nationalism in the dispute. Prominent historian and nationalism theorist Eric Hobsbawm, though his works focus on elite nationalism, made an interesting suggestion which has inspired the study of nationalism from below. Hobsbawm (1990, 10) writes, “Nations and their associated phenomena...are, in my view, dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people”. Inspired by his suggestion, my study of the Preah Vihear conflict also integrates the analysis of nationalism from below by examining the politics of nationalism of Phnom Penh city and Preah Vihear provincial residents. Whitmeyer (2002, 322) terms nationalism of ordinary people as ‘popular nationalism’, in contrast to elite nationalism. I, therefore,

will use the term ‘popular nationalism’ throughout the thesis to refer to nationalism of the ordinary people, although I recognise that there are many differences among them.

The literature on popular nationalism, which examines the notions of nation and national identities from the perspective of ordinary people, contains two interesting insights. First, national audiences are not homogenous. They comprise diverse groups of people with different social, economic, political, religious, gender, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (see Billig 1995, 71; Skey 2009, 336–337; Billig 2009, 347). This heterogeneity prevents national state elites from inculcating a coherent view of the nation. Studies have shown that in many cases state elites fail to influence the views of their countrymen (Whitmeyer 2002; Brubaker et al., 2006). The elites’ nationalist discourse appeals to only some segments of the population (Whitmeyer 2002, 322). Some studies show certain groups within the population as having indifferent or even hostile views of their national identities (see, for example, Fenton 2007). Second, ordinary people are not passive consumers of national identities produced by nationalist elites. Instead, in their daily routines they are active producers of popular national discourse (Palmer 1998; Edensor 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Ordinary people often express or interpret national identities or national interests in ways that relate to their daily-life contexts and interests (Brubaker 2004; Miller-Idriss 2006).

The popular nationalism literature presented above is useful for understanding Cambodian popular nationalism in that while the state elites are producers of nationalist discourses, they do not have full control over how different segments of the population receive, view, imagine and interpret those discourses. The literature is also useful in showing how ordinary people’s views are significantly influenced by their everyday discursive and life contexts, which lead them to produce complex and nuanced popular nationalism discourses.

Informed by this literature, I investigate the popular nationalism of ordinary people in Phnom Penh city and in the border province of Preah Vihear in relation to the Preah Vihear conflict. Upon closer examination, I found that their views of the Preah Vihear temple and the Cambodian nation had diverse meanings, and that their expressions of nationalism took variant forms and occurred for a variety of reasons. My study focuses on “what” ordinary people think and “how” they talk about the nation in their everyday

life contexts while also attempting to understand “why” ordinary people have such nuanced views of the nation and dynamic expressions of nationalism.

I, therefore, propose a conceptual framework to study popular nationalism as “an alternative political resource”. Within this framework, I situate popular nationalism between the constraints that ordinary people face in their daily life and their desires. I argue that, in the case of contemporary Cambodia, to understand the complex and nuanced meanings and the dynamic uses of popular nationalism, we need to identify the constraints and aspirations of ordinary people. I also argue that just as the Cambodian state elites, who invested in the Preah Vihear conflict, manipulated nationalism as a political resource to consolidate their political power, Phnom Penh city and Preah Vihear provincial residents also invested in the border temple dispute and relied on nationalism as a political resource to empower themselves politically, socially and economically when their access to other resources was constrained or lacking.

#### **4. Four explanatory approaches to Cambodian investments in the Preah Vihear conflict**

##### ***Politics of postcolonial nation-building***

One of the key dimensions of Cambodia’s investment in the Preah Vihear dispute is the politics of postcolonial nation-building. According to scholars, postcoloniality is subject to debate and is relatively difficult to conceptualise and theorise for systematic study (see, for examples, Shohat 1992; Gupta 1998, 6–8). One of its major complexities concerns its spatiality and temporality (Shohat 1992). Which parts of the world should we categorise as ‘postcolonial’? Should we limit them to only countries in Asia and Africa, or should we include the presently advanced but once colonial-settler states such as America, Australia, and New Zealand? When countries gained their independence also vary dramatically, some in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and many others in the twentieth century (Ibid). Shohat (1992, 103) asks interesting questions about these temporal differences, “When exactly, then, does the ‘postcolonial’ begin? Which region is privileged in such a beginning? What are the relationships between these diverse beginnings?” Another difficulty of studying the ‘postcolonial’ is its different uses across disciplines and its diverse meanings

depending on different groups of people. The different historical trajectories and experiences of colonised countries with different colonisers also make it hard to conduct systematic study of post-colonial politics (Gupta 1998, 8).

Besides, newly independent countries have experienced different pathways of postcolonial nation-building (Geertz 1973, 237–238; Sidel 2012, 116). Some opted for isolationism, as in Burma; and some for neotraditionalism, as in Algeria. Others were obsessed with the construction of neighbouring countries as enemy, as in Pakistan, while still others fell into ethnic or civil war, as in Nigeria (Geertz 1973, 237–238). Some countries, as in India, took the path of moving towards both democracy and centralised state authority (see Roy 2007, 22).

Although Cambodia's politics of postcolonial nation-building extends beyond Prince Norodom Sihanouk's regime, I limit the time frame of my analysis to only his government for the reason that Preah Vihear Temple was first promoted to symbolise the Cambodian nation during his Sangkum Reastr Niyum [People's Socialist Community] regime. Because Prince Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building is within the postcolonial nation-building literature, I wish to highlight the general political aspirations, constraints and challenges faced by political elites of newly independent countries before I come back to discuss Sihanouk's.

Many new ruling elites coming to power after decolonisation took great pride in obtaining independence from colonial rule for their countries. They had a desire to modernise, develop and build their countries to achieve the level of progress like those countries in the West. Their aspirations for modernisation and nation-building were influenced by the Western construction of the nation-state system which was universalised to become the most powerful idea for the international political order and state system assembled after 1945 (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 10–11). Nation-building and national development in the postcolonial world was also influenced by modernisation theories promoted by the US government in the context of Cold War politics as a competing ideology against the spread of communism to newly independent countries (Berger 2003). The desire for national development by nationalist political elites in the postcolonial world was also driven by the stigma of development discourses set and controlled by the West, which categorised countries as underdeveloped, developing and developed. In this context, being an underdeveloped

or developing country carries with it not only its economic position relative to others, but also its identity as backward, lacking and behind (Gupta 1998, 11). Nationalists in the postcolonial world viewed such identity as a disgrace for their countries; therefore, they took it upon themselves to achieve national pride by either looking to developed countries or to their own past ‘golden’ era, or to both of them simultaneously as in the case of Cambodia.

However, the ruling elites’ high hopes for rapid modernisation, national development and homogenous nation-building of their new nation-states were often constrained by a number of factors preventing them from materialising their political goals. First, they lacked sufficient resources, especially revenue. Many postcolonial states were not able to collect enough revenue through income or corporate taxes on economic elites, and consequently were incapable of effectively carrying out their national development projects (Slater 2010, 3).

Second, many newly independent countries emerged as weak states. They did not have “an indigenous strong state tradition” (Myrdal 1968 cited in Reid 2010, 26). They were short of what Michael Mann calls “infrastructural power,” referring to the state capacity to penetrate civil society and to implement political objectives throughout their entire territory (see Mann 1984, 188–189). The state’s territorial reach was another problem, often not extending much beyond the capital city (Slater 2010, 36). In India, the new ruling elites in the capital city had to negotiate with as many as 562 “princely states” to implement the control of the territorial sovereignty of postcolonial India (see Roy 2007, 26). In Burma, the government in Yangon had to fight bloody battles for many decades all over the country in its effort to impose control over people and territory claimed by a variety of ethnonationalist forces (see Callahan 2004; Smith 2007).

Third, the dynamics of political rivalry among elites also constrained national development. The withdrawal of Western colonial powers often resulted in a power vacuum in the newly independent countries. Thus, different groups of elites took the opportunity to vie for political dominance or autonomy, which in some cases resulted in political upheaval, military coup, insurgency or ethnic and civil war. This fragility and fragmentation in postcolonial elite politics often stemmed from such conditions as pre-colonial political cleavage, the ‘divide and rule’ policy introduced by colonialists

in some colonies, and the lack of proper state institutions and mechanisms to manage such tension. Besides, in some countries tension often arose among elites searching for their countries' post-independence national identities, with some groups favouring political and economic modernisation while others supporting traditionalism. And there were also others who favoured entirely different pathways. Unsurprisingly, nation-building in the postcolonial world has often been an ambiguous, contradictory and violent process (Slater 2010).

Fourth, many postcolonial ruling elites faced constraints in achieving the dual objectives of gaining wide popular support and the production of effective leadership (Apter 1968, 48). Colonial experience had to some extent altered the pre-colonial relationship between the ruler and the ruled, which in many states in Southeast Asia was not direct and participatory. Kings did not have direct rule or contact with their subjects, but instead had to rely on powerful local lords (see, for example, Thongchai 1994). After decolonisation, the rulers had to work hard to redefine and reconstruct their relationship with their people for wide popular support in the new context of nation-state. However, it has proved difficult to achieve. Slater (2010, 3) writes, "Half a century after the global struggle for decolonization reached its 1960 pinnacle, effective and democratic public authority remains a rare political commodity throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East."

Last, many post-independence ruling elites also faced great constraints in repositioning their countries in the international economic and political system (Sidel 2012, 116). Prominent Southeast Asian figures like Burma's U Nu, Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and Indonesia's Sukarno struggled to establish economic autonomy and political neutrality of their countries in the context of continuing economic dominance from the old colonial powers and escalating Cold War tension in the region. However, the three figures' political career faced tragic fates with coups overthrowing them in their respective countries (Ibid). In addition to dealing with the superpowers, postcolonial ruling elites also had difficulty in forging relations with their neighbouring states, many of which had just achieved independence as well. They were often suspicious of each other's intentions (Geertz 1973, 237). This suspicion sometimes exacerbated tension and gave rise to antagonism, or even armed conflict,

between the neighbouring countries as in the case of Cambodia with its neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam.

One of the typical ways in which post-independence ruling elites dealt with these constraints and challenges to their political objectives and leadership is by relying on nationalism as an alternative political resource. Geertz (1973, 237) and Gupta (1998, 14) note that nationalism is a major project of elites' politics of nation-building in most postcolonial countries. This project involves various activities such as the promotion of cultural nationalism and the construction of national history to help imagine the nation in ways that suits the elites' political interests.

Elites' cultural politics of representing the nation often involves the reviving of old cultural markers, practices and traditions by giving them new meanings, interpretations and names. In other words, ancient monuments, arts, dances, music and antiques become 'national' cultural symbols. Thus, the nation as a community can be imagined through these shared potent symbols. They become new ideological devices which the political elites can manipulate to mobilise mass support and to reinforce their political power through positioning themselves as promoters, guardians or defenders of the nation and its sacred symbols.

The cultural politics of representing the nation also has helped postcolonial ruling elites to create a sense of national pride among the public so that the elites can divert public attention from their country's slow economic, political and technological modernisation. The elites can construct a narrative by saying that their countries are behind the West in the 'material' domain, which includes the economy, statecraft, science and technology. However, their countries are equal or superior to the West in the 'spiritual' domain, which includes cultural identity and tradition (see Chatterjee 1993, 6). This national pride in the distinctness of their cultural identity is a significant source of nationalism in many postcolonial states (Ibid). In Southeast Asia, independence leaders also cultivated and promoted a sense of their people's unique cultural identity to create anti-colonial nationalist sentiment and a movement against their colonial masters. And this strand of anti-colonial nationalism has continued to have lasting post-colonial effects (see Anderson 1998; Tarling 2004; Reid 2010).

Another project of elites' use of nationalism is the construction of national history or collective history. In Southeast Asia, we see it in many countries, including

Cambodia (Edwards 2007; Takei 1998), Thailand (Thongchai 1994; Thongchai 1995; Jory 2003), Vietnam (Pelley 2002), Indonesia (McGregor 2007), Malaysia (Shamsul 2001), and Singapore (Lau 1992). The construction of national history is significant for elites' politics of postcolonial nation-building and state-making. It empowers the state elites as the narrator of the country's official history. It also enables them to unify the disparate ethnic groups and social classes within the country to create a particular type of imagined community pursuant to the state elites' political purposes. National history inculcates the diverse communities within the country the belief they share a common past. According to Smith (1986, 244), the belief in shared history leads people to form a unity and think of a shared destiny, which is significant for ideas of nation and nationalism.

These nationalism projects are communicated to the mass through the state mass media, the educational system, and its many administrative bodies and regulations (Anderson 1983, 114). Another important channel is through the landscaping of the urban public space by mapping the reproduced cultural symbols, monuments and statues onto the city space. In this way, the urban landscaping evokes the imagining of a nation of shared cultural identity and history, which are sources of powerful nationalist thought (see Leitner and Kang 1999, 217; Sutherland 2010, 80–82). Thus, state elites can claim political power and popular legitimacy from such mode of narrating the nation (Sutherland 2010, 80–82).

Knowledge and know-how about such nationalism projects in the postcolonial world owe a great deal to the experiences from colonial encounter and to the work of the intelligentsia. In Southeast Asia, colonial encounter led to the imagining of a nation (Anderson 1998). In Cambodia, for example, through such activities of the French colonialists as promoting Angkor, the study of Cambodia's past, and the construction of important monuments such as the grand palace, the national museum, and the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh led Cambodian elites to imagine the cultural "geobody" of the Cambodian nation (see Edwards 2007). The intelligentsia are also widely known to have contributed significantly to nationalist projects in colonial and postcolonial societies (see Shils 1960; Anderson 1983, 116–119; Said 1986, 45, 58; Chatterjee 1993, 35). Their bilingual literacy allowed them access to various foreign ideas of state, culture, nation and nationalism (Anderson 1983, 116–119), which they



could copy or localise to suit their country's conditions. Their bilingual ability also enabled them to see their own language as integral in protecting their cultural realm from the outside intruders (Chatterjee 1993, 7).

Taking these discussions as a launch pad, in this thesis I explore how Preah Vihear temple conflict fit into Prince Norodom Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building. Sihanouk was crowned king of Cambodia in 1941 by the French Governnor-General to Indochina. He led Cambodia to gain independence from France in 1953. He abdicated the throne in favour of his father in 1955. In the same year, he established the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, a political movement to consolidate his power. Between 1955 and the coup overthrowing him in 1970, the prince dominated the apex of the state, serving various roles as head of state and prime minister. He gained these top positions through political manoeuvring rather than through democratic electoral process, although several single-party elections were held.

Like other post-independence leaders, Prince Sihanouk took great pride in achieving independence for his country and aspired to rapid nation-building and national development. He also needed wide and popular support to consolidate his political leadership. However, his political aspirations were constrained by a number of factors, as mentioned earlier, which were typical problems facing post-independence ruling elites.

In addition to insufficient state resources and weak infrastructural power, the prince faced other major constraints, including the challenges to his political leadership by other elites and political groups, the difficulty in manoeuvring of Cambodia's foreign policy in the Cold War contexts, and the strained relations with the Thai and the South Vietnamese governments. The major political groups vying for political dominance or challenging Sihanouk's leadership were the democrats, Khmer communists with links to communist North Vietnam, and Son Ngoc Thanh's Khmer *serei* [Free Khmer] movement operating from bases at the Cambodian-Thai border. Sihanouk also experienced coup plots and assassination attempts, which he alleged the South Vietnamese and the Thai governments and the CIA to have been behind (see Osborne 1994).

One of the important ways Prince Sihanouk dealt with these constraints was by relying on the use of nationalism as an alternative political resource. His nationalism

project involved mobilising cultural symbols and constructing an image of himself as the embodiment of the Cambodian nation. In his politics of personifying the nation, the prince instilled in the Cambodians the perception that Cambodia is Sihanouk and Sihanouk is Cambodia. Cambodia without Sihanouk would be in great danger (see Barnett 1990, 122). Besides, he addressed the nation as his children and himself as their father. He also established himself as the father of many things, for example, the father of national independence, the father of sports, the father of national development, and the father of national unity. Thak (2007, 1) terms this particular type of politics in which the national leader is constructed as the father-figure of the nation as “the politics of despotic paternalism”. It helps enhance the leader’s political authority and legitimacy.

Prince Sihanouk also made use of cultural politics of representing the nation to help imagine the nation in ways that suit his political purposes. His Sangkum regime sponsored various projects and activities to invent Khmer national identity, from linking it with Angkor to co-opting disparate popular cultural fragments, reproducing them and according them with new ‘national’ meanings. The state urban planners designed Phnom Penh urban landscape, monuments and buildings in such a way as to invoke the imagining of the city’s continuity and link with Angkor. Some government officers in the art sector were tasked to go to various provinces and remote parts of Cambodia to collect and document disparate local and popular dances, music, folklore, arts and crafts, and rituals under the state’s so-called project of promoting and preserving Khmer cultural practices and traditions from becoming extinct. This project was institutionalised and promoted through the newly-established state-owned Royal University of Fine Arts and various state-affiliated troupes of performers (Daravuth and Muan 2001).

These reproduced and reinterpreted cultural symbols formed an integral part of the image-making and the face of Sihanouk’s Sangkum. State officials and media compared *samai* Sangkum Reastr Niyum [the period of the Sangkum regime] to the Angkorian period, which the Cambodians widely consider to be the golden era and thus a significant source of their national pride. Traditional dances and other performances by national troupes were an integral part of the prince’s protocol for entertaining and welcoming foreign leaders and diplomats. Combining with the

prince's flamboyant speech and his specially selected champagne, the cultural show became in itself a political resource for his diplomacy to impress foreign dignitaries visiting Sihanouk's Cambodia.

Thus, Preah Vihear Temple fitted perfectly in Prince Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building and state-making. The fact that the Thai state, which the prince was deeply suspicious of, tried to claim ownership of the temple added greatly to its significance. The Sangkum government publicised the temple conflict in the 1950s as a major national issue. It manipulated the symbolism of the Preah Vihear Temple and its constructed imagery of the 'hostile' Thai state to rally popular support for Sihanouk's regime. In this context, Preah Vihear Temple emerged from its obscurity and became a symbol of Khmer national unity and the embodiment of the Cambodian nation. The temple's potent symbolism became an alternative political resource for Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building. The prince empowered the temple, and the temple empowered the prince.

### *(Constructing) political legitimacy*

A second key area of Cambodia's investment in the Preah Vihear dispute that I propose concerns political legitimacy. Despite its primacy in elites' political life, there has been surprisingly few systematic academic studies of legitimacy. The reason is that scholars find it difficult to define or measure. Besides, legitimacy is associated with diverse symbols and aspects that take different forms (see White 2005, 1–3). One scholar tries to define political legitimacy as

The belief in the rightfulness of a state, in its authority to issue commands, so that the commands are obeyed not simply out of fear or self-interest, but because they believe to have moral authority, because subjects believe they ought to obey.  
(Barker 1990, 11)

Political legitimacy of state elites relies on “the conviction of the governed that their government (whether democratic, monarchic, communist, theocratic, or authoritarian) is morally right and they are duty-bound to obey it” (Alagappa 1995, 2). It also depends on whether the ruling elites have adequate capacity and resources to convince the governed to accept that their “existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society” (Lipset 1959, 86).

Because what constitute “morally right” or “the most appropriate or proper” are vague and open to different interpretations, what constitute legitimacy or illegitimacy are also subject to debate. In the complex real world political arena, in which different political and social groups contest for political dominance, what represent legitimacy or illegitimacy are “ambiguous and relative” (White 2005, 4–5). They are “complex, multifaceted, and contested” (Alagappa 1995, 7); therefore, the construction of political legitimacy is an interactive and continuous process. It requires state elites to constantly construct and reconstruct their legitimacy in ways that make their subjects accept their authority (Ibid, 13–14). If the government loses or is widely believed not to have sufficient legitimacy, its authority to govern will erode leading to various consequences such as resistance, rebellion and possibly revolution. The state cannot enforce its commands by relying only or largely on the use of naked force (Ibid, 4). It needs to rely on both coercion and ideology to function in its relations with the society (Abrams 1988, 70).

Therefore, political elites often seek to cultivate and increase their political legitimacy by identifying themselves with diverse sources of traditional and modern ideas of political power to gain wide support from the people they govern. The elites can draw from sources of tradition from the cosmology, myths, ancient kingship, religion, culture, and history. In Southeast Asia, for example, we can find abundant evidence of elites’ identification with such symbolisms (see, for examples, Reynolds 2002; Norén-Nilsson 2013).

State elites can also construct their political legitimacy by portraying themselves as representing or defending the potent symbolism of modern state and political ideology, for example, democracy, the constitution, the rule of law, national territorial sovereignty, and national and economic development. They can also manipulate nationalism, which is a major source of political legitimacy, to construct their image as nationalists safeguarding national interests and defending the nation and its associated symbols.

In this thesis, I look at Prime Minister Hun Sen’s investment in the Preah Vihear conflict through the lens of political legitimacy because legitimacy has become a particularly important issue for him since his rise to power under Vietnam’s patronage that began in 1979. I investigate the major challenges to his rights to rule; the ways he

has cultivated his political legitimacy; and how his manipulation of politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict with Thailand became an alternative political resource to bolster his legitimacy. I argue that we need to look at the constraints to his rule or the contexts of his political vulnerability to understand why Hun Sen has identified himself with various powerful symbols of political power and legitimacy. I also argue that the projection of his image as a nationalist defending the Preah Vihear border territory against alleged Thailand's encroachment is embedded within his broader dynamic legitimacy construction.

Coming to power from non-elite background after the fall of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime in 1979, Hun Sen's political legitimacy has relied greatly on the narrative of his government's important role in liberating the country, saving the people from the horrendous Khmer Rouge regime, and preventing DK from coming back to power. Thus, his government has since celebrated 7 January, the day his forces backed by the Vietnamese army pushed DK out of Phnom Penh, as a public holiday and state festive celebration. Through state media, the routinised message has been communicated to the public reminding them every year to be grateful and faithful to Hun Sen and his senior government officials.

However, as Cambodia has gone through major political and socio-economic transformations since the early 1990s, Hun Sen has been facing new challenges to his rights to rule, requiring him to carefully construct and reconstruct his political legitimacy. The first major constraint took place during Cambodia's transition from the one-party state to multi-party electoral democracy in the early 1990s. His CPP lost in the 1993 general election to the royalist Funcinpec Party of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, King Norodom Sihanouk's son.<sup>2</sup> Realising that Funcinpec's election victory derived largely from its capitalising on Sihanouk's mass popularity and that his own political legitimacy needed to rely on electoral popular support, the prime minister began to establish reciprocal relations with rural people in similar fashions to those of Sihanouk during his Sangkum regime.<sup>3</sup> Through his own and his party's financial sponsorship of various rural and agricultural development projects, Hun Sen has managed to turn Cambodia's rural areas into the CPP's strong electoral support base.

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<sup>2</sup> Funcinpec won 45 percent of the votes to the CPP 38 percent. Although it lost the election, the CPP was still able to force Funcinpec to accept an equal power-sharing arrangement in the government. Thus, Cambodia for the first time had co-prime ministers, with Prince Ranariddh as the first and Hun Sen as the second.

<sup>3</sup>See (Hughes 2006, 473) and (Stuart-Fox 2013).

He has used the opportunities during the launchings or inaugurations of those projects to present himself as a guarantor of peace and builder of post-conflict Cambodia, which have become a major source of his political legitimacy.

When Hun Sen, who was then serving as the second prime minister, ousted Prince Ranariddh, the first prime minister, from power in 1997, some critics then alleged that his move was illegitimate and not respecting the royal family. To defend his action, Hun Sen declared that the CPP was also a royalist party. He even went further to propagate and sponsor a narrative depicting himself as the reincarnation of sixteenth-century King Kân, a commoner who usurped the throne, suggesting that he also came from a royal background (see Norén-Nilsson 2013). In Cambodian society, the monarchy represents not only the moral authority but also the country's culture and tradition; therefore, having royal connections or representing the monarchy enhances a leader's political legitimacy.

However, as argued by White (2005, 4) that “legitimacy is partial, never total”, Hun Sen's political legitimacy remains vulnerable to political challenges and criticism from his political opponents, critics and some civil society organisations. The prime minister's critics, including prominent opposition party leader Sam Rainsy, have often criticised the government for being incompetent, corrupt, abusive, and damaging to the Cambodian nation. They have called for his resignation on several occasions. To counter criticisms and to reinforce the belief among the governed of his rights to rule, Hun Sen and his officials have been promoting a carefully built image of himself as a leader of great wisdom and competence. The prime minister possesses at least 13 honorary doctorates from both local and foreign universities (*The Cambodian Daily*, October 16, 2015). Officials argue that the government is leading the country in the right direction, citing peace, political stability, strong annual economic growth, and the growing modernity of Cambodia's urban and rural landscapes. They have attributed these achievements to Hun Sen's 'brilliant' leadership. The prime minister himself has called his era *samai Techo Sen* (the period of *Techo Sen*) in reference to unprecedented development, prosperity and joy under his leadership. *Techo* comes from his full title bestowed on him by King Norodom Sihamoni: Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, which Heder (2012, 104) translates as “exalted supreme great commander of gloriously victorious troops”. Hun Sen has also drawn from democratic

legitimacy to defend his long rule. He has often argued that his mandate came from the people. He would step down only when people stop electing him.

As illustrated in this thesis, Hun Sen's construction of his political legitimacy has been continuous and dynamic depending on the nature of the challenges to his right to rule. Therefore, his manipulation of nationalism in the recent Preah Vihear temple border dispute with Thailand should be seen through this lens. His construction of himself as a nationalist defending the temple border territory should be explained by examining the particular type of threat to his political legitimacy and his effort to overcome it.

Hun Sen's critics and his political opponents have long alleged his government of being submissive to the Vietnamese government. The rise of Hun Sen and many senior members of his government to power under Vietnam's patronage in 1979 after the Vietnamese army had overthrown Pol Pot's DK regime has given rise to such allegation. According to this anti-government nationalist narrative, Hun Sen is not a nationalist and cannot defend Cambodia's national borders. Allegations that the prime minister is a 'puppet' of Vietnam or has been 'ceding' Cambodia's border territories to Vietnam have appeared in opposition political parties-affiliated newspapers and on well-known anti-government nationalist online blogs such as KI-Media, Khmerization, and Sacravatoons.

The eruption of the Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand in 2008 presented a perfect opportunity for Hun Sen to counter domestic critics and, at the same time, to construct his political legitimacy as a nationalist and staunch defender of Cambodia's national borders. His government's firm defence of the Preah Vihear border received wide support from segments of the Cambodian population. His CPP won a resounding election victory that year, winning 90 out of the National Assembly's 123 seats.<sup>4</sup> In this context of political legitimacy construction, nationalism has proved a valuable alternative political resource for Hun Sen to rely on to deal with the constraints to his rule and to mobilise popular support for his government. Nationalism is a political resource to legitimise his leadership and regime.

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<sup>4</sup>A few months before the eruption of the Preah Vihear border conflict, I attended a CPP's supporters meeting in Phnom Penh. A senior party official then told supporters that the party expected to win between 70 and 80 seats in the election. The 2008 election's result was the CPP's most legitimate and glorious victory, something which was never seen in previous elections nor repeated since.

### *Urban politics of empowerment*

A third key dimension in Cambodia's investment in the Preah Vihear conflict came from urban people, namely Phnom Penh city residents, in their politics of empowerment. From my own observations during the conflict and later from interviews during my fieldwork, many people in the city invested a great deal of their time, attention and resources in the Preah Vihear dispute. They followed the news about it; talked about it; and expressed their diverse opinions of what should be done about it. Some of them even spent their own resources and organised trips to the Preah Vihear Temple to distribute donations to the Cambodian soldiers there. So why were these urban dwellers so concerned about the border temple conflict with Thailand, while the contested border area was hundreds of kilometres away from the city and the military tension there had no serious direct impact on their daily life? To shed light on this question, I will present in the paragraphs below some general concepts and theories of urban space as a relatively potent site of nationalism, critique and complex social and political activities.

City people are more likely than rural people to express themselves politically around nationalist ideas, abstractions and sentiments because they have more frequent exposure to their countries' national symbols such as buildings, monuments, museums, and statues of public figures. They also have a better chance to observe and participate in major national celebrations and ceremonies, for example, their country's National Independence Day during which the national flag and other symbols of national unity and strength are displayed in their city.

State elites play significant roles in landscaping the urban space to conjure up imagery and markers of national identities because cities, especially capital cities, are the state's 'privileged site for nation-building', which is important for its legitimacy and authority (Sutherland 2010, 80–82). The cultural (re)production of these symbolic monuments and statues are aimed at inventing a national tradition and a national history (Hobsbawm 1983), important sources that urban people can also identify with for their everyday political expressions and activities. The city is also a landscape of names of cultural and political public figures. Their names are given to public



buildings, parks, and streets. According to Penrose (2002, 278–280), giving names to places is one of the ways in which human beings harness the power of space for nationalist thought. Thus, it is typical that urban space is a potent site of concentrating nationalism.

Urban people's nationalist ideas and political consciousness also derive from the primacy of the city as their country's most dynamic place in terms of information, modernisation, and social relations. Print technology, print-capitalism and their products and consumers are concentrated in cities; therefore, they can potentially lead city dwellers to imagine themselves as part of a political community, a nation (Anderson 1983). Other forms of media are also more available in cities. Moreover, educational institutions and other concepts of modernity, which Ernest Gellner calls 'high culture', concentrate in urban space. Nationalism is the product of this education-dependent high culture (Gellner 1983). The city is also a very dynamic place with complex webs of relations and site of concentrated information, wealth and social capital (Castells 1978). It is a site of 'nodes in a great many networks', where people "tend to organize their lives in overlapping sub-communities: neighbourhoods, ethnic groups, professional networks, clusters of friends" (Tilly 1974, 5, 3). With a plethora of cafes, tea shops, eating venues, formal and informal meeting venues, markets and parks, the city is a cradle of the public sphere, a sphere of communicative rationality in otherwise authoritarian contexts, one that facilitates the emergence of new norms, ideas and forms of consciousness based on robust discourses, and one that can lead to the emergence of shared political views (Habermas 1989).

Cities are zones of competition, inclusion and exclusion. They are landscapes of conflicting interests, identities, survival strategies and unequal power relations. Therefore, urban space is a breeding ground for various social and political activities, movements and associations formed to protect and advance the interests of individuals and groups. Castells (1983, 297–300, xviii) suggests that urban social movements result from contradictions in the process of urbanisation which may favour the interests of one group over another. Thus, the grass-roots mobilise to resist and challenge the dominant interests. The urban space is also a frictional contact zone between ethnicities and a place where disenfranchised people find a new source of cohesion in ethnonationalism, where they meet and transform their grievances into demonstration,

protest and clash (Tambiah 1996). The city is also a potent site where certain groups of people like nationalists and educated elites gather and seek upward mobility, and yet are often frustrated in this process. Their idealistic aspirations to be part of a modernising nation are checked by entrenched power holders, and they can compare experiences with other disaffected people from elsewhere, leading them to decide that the problem is systemic. Thus, they coordinate with each other to build a new social movement to save the nation (see Khoury 1983, 69–70).

The concepts and theories presented above are useful in helping us understand Phnom Penh city residents' general tendency to engage with politics and nationalism. From this general understanding, we can then explore their politics of nationalism and their politics of Preah Vihear. As stated earlier, many Phnom Penh urban dwellers invested a great deal of their time, attention and resources in the Preah Vihear dispute. A superficial analysis would suggest that their nationalist responses to the conflict derived from their sentiment or sense of belonging to the imagined community of Cambodia. They imagined their country being invaded by Thailand, so they had to respond to defend Preah Vihear Temple and the border territory against Thailand's encroachment.

However, a closer examination reveals that their politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict was more complex and nuanced than an outpouring of urban nationalist sentiment in response to assaults upon the imagined nation. It originated from the diverse concerns of urban people to gain greater empowerment within the urban environment in which they lived. The city people's politics of nationalism was rooted in their everyday struggles to deal with various types of frustration and constraints they were facing amid Phnom Penh's rapid spatial, socioeconomic and political transformations. State institutions or mechanisms, which were supposed to support and help them deal with their problems, were lacking or absent. Moreover, financial and organisational resources that they could rely on were inadequate.

Arising from these contexts, the city people relied on the use of nationalism as an alternative political resource to enable them to achieve their various objectives and desires. Those included, for example, the empowerment of their voices and struggles for a more inclusive urban development, the drawing of public and national attention to their grievances, and the negotiation of their relations with the municipal and the

national governments. The city people also relied on nationalism to sidestep the state and materialise through collective action a more secure, dignified and liveable society. In this thesis, I argue that Phnom Penh residents' investment in nationalism projects in the Preah Vihear conflict was embedded in their broader struggle for empowerment, inclusion, and recognition of their voices and roles in the governance of the city and the state. The Preah Vihear border tension with Thailand provided a rare opportunity for the residents to unleash and enact their popular narratives of the Cambodian nation, a nation which they believed was weak and suffering, and thus their own participation as the nation's key stakeholders was urgently needed to restore it to its former pride.

### *Periphery politics of pragmatism*

A fourth explanatory approach to Cambodia's investment in the Preah Vihear conflict focuses on the residents in the border province of Preah Vihear and their politics of pragmatism. During the years of the border military tension, Prime Minister Hun Sen's government invested heavily in nation-building and state-making projects in Preah Vihear province through intensified public infrastructure development, increased military and state administrative presence, and state policy of populating the border region. The government portrayed its activities as an effort to defend Cambodia's border territories and the Preah Vihear cultural heritage site and to restore Khmer national pride. The government also promoted Preah Vihear Temple as the embodiment of the Cambodian nation and Khmer pride. The state-affiliated media adopted a nationalist propaganda campaign by portraying the Thai state as a warmonger and its action as a direct threat to Cambodia's territorial sovereignty.

The Cambodian government's nationalist rhetoric and campaign might have led those who relied on media reports about the Preah Vihear conflict to assume that the dispute must have seriously affected Preah Vihear provincial residents and the local economy, and that the local inhabitants must have viewed the conflict in a very negative light. I also held that view prior to my fieldwork trips to the province. However, when I was there, I was struck by what I saw and heard from numerous people I interviewed or had conversations with. Many of them did not adopt the government's nationalist discourse. Instead, they possessed more diverse, nuanced and practical views on the notions of the Preah Vihear Temple and the government's

responses to the border conflict. So why did the Preah Vihear borderland residents not share the government's nationalist discourse? And why did they have more diverse, nuanced and practical views? I rely on the literature on popular nationalism and everyday politics to answer these questions.

As I have already discussed the literature on popular nationalism, I will now only examine the literature on everyday politics. Kerkvliet (2009, 227–243) categorises everyday forms of peasant politics in their relations with state authorities into four categories, 'support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance'. His work describes the 'modifications and resistance' category. He shows how peasant households' deviation from the Vietnamese state's prescribed collective farming policies pressured the state into changing its policy on household farming (Kerkvliet 2005). James Scott's work on everyday forms of peasant resistance shows villagers employing various methods in their daily lives to resist against what they perceive as forms of dominance, control and exploitation (Scott 1985; Scott 1990). Yoshinori Nishizaki's study shows that people in Suphanburi province, Thailand, supported prominent politician Banharn Silpa-archa because he tried to secure state funds to develop provincial infrastructure. Suphanburi people are proud of Banharn, the politician from their province, although at the national level Banharn is viewed as bad and corrupt (Nishizaki 2011). Andrew Walker's recent study of a village in Chiang Mai province offers fascinating insights into the dynamics of state–rural society relations. The villagers try hard to cultivate productive relations with various sources of power and state authorities near and far in their daily lives (Walker 2012).

All these studies share one thing in common. Whether the villagers resist, avoid, modify, support or engage with state power, they put their individual and local interests first. Their everyday political discourses in relations with the state tend to be based on pragmatic calculations. Knowing the everyday dimensions of villagers' views on nationhood and politics, it is not surprising then that the residents of Preah Vihear engage in complex and diverse popular discourses about the Preah Vihear conflict that are starkly different from the nationalist discourse and narrative promoted by Prime Minister Hun Sen's government.

Prior to the outbreak of the border conflict, the Cambodian government paid little attention to Preah Vihear province. Roads leading in and out of this remote and

isolated province were in bad condition. Therefore, many provincial residents faced a lot of difficulty in their daily life in terms of mobility and accessibility to information, jobs and other livelihood opportunities. The eruption of the dispute and the Cambodian government's responses to it presented a rare opportunity to the provincial residents to negotiate new relations with the national state for more public infrastructures, gifts, attention, salary increase, and land for housing and for agriculture. In this context, their investment in the politics of nationalism and the politics of Preah Vihear was a useful resource enabling them to gain benefits and to improve their livelihoods. The borderland inhabitants' everyday experiences, needs and desires influenced and shaped their discursive pragmatic views of such notions as nation, state and heritage site. Their popular nationalist discourses are an alternative political resource to draw national and public attention and resources into their local realms and for local benefits.

## **5. Methodology**

To explore the four explanatory approaches, this study followed a qualitative methodology. It is based on a total of nine months of fieldwork in Cambodia, particularly in Phnom Penh and Preah Vihear province. The first segment of the fieldwork was conducted between March and October 2012 and was followed by the second one between December 2013 and January 2014, during which I conducted 69 in-depth and 4 focus group interviews and had many informal conversations. Some of the interviews were not audio-recorded because the interviewees were not comfortable to have the conversations recorded. In such cases, I took notes of their answers.

I employed slightly different methods of collecting data to be used for explaining each of the four proposed approaches. For the politics of postcolonial nation-building approach, in addition to books and journal articles, I collected archival materials including old newspaper articles, magazines, pamphlets, photos, pictures, and state propaganda materials from the National Archive of Cambodia, the National Library of Cambodia, and the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. The reasons I relied on archival materials were that I wanted to understand how Prince Norodom Sihanouk's government had portrayed its nationalist investment in the Preah Vihear temple conflict with Thailand and how it had presented the ancient temple as a representation of the Cambodian nation and identity. Although the materials provided rich insights

and answered some of my research questions, they did not fully resolve my puzzles. I still wondered about how his government used broadcast media, particularly National Radio Phnom Penh as an instrument of state nationalist propaganda to reach out to urban and rural Cambodians. I also wanted to understand the role of other state actors and state-sponsored nationalist campaigns during the temple dispute. In answering these remaining questions, I, therefore, decided to also include in-depth interviews with three Cambodian scholars and historians to elucidate our understanding of state-sponsored nationalist campaigns and uses of the media in Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s. The three scholars were then teenagers and were thus mature enough to witness the events as they were unfolding, and they had good recollections of those events. The two methods combined together answered my research questions and led to important findings as illustrated in Chapter 3.

For the political legitimation approach, my analysis integrated data from a wide range of sources including books, journal articles, newspaper and magazine articles, reports from Cambodian government and international institutions, photos, speeches, maps, pamphlets, news and announcements on Cambodia's radio and television channels, online materials, and other ephemera. I also included data from interviews and informal conversations with Cambodian soldiers in the Preah Vihear temple region. In addition, I relied on my personal experiences of watching television, listening to the radio and observing the situation in Phnom Penh during the period of the Preah Vihear border conflict. The reasons I relied on the above-mentioned sources and methods of collecting data were that I found them useful in helping me understand and analyse the multifaceted nature of the Preah Vihear conflict and especially of the nationalist investment by Prime Minister Hun Sen's government. In particular, my personal experiences of watching Cambodia's television channels and listening to the radio added strength to my analysis. During the recent Preah Vihear conflict, Hun Sen and his senior government and military officials spoke on television and the radio. The tone of their speeches and the nature of the symbolism and discourses they used to communicate with the Cambodian people could not be fully relayed by newspaper or translated texts.

For the urban politics of empowerment and recognition approach, in addition to primary and secondary data, I relied on in-depth interviews with twenty-four

individuals and many informal conversations in Phnom Penh. The informants came from a wide range of backgrounds, including researchers, university lecturers and students, NGO staff, market vendors, motor taxi drivers, factory workers, private company staff, builders, security guards and many more (see Appendix A). Among the twenty-four informants, three organised separate trips with their respective groups to distribute donations to Cambodian soldiers in the Preah Vihear temple region during the period of the border tension. I devoted one section of Chapter 5 to discuss in detail cases of materialising the nation to give us insights into the city residents' experiences, personal views, desires and factors underpinning their dynamic nationalist responses to the dispute. For this approach, I also relied on my own observations and personal experiences of living in Phnom Penh throughout the duration of the conflict.

I found that my employment of both in-depth interviews and informal conversations as methods of collecting data were useful for answering my research questions about the urban people's nationalist views and their investment in the Preah Vihear conflict. The selection of my informants from diverse social, economic and political backgrounds representing contemporary Phnom Penh city residents helped me grasp the general patterns of their nationalist attitude and politics of empowerment. My in-depth interviews with three individuals who had organised separate trips to distribute donations to Cambodian soldiers at the Preah Vihear temple region helped me analyse the dynamics of how a popular autonomous nationalist movement emerged, expanded and played out in Phnom Penh's contemporary urban space. Moreover, my personal experiences as an insider (a resident of Phnom Penh myself) enabled me to understand and observe the nationalist sentiment and views of the urban residents during the border tension. I observed the popular urban nationalist phenomena as they were expressed through widespread conversations, discussions, and debates in Phnom Penh urban public spheres. Although the experiences, perspectives and knowledge as an insider were valuable for my analysis and writing, I sought during my fieldwork to collect a diversity of perspectives from people who did not share my social positionality as a male foreign-trained intellectual of a particular generation. This approach allowed me to confirm some of my pre-existing perspectives as an insider, while at the same time collecting nuanced and fresh perspectives from the urban residents as an outsider.

What set the periphery politics of pragmatism approach apart from the other three outlined above is my use of combined methods to collect the data in Preah Vihear province. They included field observations, informal conversations, in-depth and focus groups interviews, taking photos, field notes, and drawing sketches of places in the border province. I employed semi-structured interviews with probing questions for the in-depth analysis and discussion questions for the focus groups. My provincial fieldwork sites included Tbeng Meanchey, Sra Em, Preah Vihear Temple, and two newly established villages, Sen Chey and Tham Cheat Samdech Techo Hun Sen.<sup>5</sup> My informants included villagers, town and city residents, market vendors, economic migrants, traders, transport operators, public servants, soldiers and border police. I also interviewed members of the indigenous Kuy minority in Sra Em (see Appendix B). The reason I employed a variety of data collection methods and visited different sites for my research in Preah Vihear province was that I was an outsider. Prior to my fieldwork trips to the border province, I was neither familiar with the province's geography nor was I familiar with the social, cultural, economic and ethnic aspects of the people living in the peripheral region. Therefore, I needed to use various ethnographic research tools to make sure that I became familiar with the geographical and human landscapes of the border province as quickly as possible. The combined methods I used allowed me to analyse the impact of the Preah Vihear conflict on the border province and to understand the various types of popular and pragmatic nationalism at the periphery.

The data obtained from Cambodia and from my library research at the Australian National University were then integrated under each of the four proposed approaches. They were analysed through systematic and interpretive methods based on concepts and theories from Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, and History. The concept of nationalism as an alternative political resource unified and ran through the four proposed explanatory approaches, allowing us to see not only the dynamism and nuances of the politics of the Preah Vihear conflict but also of contemporary nationalism in Cambodia.

Naturally, any study project of this scale faces some limitations and challenges during both the fieldwork and writing stages. One of the issues I would like to

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<sup>5</sup>Tbeng Meanchey is about 100 km from the temple. Sra Em is about 30 km from and the final gateway to the temple. Sen Chey and Tham Cheat Samdech Techo Hun Sen are about 10 km and 20 km from the temple respectively.



highlight is language. Since I am proficient only in Khmer and English, I did not consult with materials existing in other languages, for example, Thai or French. Another major issue was that I was unable to secure appointments for interviews with high-ranking Cambodian government and military officials although I tried my best to contact them through various channels. For this reason, I quoted their statements and opinions based on what appeared in the media or government documents. The final challenge I faced in this study was that I had to spend a considerable amount of time following news about ongoing political development in both Cambodia and Thailand so that I could make an accurate analysis in my thesis writing. As you are aware, the recent Preah Vihear border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand has continued to be affected by highly complex and unprecedented domestic political developments in Thailand and Cambodia, which have made it difficult for me to sift out the important patterns, stabilise my analysis and contain the thesis.

## **6. Chapter outline**

This thesis has a total of seven chapters. Following this Introduction, Chapter 2 situates the dispute over Preah Vihear within an overview of broader tensions between Cambodia and Thailand in both historical and contemporary periods. Chapter 3 examines the close relationship between Prince Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building and Preah Vihear Temple's emergence from obscurity to represent the Cambodian nation in Cambodia's nationalist discourse. Chapter 4 frames Prime Minister Hun Sen's assertive actions during the Preah Vihear conflict with Thailand in the context of his political vulnerability and pursuit of legitimacy. It shows how his government's investment in the Preah Vihear conflict fitted into the incumbent's broader approach to power and continuous quest for political legitimacy. Chapter 5 shifts the analysis from the Cambodian state elites to Phnom Penh residents. It explores the nationalist actions of urban people during the Preah Vihear border conflict as an example of the urban politics of empowerment. Chapter 6 presents the investments in the border temple conflict made by people at the periphery living near or in the conflict zone as illustrative of their politics of pragmatism. It highlights the shifting nature of Cambodian state-border relations. It also draws a comparison between Prime Minister Hun Sen's nationalist discourses of the Preah Vihear conflict and popular discourses in

Preah Vihear province. Chapter 7 presents a synthesis and summary of the study as a whole. It highlights how this study contributes to scholarly literature on the Preah Vihear conflict and on Cambodia's contemporary politics of nationalism. Its empirical and theoretical findings may be of significance for Southeast Asian Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, nationalism studies, border studies, heritage studies and studies of urban politics.

## Chapter 2

### Background of the Conflict

#### 1. Introduction

Contemporary relations between Cambodia and Thailand are characterised by both cooperation and contention. The two countries have benefited from cooperation in various aspects of cross-border trade, tourism, education, agriculture, energy, etc. The trade volume between these neighbouring countries accounted for US\$4.5 billion in 2013 (AKP, February 12, 2014). In 2013, 481,595 Cambodian people visited Thailand, and 221,259 Thai people visited Cambodia.<sup>6</sup> However, there are still some critical and unresolved issues, which at times have caused tension between the two countries. Cambodian and Thai elites in modern times have constructed different historical narratives that often portray the other side in a negative light. When faced with a legitimacy crisis or wanting to consolidate political power at the expense of their domestic political rivals, Thai and Cambodian political elites have often manipulated nationalism in the defence of national symbols and sovereignty to marshal popular support (Kimly 2011; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013). At times, the manipulation of history and nationalism for political ends played out in diplomatic tension or military hostility between the two countries as seen during the recent Preah Vihear conflict.

The dispute, which erupted in 2008 and remained tense until Yingluck Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister of Thailand in 2011, made headlines in international news around the world. It took place after the World Heritage Committee of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) endorsed Cambodia's proposal to have Preah Vihear Temple inscribed on the World Heritage List. The temple's world heritage status became a hostage to Thailand's domestic political crisis evolving after the 2006 military coup overthrowing Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The ultra-nationalist People's Alliance for Democracy, an anti-Thaksin social movement, seized the opportunity to fan Thai nationalism by alleging the People's Power Party (PPP) of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, a Thaksin proxy, was ceding Thai territory to Cambodia. In Cambodia, the temple's world heritage

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<sup>6</sup>See (Cambodia Tourism Statistics Report 2013; Thailand Ministry of Tourism and Sports Report 2013).

status became a symbol of national pride. Prime Minister Hun Sen's government conjured up the image of the temple's listing as a proud victory the government had achieved for the nation. Because the temple became politicized in Thailand as a symbol of 'losing' territory and in Cambodia as a symbol of 'gaining' national pride, both Cambodia and Thailand deployed troops to the Preah Vihear temple region to contest over a small patch of land adjacent to the temple, which led to several rounds of deadly fighting.

Cambodia-Thailand relations deteriorated dramatically when Abhisit Vejjajiva became prime minister of Thailand. Following harsh verbal exchanges between Hun Sen and Abhisit, both countries recalled their respective ambassadors. People were arrested and accused of spying while the fighting between both militaries at the border areas became aggravated. Relations started to improve only after the Pheu Thai party won the July 2011 election and Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, became Prime Minister of Thailand. However, fearing that the anti-Thaksin groups would once again use the temple issue to destabilise her government as they had done with the governments of Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat, Yingluck kept the Preah Vihear issue low profile, although the decision from the ICJ in 2013 was intended for both countries to resolve the overlapping claims of the land near the temple. The military coup overthrowing the Pheu Thai government in May 2014 and General Prayut Chan-o-cha's elevation as Prime Minister of Thailand did not stir up the conflict further, but it did put into abeyance hopes for timely implementation of the ICJ's decision.

This chapter argues that the recent Preah Vihear conflict resulted from the broader tension between Cambodia and Thailand, which has its roots in both historical and contemporary contexts and in the complex dimensions of domestic politics in both countries. This chapter explains the conflict by examining a history of tensions between Cambodia and Thailand because political elites and nationalists in both countries have often drawn ideas from past incidents to justify and legitimise their contemporary actions and nationalistic narratives.

## 2. Historical account

### *Precolonial Khmer-Siamese relations*

Domestic political issues in both countries, especially in Thailand, were the main cause of the recent Preah Vihear conflict.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to look at historical relations between Cambodia and Thailand before France established its Protectorate over Cambodia. Ideas and narratives about this historical context and how they have been interpreted, reconstructed, and politicised in the modern period will help us understand the complexity of the recent dispute.

Before the establishment of the Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1351, the Khmer Kingdom at Angkor was a great empire in mainland Southeast Asia. It controlled from Angkor a vast territory covering much of present-day Thailand, some parts of Laos and the lower Mekong delta region of present-day Southern Vietnam. By the time Ayutthaya was established, the power and influence of the Angkor Empire had already been fading. Scholars attributed its decline to various internal and external factors (see Coedès 1967, 124; Coedès 1968, 189–191; Hall 1968, 125; Charnvit 1976, 30–39; Chandler 1992a, 69). Seizing the opportunity presented by Angkor's decline, Ayutthaya started to challenge the power of Angkor's rulers. It launched attacks and managed to capture the Khmer capital in 1431 (see Briggs 1948). After sacking the capital, Siamese troops took a large number of Khmer prisoners of war, many sculptures and other valuable objects of art back to Ayutthaya (Rong 1988, 36). Ayutthaya also wrested a large swathe of land in the Khorat Plateau from Angkor's control.

For a century that followed, the Siamese and the Khmer kings continued to wage wars against each other, with the former trying to establish overlordship and the latter trying to repel it and restore Khmer's former prestige (see Coedès 1967, 197; Hall 1968, 136; Wyatt 1984, 100). However, Siam's capture and complete destruction of the Khmer capital at Lovek, a strongly fortified and trade-oriented capital after Angkor, in 1594 struck a blow against any hope of the Khmer rulers in restoring past greatness.<sup>8</sup> Chandler (1992a, 84) writes that the Siamese troops razed the city to the ground, took

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<sup>7</sup>See my discussions in this chapter from the subsection of '2006 military coup in Thailand and its consequences on Cambodia-Thailand relations'.

<sup>8</sup>For details about Siamese King Naresuan's war expeditions against the Khmer capital of Lovek, see (Leclère 2006, 247; Vickery 1977, 448–449).

with them to Ayutthaya people and precious things, and destroyed everything they could not take. Cambodia's chronicles describe the event as having a catastrophic effect on Cambodia from which the country never fully recovered (see Eng 1969).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Cambodia's independent status became reduced to a vassal state of two powerful neighbours, Siam to the west and Vietnam to the east. Some of Cambodia's kings like Ang Eng (r. 1794–1797) and his son, Ang Chan, were crowned by Siamese kings in Bangkok. The Khmer King Ang Duang (r. 1848–1859) was crowned in the Khmer capital of Udong, but the coronation ceremony took place under Bangkok's patronage. During that period, Siam also imposed its authority over Battambang and Siem Reap provinces. In theory, both provinces remained Cambodia's soil. However, their governors, who were ethnic Khmer, received orders from Bangkok, not from Udong (Coedès 1967, 199). By the time of the arrival of Western colonialism, the Bangkok dynasty had already established Siam as a great regional power in mainland Southeast Asia, bringing under its sphere of control vast territories which had been formerly controlled by Khmer, Laotian, Burmese, and Malay rulers.

Wars, hostility, mistrust, tributary, and suzerainty are the typical nature of the Khmer-Siamese relations prior to the colonial period. Contemporary Thai and Cambodian nationalist elites often manipulated this historical legacy of hostility and unequal hierarchical power relations between both ancient kingdoms to incite nationalist sentiments against each other during times of conflict. Instead of telling their own people that it was common practice for ancient states in the region to go to war against one another as victory would reward the rulers with more prestige, power, and wealth, and that ancient states became regional powers through conquest and the ability to weaken their rivals, contemporary Thai and Cambodian nationalist elites often revived the precolonial idea of modern states with clear boundaries and defined territorial sovereignty to instil in their own people the belief that their ancient kingdom's territorial boundaries were natural and primordial. Their respective country's once bountiful territory became reduced because another power had illicitly annexed or 'stolen' it. To put Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul's words "a new past" or "the landscape of the Thai past has been reshaped" to serve new political agendas (1995, 99). The bounded territorial space of a nation or the "Geo-Body" of a

nation became manipulated as ideological device to create Thai national identities and to mobilise popular support (Thongchai 1994).

Contemporary elites in both countries have constructed histories that emphasise their own country's past greatness and victimisation. In Cambodia, the central theme of its nationalism focuses on the imagery of Angkor. The image of Angkor has appeared on every Cambodia's flag since the 1940s regardless of changes in political regimes. Angkor is the symbolism of Cambodia's past greatness, and thus a source of national identity and pride for contemporary Cambodians. Cambodian students learn from history textbooks in public schools about the glory of the Khmer empire of Angkor and its decline due to warfare between the Khmers and the Siamese. Cambodian nationalist and historical discourse often portrays the Siamese as the 'villain'—who played the part of 'invader', 'aggressor', and 'thief'—and the Khmers as the 'victim'. Following this historical discourse, Preah Vihear Temple in Cambodia's nationalist perspective symbolises Khmer pride and reunion of Khmer heritage and land, which had been 'lost' to Thailand. The temple also represents fear of Thailand's continued 'ill intent' of 'stealing' more Khmer land.

In Thailand, the official history written during Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Songkhram's regime, which is still influential as reflected through PAD's irredentist campaign to reclaim Preah Vihear Temple, portrays the precolonial Siamese state as a great regional power controlling vast territories. Thai 'land' became smaller because it had 'lost' territories to Western colonial powers, the British and the French. From this historical discourse, Cambodia's western and north-western provinces were formerly Thai 'land'.<sup>9</sup> Siam absorbed these Cambodian provinces in 1794 and again in 1941. After Thailand lost in the World Court battle in 1962, Preah Vihear Temple became embedded in this historical discourse of territorial 'loss' (Puangthong 2013, 61; Strate 2013, 43; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013, 14). It has been included in history textbooks for generations of Thai students to study (Puangthong 2013, 61; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013, 14).

This similar historical narrative in Thailand and Cambodia, which glorifies each country's past while at the same time celebrates their victimisation, breeds suspicion and hatred between the Thais and the Cambodians. It has also cultivated a sense of

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<sup>9</sup>For detailed discussion about Thai historiography which emphasises territorial 'loss', see (Puangthong 2013, 61; Strate 2013; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013).

national and ethnic superiority as well as collective grievances against each other. This historical discourse is an important source of nationalism in contemporary Cambodia and Thailand and has become a convenient political resource which political and nationalist elites in both countries can exploit to mobilise mass support. The symbolic embeddedness of Preah Vihear Temple in this broader historical discourse helps explain why large crowds in Phnom Penh celebrated, while many people in Bangkok protested in 1962 and again in 2008.

### *Preah Vihear Temple in Franco-Siamese relations*

During their colonial rule in Cambodia, France signed treaties with Siam and produced maps that delineated the modern boundary between Siam and French Indochina. The Franco-Siamese treaties, which delimited the frontiers between Siam and French Indochina, are the 1893 Franco-Siamese Treaty, the Treaty of 13 February 1904 and the Treaty of 23 March 1907. The Treaty of 1904 also included the Dangrek mountain range, where the Preah Vihear Temple is located (see ICJ Judgment of 15 June 1962, 16–20). The treaties and one of the maps produced as the outcome of frontier delimitation became a source of contention between Cambodia and Thailand half a century later over who owned Preah Vihear Temple. Even during the most recent Preah Vihear conflict, Cambodian and Thai political and nationalist elites still referred to the treaties and the map to lay their respective claims to the land surrounding the temple. Therefore, it is important to look at the Franco-Siamese relations to understand the Preah Vihear temple dispute in the 1950s and 1960s and the recent conflict.

France's establishment of the protectorate over Cambodia in 1863 transformed the political landscape of Cambodia's interaction with its powerful neighbour Siam. France's colonial rule allowed Cambodia to escape from the political influence and suzerainty of Siam and to regain some of its former provinces. Through a series of negotiations and treaties between Siam and France from 1893 to 1907, Siam 'returned' to Cambodia some of the Khmer kingdom's former territories in the north and the west. By the treaties of 1902 and 1904, Siam ceded the provinces of Mlu Prey, Tonlé Repu and Stung Treng to Cambodia. The treaty of 1907 saw Siam's transfer to Cambodia of Battambang, Sisophon and Siem Reap (where Angkor is located)



provinces in exchange for Trat and Chantaburi.<sup>10</sup> The transfer of these provinces bolstered French claims to be a protector for Cambodia and restorer of its past greatness. Briggs (1946, 453) writes, “Besides their population and territory, with their rice fields and fisheries, Angkor was Cambodia’s only tie to the most glorious past any nation of Indo-China had ever had.” Nationalists in Cambodia celebrated the return of these provinces as a territorial ‘reunion’. In Thailand, however, Thai historiography during Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram’s regime regarded it as a territorial ‘loss’ of Thai ‘land’.

The Franco-Siamese treaties that became a profound source of contention several decades later between Cambodia and Thailand over the ownership of Preah Vihear Temple are the Treaties of 13 February 1904 and 23 March 1907, which aimed to create a modern boundary between Siam and French Indochina. The text of the Treaty of 1904 stated that in regard to the Dangrek mountain range, where Preah Vihear Temple is situated, the boundary line would follow the mountain’s watershed. The treaty also stated that both sides would form a joint border commission to implement the mapping of the frontier. However, due to a lack of expertise in cartography, Siam allowed the French team to do the mapping alone (see ICJ Judgment of 15 June 1962, 16–20).

In the late autumn of 1907, the French team produced a series of eleven maps covering most of Siam-French Indochina frontiers. The Siamese government received the maps in 1908. One of the maps, which the ICJ in its 1962 Judgment referred to as the Annex I map, placed the whole promontory, on which Preah Vihear Temple is situated, inside Cambodia’s territory. The Siamese government distributed the maps to some of its embassies and all of her provincial governors for official use (Ibid, 20–24). It was not until more than two decades later that the Siamese government discovered that the line on the map deviated from what was stipulated in the treaties. In 1930, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, a historian and brother of King Chulalongkorn, informed the Siamese ruling elites in Bangkok of Preah Vihear Temple after returning from his archaeological expedition in Siam’s north-eastern provinces. Four years later, Bangkok dispatched a survey team to the temple region where it was discovered that the

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed discussion about negotiations and treaties between Siam and France, see (Thompson 1941; Briggs 1946; Briggs 1947). Strate (2013, 58) argues, “Chulalongkorn decided to sign because Chantaburi and Trat were more valuable to him than ‘a few Cambodian lands’.”

boundary line on the map did not follow the watershed line as stipulated in the 1904 treaty. Strate (2013, 48) argues that it was unlikely that King Chulalongkorn would have protested even if he had noticed the map's irregularity because "very few people were aware of the temple's existence." "After all, if Chulalongkorn was willing to give the French control of Angkor, why would he have protested over the loss of a relatively unimportant site such as Preah Vihear?" he questions.

It was only under Phibun Songkhrum's regime that Preah Vihear Temple became important in Thai national identity discourses (Ibid, 50). During his rule between 1938 and 1944, Phibun's government pursued an irredentist foreign policy of restoring territories 'lost' to Western imperialism, especially to French Indochina. His government produced maps showing areas of French Indochina as being formerly part of Thailand (Strate 2013, 44; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013, 6). As French authority in Indochina declined during World War II, Phibun's government seized the opportunity to ally with Japan and reassert its claim to territories it had earlier returned to Cambodia. After a brief war with French forces from late 1940 to early 1941,<sup>11</sup> Thailand, through Japan's mediation, managed to regain most of the territories it had ceded to Cambodia. However, the Thai government was not able to obtain inclusion of Angkor Wat in the peace settlement, although it tried to lobby for this. To draw attention away from his government's failure, Phibun, through a media campaign, glorified the beauty and historical significance of Preah Vihear Temple, which his government had managed to retake from French Indochina (see Strate 2013, 51). When Japan was defeated in 1945 and France restored its authority in Indochina, Thailand was obliged to return the territories to Cambodia (and this included Preah Vihear Temple).

***France left, Thailand occupied Preah Vihear, Cambodia approached the ICJ***

Preah Vihear Temple became the centre of a dispute between Cambodia and Thailand soon after Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953. Field Marshal Phibun, who resigned in 1944, once again became Thailand's prime minister after he had successfully toppled Pridi Banomyong's government in a military coup in 1947. He ruled Thailand until 1957 when he was overthrown in a military coup by

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<sup>11</sup>For details about the war, see (Paloczi-Horvath 1995).

another military strongman, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957–1963). Phibun, who had earlier glorified Preah Vihear Temple, renewed his interest in it. He seized the opportunity of France’s departure from Cambodia to dispatch a small police unit to Preah Vihear Temple and hoisted the Thai flag there. This drew quick protest from the Cambodian government, who viewed Thailand’s action as an encroachment on their country’s border territory and national sovereignty. Cambodia sent diplomatic notes to Thai government in 1954 but received no reply. After a bilateral negotiation between both countries in Bangkok in 1958 failed to produce any result, the Cambodian government instituted legal proceedings against Thailand at the ICJ on 06 October 1959 (see ICJ Judgment of 15 June 1962, 31–32). The temple dispute created diplomatic tension and severely affected the relations between Phnom Penh and Bangkok. On two occasions, it resulted in the suspension of diplomatic relations and the closure of the border between the two countries: in November 1958 and then in October 1961 (see Leifer 1961–1962, 361–374).

Portraying themselves as the defenders of national heritage, leaders in both countries played up the temple dispute to achieve political goals in their respective countries. Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia faced political challenges from within and without. Domestically, France’s decolonisation created a power vacuum in the newly independent Cambodia, making the country vulnerable to different groups contesting for power. Prince Sihanouk also faced challenges to his power from the Democrat Party in Phnom Penh, Khmer communists with links to communist North Vietnam, and the *Khmer Serei* [Free Khmer] movement operating from the Cambodia-Thailand border. Externally, Cold War contexts put Prince Sihanouk’s government in a very uncomfortable position and made his foreign policy deviate from its neutrality stance. The prince found his country being sandwiched between two traditional enemies, Thailand to the West and South Vietnam to the East, who were now America’s allies. Prince Sihanouk manipulated the symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple and the dispute with Thailand to rally popular support and to unify the nation behind his government.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, Phibun and Sarit of Thailand were military strongmen who came to power through military coups. Both Phibun and Sarit promoted Thai nationalism to

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<sup>12</sup>For more details, see Chapter 3.

make up for their legitimacy deficit and to divert public attention from their dictatorial regimes. They also manipulated the symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple, which had been embedded in Thailand's national historiography of territorial 'loss', to rally popular support for their respective governments. The Thai media and Sarit's government launched well-publicised 'one person, one baht' campaigns to allow Thai people to participate in contributing to the legal defence fund for defence counsel representing Thailand at the ICJ (see Strate 2013, 60–62).

At the ICJ, Thailand's defence counsel attempted to prevent the World Court from considering the Preah Vihear case by arguing that the Court had no competence to handle the case. On 26 May 1961, the Court rejected Thailand's objection and ruled that it had competence. On 15 June 1962, the ICJ declared in its judgment as follows:

The Court, by nine votes to three, finds that the Temple of Preah Vihear is situated in territory under the sovereignty of Cambodia; finds in consequence, by nine votes to three, that Thailand is under an obligation to withdraw any military or police forces, or other guards or keepers, stationed by her at the Temple, or in its vicinity on Cambodian territory. (ICJ Judgment of 15 June 1962, 36–37)

The judgement also added:

By seven votes to five, that Thailand is under an obligation to restore to Cambodia any objects of the kind specified in Cambodia's fifth Submission which may, since the date of the occupation of the Temple by Thailand in 1954, have been removed from the Temple or the Temple area by the Thai authorities. (Ibid, 37)

The ICJ made its judgment based on the legality of the Annex I map. Cambodia submitted the map to the Court to support her claim to sovereignty over Preah Vihear Temple. Thailand's defence counsel contested the map's legality on two grounds:

First, that the map was not the work of the Mixed Commission, and had therefore no binding character; secondly, that at Preah Vihear the map embodied a material error...This error...was that the frontier line indicated on the map was not the true watershed line in this vicinity, and that a line drawn in accordance with the true watershed line would have placed, and would now place, the Temple area in Thailand. It is further contended...that she never accepted this map or the frontier line indicated on it...if she did accept the map, she did so only under, and because of, a mistake belief...that the map line was correctly drawn to correspond with the watershed line. (Ibid, 21)

The ICJ's judgment, however, gave in its reasoning that the map had an official standing because it was "one of a series of maps of the frontier areas produced by French Government topographical experts in response to a request made by the Siamese authorities, printed and published by a Paris firm of repute" (Ibid, 21). The

reasoning also added that evidence showed that Siam did accept the map in 1908 and its government at that time even distributed it along with ten other maps to its provincial governors and some of its embassies for official use. If the Siamese authorities wished to reject the Annex I map or raised any question about the discrepancy between the line on the map and the watershed line in the treaty, they had several opportunities to do so either in 1908 or for many years later during their meetings with French authorities in 1925, 1937, 1946 and 1947. However, Siamese authorities, later Thai authorities, did not reject or raise the issue of the Annex I map. The Court concluded that Thailand, while it continued to enjoy the benefits of the Franco-Siamese settlement for several decades, could not now deny that it ever accepted it. The Court, therefore, awarded the sovereignty over the site of Preah Vihear Temple to Cambodia (Ibid, 22–37).

In Cambodia, the ICJ's judgment was greeted with celebrations. One day after the Court had announced the judgment, thousands of people gathered and celebrated the victory in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. On 5 January 1963, Prince Sihanouk presided over a grand ceremony to raise the Cambodia's national flag at Preah Vihear Temple. In Cambodia's nationalist discourse, the victory gave a boost to national pride, for Cambodia had rarely triumphed over Thailand since the post-Angkorian period. The victory also symbolised the reunion with Cambodia of Khmer territories and heritage lost to Thailand. Cambodia's elites also felt that justice was served since the temple was built by Khmer kings at the time when Siamese people did not yet have a kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

In Thailand, however, the ICJ's judgment was strongly rejected. Fierce protests against it were organised in Bangkok and in the provinces. The Thai media and the Thai public called for Field Marshal Sarit's government to reject the Court's ruling and to never relinquish Preah Vihear Temple to Cambodia (Strate 2013, 62–63). Thailand also protested internationally by withdrawing its ambassador to Paris and its delegation from the SEATO Council and the Geneva Conference on Laos as a protest against the uncooperative behaviour of its allies, especially the United States which allowed Dean Acheson, a former US Secretary of State, to render his service in Cambodia's lawyer team at the ICJ. Field Marshal Sarit's government also sent a Polish trade delegation

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<sup>13</sup> Interviews and informal conversations with Cambodian scholars, journalists, university lecturers and students, and NGO staff, Phnom Penh, March–October 2012.

back to Poland because the President of the ICJ was Polish. However, the protests soon calmed down after Thai Prime Minister Marshal Sarit Thanarat announced on 21 June 1962 that Thailand would honour the Court's decision (see Singh 1962, 24–25).

Sarit's announcement came as a surprise since his government had earlier projected a tough nationalist stance and rhetoric. He explained to the Thai public that his government decided to back down at the suggestion of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. There were two other reasons that could explain Sarit's sudden change of heart: first, Cambodia had a close relationship with China, and second, Thailand did not want to lose its membership at the United Nations, which was important for its international prestige (Strate 2013, 62–64). The Thai public viewed the ICJ's verdict as unfair to Thailand and linked the loss of Preah Vihear Temple to Cambodia to the notion of earlier territorial 'loss' of Thai 'land' to the French and British colonial powers. They viewed the ICJ in the same category as the two Western colonial powers who had victimised Thailand. Without Western powers' interference, contemporary Thailand would have been much larger and more glorious. The 'loss' of Preah Vihear was added into textbooks for Thai students to study (see Puangthong 2013, 40).

Although Sarit's government withdrew their forces from the temple, their gesture and rhetoric sent a controversial message that could be interpreted that Thailand may reclaim the temple in the future. Sarit told the Thai public, "Although Cambodia has for the moment won the ruins of the temple, the soul of the temple of Phra Viharn remains with Thailand" (see Singh 1962, 26). As Thai soldiers withdrew from the temple, the Thai flag and the flagpole were removed in a standing position and subsequently placed in a museum. The gesture of the Thai state encouraged some Thai elites to argue that while the temple belonged to Cambodia, the land upon which the temple was built belonged to Thailand (Grabowsky 2011, 10).

In the years after the Court's ruling, relations between Cambodia and Thailand continued to be strained and difficult. Between 11 and 19 April 1966, armed fighting involving the use of heavy weapons and artillery took place along the border between the two countries, especially in the region near the Preah Vihear Temple (see Cuasay 1998, 881). The Cambodian government lodged a complaint against Thailand with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 23 April 1966, accusing Thailand of repeated military aggressions and of attempting to occupy Preah Vihear Temple by

force (Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Letter of April 23, 1966). In the years that followed, Cambodia was heading towards instability as the Vietnam War was engulfing the small kingdom. The country eventually fell into civil war after Prince Sihanouk was overthrown by a US-backed coup in 1970. During the next two decades of civil war, the question of Preah Vihear Temple was put to rest for a while.

### *Cambodia in civil war, Thailand closed border*

Suspicion and hatred between Cambodia and Thailand worsened in the 1970s and 1980s due to ideological differences between both states in the context of the Cold War. Thailand was an American ally and was fighting against Thai communists in the country's uplands and the spread of communism in mainland Southeast Asia. When communist Khmer Rouge overthrew Lon Nol's US-backed Khmer Republic and Pol Pot came to power in Phnom Penh in 1975, Thailand moved to close the entire Thailand-Cambodia border. Thailand began to heavily militarise its border with Cambodia and Laos because the victory of communist forces in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the 1970s was perceived as a serious threat to Thailand's national security (see French 2002, 440–444). Thus, the closure of the entire border with Cambodia and Laos was the national priority of the Thai state at that time to prevent the spread of communism from the two neighbouring countries into Thailand and to maintain political stability within the country's ethnically diverse population (Ibid, 428). Thailand also intended to use the border closure to undermine the communist governments in Cambodia and Laos. It was hoped that Thailand's embargo against these two countries would weaken them politically and economically (Puangthong 2013, 14–15).

However, Thailand's strategy had little relevance to the DK regime since Pol Pot was attempting to build Cambodia as a self-sufficient utopian agrarian society modelled after the Khmer empire of Angkor; he had no interest in building a modern economy of trade and free-market capitalism.<sup>14</sup> After the Khmer Rouge came to power, people were evacuated from cities and towns and sent to work in forced labour camps in the countryside. Money was abolished. Family, religious and other social

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<sup>14</sup> According to its several internal documents archived by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), DK, during its rule (1975–1979), had limited trade exchanges with only a few communist countries namely China, North Korea, and Yugoslavia.

communities were broken up and replaced by a new contract in which every individual person was required to be loyal to no one but *Angkar*<sup>15</sup> [The Organization] (see Frieson 1988; Chandler 1992b; Kiernan 2004; Hinton 1998a).

Moreover, the DK paid less attention to Thailand and concentrated instead on Cambodia's eastern neighbour, Vietnam. DK senior leaders were preoccupied and obsessed with searching for foreign spies and especially for Vietnam's agents suspected of hiding within their ranks. This led to mass purge of some of its own cadres, whom the regime labelled as "Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds". Regarding Vietnam as a threat to Cambodia's existence, the DK attacked Vietnam's border provinces in 1977 and 1978 in an attempt to eliminate a perceived threat and to recover Kampuchea Krom from Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> However, these unilateral actions led Vietnam to respond with a full-scale military campaign against Cambodia in December 1978. The DK was driven out of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979.

After the collapse of Pol Pot's regime, Vietnam installed a new government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), in Phnom Penh and maintained a large presence of troops in Cambodia until 1989. The fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia sent an exodus of Cambodian refugees to the Cambodia-Thailand border in 1979 and subsequent years. Some of them were resettled in third countries, while the rest remained trapped in the refugee camps.

As Vietnam, which had just defeated the United States four years earlier, now stationed its large troop presence in Cambodia,<sup>17</sup> Thailand viewed itself as a 'frontline' state. It viewed Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia as damaging to its national interests (see Khien 1982, 569–571). Therefore, Thailand allowed the establishment of refugee camps along its border with Cambodia. It also provided support to the Khmer Rouge and other Cambodian resistance forces, which were fighting from their bases along the Cambodia-Thailand border against the new pro-Vietnam government in Phnom Penh. Thailand's support for the Khmer Rouge and two other resistance forces was in line with the standing of Cold War politics of Association of Southeast Asian

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<sup>15</sup> It was referred to the ruling body of DK regime.

<sup>16</sup>For detailed discussion about the DK's war against Vietnam, see (Heder 1979). Kampuchea Krom [Lower Cambodia] is the Khmer name for southern Vietnam. From Cambodia's perspective, it is considered historically a part of Cambodia (see Taylor 2014, 2, 19–30).

<sup>17</sup>According to Khien (1982, 568), Vietnam had approximately 200,000 troops in Cambodia in 1982.



Nations (ASEAN), China and the United States and its allies against Vietnam, which was an ally of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The PRK government in Phnom Penh viewed Thailand's supports of the Khmer Rouge and other resistance forces as a serious threat to Cambodia. In 1983, the PRK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an 87-page pamphlet in English titled "Thai Policy vis-à-vis Kampuchea", which accused the Thai state of harbouring ill will against Cambodia (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1983). Regarding each other as enemies, the PRK government and the Thai government had no official relations with each other between 1979 and 1989, and the border between both countries remained officially closed. Nevertheless, the border as zone of passage, interactions and exchange continued to exist. There were smuggling activities of Thai products into Cambodia and timber, gems, and looted antiques from Cambodia into Thailand. The smuggling networks included people on both sides of the border and involved some powerful interest groups like the military (see French 2002, 447; Mackenzie and Davis 2014).

### *From a battlefield to a marketplace*

The late 1980s saw major political transformations in Southeast Asia and in the world. The Soviet Union's hegemony on Eastern Europe started to decline paving the way for independence of several states and the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1990. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia in 1989 in exchange for the lifting of economic sanction from the United States and Western countries. In Thailand, Chatichai Choonhawan was elected Prime Minister in 1988. Unlike his predecessors, he wanted to turn Indochina from "a battlefield into a marketplace". In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen introduced a series of reforms which recognised private landownership and reduced the state's control of the economy. His PRK regime was also renamed the State of Cambodia (SoC) in 1989. The political transformation at the domestic, regional, and international levels in the late 1980s paved the way for a peace settlement in Cambodia and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Phnom Penh and Bangkok in the early 1990s. In the paragraphs below, I will discuss briefly how Chatichai Choonhawan's policy has charted a new course for Cambodia-Thailand relations; how both countries have benefited from the cooperation; and how

the old wounds have remained a thorny issue hurting both neighbours' bilateral relations.

Soon after Chatichai Choonhawan became Prime Minister of Thailand (1988–1991), he announced his government's new foreign policy on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Under his leadership, Thailand began to forge new relations with the three Indochinese countries by promoting trade and economic cooperation with them. Chatichai Choonhawan's goal was to transform Indochina from “a battlefield into a marketplace”. It was a dramatic shift from the policy pursued by previous Thai governments, who regarded the Indochinese countries as enemies and the closure of Thailand's borders with these countries as necessary to protect its national security and political interests. Chatichai's government viewed Thailand's borders as zones of trade and economic activities. Economic engagement with Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam played a significant role in resolving the ideological differences and bringing mutual benefits to all countries concerned (see Battersby 1998, 479–480; French 2002, 444–449; Puangthong 2013, 15–19).

With this new policy outlook, Prime Minister Chatichai invited Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen for official visits to Bangkok. In 1989 alone, Hun Sen visited Thailand's capital city a few times (*The New York Times*, September 22, 1989). Hun Sen's first official visit was broadcast on Cambodia's state television. I remember watching his trip to Bangkok on my neighbour's television.<sup>18</sup> The Thai prime minister gave his Cambodian counterpart a warm welcome with a long police motorcade escorting Hun Sen through Bangkok's traffic.

There were several reasons which prompted Chatichai's government to adopt the “turning Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace” policy. Towards the late 1980s, there were positive signs of major political changes in Cambodia and in the region. The Phnom Penh government started to introduce a series of reform aimed at shifting the country from a planned economy to a market economy. Vietnam also withdrew its tens of thousands of troops from Cambodia in exchange for economic benefits of foreign aid and investment from the United States and Western countries.

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<sup>18</sup>There were only two televisions in my village in 1989. They were owned by families with good income. Many of the villagers were poor farmers and they usually gathered in the evening to watch TVs at the two houses. It was the first time I saw Thailand on television. I was only seven years old at that time. I only knew Thailand was a country but did not know where it was and why Hun Sen went there. I remember his trip because I was impressed by Bangkok's expressways and high-rise buildings, symbols of modernity that were strikingly different from poor and quiet Phnom Penh.

Thailand's economic contexts were also changing so rapidly that the Thai state needed to redefine its relations with neighbouring countries. Its export-oriented economy was booming, which required Thailand to search for new markets for its products and natural resources for its industries. Thus, Indochinese countries became new frontiers for Thailand to exploit in its quest for economic prosperity. Chatichai's government also wanted to capitalise on the changing political and economic contexts in the region to reposition Thailand as a regional hub for foreign investment, trade, and tourism (see Battersby 1998, 479–480; French 2002, 444–449; Puangthong 2013, 16–19). Chatichai government's diplomatic and economic engagement with Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam charted the course for successive Thai governments to follow. Cambodia and Thailand have benefitted politically and economically from the policy. Thailand could now close down all the seven refugee camps on its territories along the border with Cambodia after more than 365,000 Cambodian refugees were repatriated to Cambodia between 1992 and 1993 following the Paris Peace Accords of 23 October 1991. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) financed the repatriation and the reintegration operations. As for Cambodia, the reengagement of Thai governments and international communities with the Phnom Penh government weakened the Khmer Rouge financially, politically and militarily. From the mid-1990s, Khmer Rouge commanders started to lead their soldiers out of the jungle to surrender to the Phnom Penh government. They were reintegrated into the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), thus effectively ending more than two decades of bloody civil war.

Both Thailand and Cambodia have also derived significant economic benefits from Chatichai government's policy. It laid the foundations for a wide range of economic cooperation and trade activities between both countries in later years. When Cambodia opened its door to foreign investment in the early 1990s, Thai companies, along with companies from Singapore and Malaysia, were the first wave of foreign investors to enter Cambodia's markets.<sup>19</sup> They invested in telecommunications, transportation, hotels and tourism and construction, among other sectors, which were significant in

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<sup>19</sup>The second wave of foreign investment to Cambodia came mainly from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from the late 1990s. The third wave came from South Korea from the mid-2000s. The recent wave from the late 2000s came from Japan, the United States, European countries, and others.

contributing to the rebuilding of Cambodia's post-conflict economy. Several international border checkpoints and informal border gates have also been opened to facilitate a large volume of cross-border trade and other economic exchanges between people on both sides of the border. Thailand has also absorbed tens of thousands of Cambodian migrant workers, many of whom did not have legal work documents and some of them were thus vulnerable to abuses by their Thai employers and Thai authorities. While the Thai economy has benefitted from hiring Cambodian migrant workers at relatively lower wages than Thai workers, Cambodia's economy has also benefitted from the remittance workers send to their families.

While Cambodia and Thailand have benefitted significantly from the renewed diplomatic and economic linkages, they could not prevent old wounds from occasionally re-opening to haunt their bilateral relations. Suspicion remains between the two neighbours and, at times, flared up into violent conflicts as playing out in the 2003 riot in Phnom Penh and the recent Preah Vihear border tension. When Thai companies came to set up their businesses in Cambodia in the 1990s, Thai products started to dominate Cambodian markets. Cambodia's television channels and radio stations also aired Thai films, songs, and music. Young Cambodians started to adopt Thai hair styles and fashion. Rich people built their houses in similar styles to houses seen in Thai films.

The flow of Thai products and popular culture and the increase in Thai economic activities in Cambodia caused suspicion and anger among Cambodian nationalist and conservative groups, who viewed them as signs of neo-Thai dominance. They suspected that Thailand still harboured the 'ill' intent of dominating Cambodia by controlling Cambodia's economy and spreading Thai popular culture at the expense of Cambodian culture. The Cambodian nationalists and conservatives often expressed their concerns and criticisms in the mass media and in their discussions in the public spheres about the new forms of Thai dominance. The build-up of anti-Thai sentiments helped, to some extent, explain why many Cambodians took part in torching the Thai embassy and business interests in Phnom Penh in 2003.

### 3. Recent conflict

#### *2003 riot in Phnom Penh*

On 29 January 2003, angry Cambodian protesters set the Thai Embassy and Thai-owned business establishments in Phnom Penh on fire. The protest against Thailand occurred after *Rasmei Angkor*, a small pro-government newspaper, ran an article about a rumour that had been circulated for months concerning a comment allegedly made by a famous Thai actress named Sovanan Kongying, who was often called *Phkay Preuk* (Morning Star), after her character's name in a popular Thai soap opera. The newspaper alleged that she had said:

She would only ever accept an invitation to perform in Cambodia if the Angkor Wat was returned to Thailand and she looked down [on the Cambodians] by saying that if she was reincarnated, she would rather be a dog than be a Khmer national. (Quoted in Hinton 2006)

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen later openly criticised the Thai actress in his televised speech during the opening ceremony of a school for the blind and deaf in Kampong Cham Province on 27 January. He called the actress 'Thief Star' and said her value was cheaper than a few clumps of grass at Angkor Wat. Hun Sen's remarks intensified the anti-Thai sentiment. His speech seemed to give Cambodians the green light to protest against Thailand. A crowd of angry demonstrators gathered in front of the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh on the morning of 29 January 2003. The situation deteriorated in the afternoon when a rumour circulated that the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok had been set on fire and that several Cambodians there were killed by a Thai mob. As a result, some of the protesters broke into the Thai embassy's compound and burnt the embassy building. The Thai ambassador and his staff managed to escape just minutes before the mob stormed into the compound (Hinton 2006, 448–449). Some of the mob went further and destroyed Thai-owned businesses in Phnom Penh, such as hotels (the Juliana and the Royal Phnom Penh), telecommunication companies, a cement company, and the Thai Airways Office. They also damaged two television stations in Phnom Penh, TV 3 and TV 5, which frequently showed Thai movies and concerts. Thai diplomats, businessmen and tourists were evacuated from Phnom Penh airport by Thai military planes the following days.

The Thai government reacted immediately and strongly to the incident. It downgraded diplomatic relations; closed Thailand's border with Cambodia; and sent

thousands of Cambodian traders and labourers across the border back to Cambodia. The Thai government also demanded that the Cambodian government apologise, investigate, arrest perpetrators and compensate for the damages to the Thai embassy and Thai businesses in Phnom Penh. The Cambodian government expressed regret over the riot and agreed to the Thai government's demands.

Some observers believed that the protest against Thailand stemmed from Cambodian domestic politics. Prime Minister Hun Sen's criticism of Morning Star was seen as his attempt to take advantage of the situation and promote himself before the upcoming general election in July 2003. He wished to portray himself as the guardian of Khmer culture and the defender of Angkor Wat Temple, which is the centrality of Cambodian national and cultural identity. The riot was also seen as a plot or excuse for Hun Sen's government to silence or crack down on the opposition party members and media affiliated with the opposition party. Noticeably, the director of Beehive Radio Station, which was seen as having a pro-opposition tendency, was arrested, and Sam Rainsy, the leader of the opposition party, had to flee the country for fear of arrest.

However, others suggested that the riot had its link with the border tension between both neighbours nearly two years earlier. In December 2001, Thai soldiers closed the border gate on the Thai side in Sisaket province to Cambodia's Preah Vihear Temple. This was due to the sewage problem from the market vendors on the Cambodian side. The move by Thailand effectively shut down tourism to Preah Vihear Temple. Cambodia responded by sending hundreds of troops to Preah Vihear and accelerating efforts to build a road link on its side of the border and remove land mines from the path to the ancient monument. According to Dr. Sorn Samnang, speaking when he was the President of the Royal Academy of Cambodia and Chairman of the Cambodian Culture Committee, the tension at the border in 2001 had damaged the relationship between Cambodia and Thailand. It was also one of the factors that led to violent protest at the Thai Embassy in 2003 (*Raksmei Kampuchea Daily*, January 15, 2004).

A few months after the incident, both Cambodian and Thai governments made an effort to restore relations. They reopened the border and normalised their diplomatic ties. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Thai counterpart, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, also led their respective ministers for a joint cabinet meeting in Siem Reap on 31 May 2003. They concluded the meeting with a tour and a group

photo in front of Angkor Wat Temple. Despite their efforts, the effects of the riot remained. In Cambodia, all television channels stopped showing Thai films, concerts, and advertisement of Thai products. Cinemas, which had often shown Thai movies, chose to show Chinese, Indian or Hollywood movies. Shops, especially cosmetic shops named after Morning Star or those with Thai names, were renamed. Some Cambodian people, especially Phnom Penh residents, stopped consuming Thai products and turned to products from other countries. This incident gave commercial advantages to other countries, especially Vietnam, to increase their products in Cambodian markets.

Over next three years after the riot, Cambodia-Thailand relations improved steadily. The Preah Vihear temple issue was kept at low profile from public and national attention. There were not any significant activities going on at the temple region.

### ***2006 military coup in Thailand and its consequences on Cambodia-Thailand relations***

At about 10 pm on 19 September 2006, a Thai friend called me on my mobile phone. She warned me, “Kimly, do not go out. Just stay in your apartment. Soldiers are occupying the city. It’s a coup!”<sup>20</sup> Immediately after I got off the phone, I called out to my housemates—two Cambodian engineering students who had been sharing the same apartment with me in the Pratunam area of Bangkok—and told them to turn on their television. Every channel was showing portraits of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and playing military music. Then, several minutes later, the coup leaders went on television and one of them read a statement in Thai, which I did not understand. I knew only one of them—General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army.

Two days later, I went with some friends to the area near the Government House. We saw tanks and soldiers there. Yellow ribbons were tied to the soldiers’ guns and to the tank guns. I knew the colour represented the Thai King because just three months ago Thailand had celebrated King Bhumibol’s sixtieth anniversary of his accession to the throne. Many Thais in Bangkok wore yellow shirts to work and in public places for many weeks after that. In front of the Government House, some people gave flowers to the soldiers and took photos with them and the tanks.

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<sup>20</sup>I was a student in the Master program of Southeast Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok between late 2005 and mid-2007.

The man, who had just been deposed by the coup, was Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was widely popular in Thailand's North and Northeast regions and among Bangkok's poor residents. The deposed prime minister is also a man whom Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen described as his 'eternal friend'. It is important to look at the contexts surrounding the 2006 coup in Thailand because it had consequences for Cambodia-Thailand relations, leading to the Preah Vihear conflict in 2008. The self-proclaimed Thai nationalists and royalists, the Yellow-Shirts, whose protests against Thaksin in Bangkok in 2006 led to the military coup, were the same groups of people whose street protests in Bangkok in 2008 led to the military conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in the Preah Vihear temple region.

Military coups have become embedded in Thailand's elite political culture. The country had seen 19 successful coups and coup attempts since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 (Farrelly 2013). However, the 2006 coup was different from all other coups the country had seen because it deposed a very charismatic and popular yet divisive prime minister. It took place at a critical time when the reigning monarch's old age and poor health caused great anxiety among Thais about the royal transition. It also occurred at a time when rural people in the country's north and north-eastern provinces were becoming more economically and politically savvy and active (Walker 2012) and more connected to the cosmopolitan world (Keyes 2012).

Thaksin Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister of Thailand in 2001. The conditions after the 1997 economic crisis presented an opportunity for Thaksin to rise to power. The crisis was a shock to Thailand and badly affected Thai domestic business elites and rural people. The ruling Democrat Party accepted an emergency fund of US\$17 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to revive Thailand's economy. The IMF's funding, which came with a string of conditions, caused economic recession and growing dissatisfaction among Thailand's rural, business, and intellectual communities. The negative impacts from the IMF's intervention led to the emergence of new NGOs and social movements who promoted Thai nationalism and localism as a way to rebuild Thailand. Thaksin, a telecommunications magnate and one of the few local businessmen who were spared from the worst effects of the economic crisis, grasped the opportunity. He, therefore, established Thai Rak Thai (TRT, Thai Love Thai) Party in 1998 and registered it in 1999 (see Hewison 2008, 200–2001; Kengkij



and Hewison 2009, 454–455). Many civil society groups helped connect TRT with the rural and urban electorate. They also helped Thaksin formulate his party's policy platform, which focused on rural development and health policy (Pasuk and Baker 2008, 64; see also Kengkij and Hewison 2009, 455–458). The policy platform appealed to different segments of Thai society, and thus sweeping his party to victory in the 2001 election. Thaksin gained massive personal popularity among rural voters in the north and northeast. His TRT party and its reincarnations, the People's Power Party and later Pheu Thai Party, continued to win every general election in Thailand.

However, Thaksin's populist politics and his empowerment of the rural masses collided with other powerful and influential interest groups in Thailand. The established elites became increasingly discontented with Thaksin's growing popularity and connections with the rural masses (Pasuk and Baker 2008, 62). The palace saw Thaksin as trying to challenge its economic, ideological and political interests. His government introduced policies that favoured his family's business empire and those of his associates. Thaksin was attempting to wrest control of the military and bureaucracy from the palace, and he openly competed for mass popularity (see Hewison 2008, 199–205). He also attempted to control the Deep South by replacing forces loyal to the "network monarchy" with his own (see McCargo 2006).

Thaksin's distribution of largesse and empowering of the rural population also angered Bangkok's middle-class elites, who stereotyped rural people as ignorant and thus vulnerable to vote-buying by immoral politicians. According to the city people's views, rural voters did not care much about national interests as urban people. They were not ready to participate in electoral democracy (Thongchai 2008, 25–26). However, according to Walker (2008), rural voters were politically informed and made decisions based on complex electoral values little understood by Bangkok's middle-class and wealthy elites and some observers of Thai politics.

Thaksin's growing confidence and his subsequent attacks on NGOs and his critics led to his fall-out with civil society groups and intellectuals, who had helped him during the early days of the formation of TRT and his government (Hewison 2008, 202–203; Kengkij and Hewison 2009, 458–459). He also clashed over a business dispute with media tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul, his close business associate who later became his bitter enemy. Sondhi started attacking Thaksin by alleging him of being

disrespectful of the monarchy (see Hewison 2008, 193, 202–203). Sondhi later became one of the influential leaders of PAD. PAD was established in 2005 as a social movement to oppose Thaksin's regime. It drew memberships mainly from Bangkok's middle-class, bureaucrats, civil society groups, academics, business elites, royalists and conservatives groups (see Hewison 2008, 203–204; Giles 2009; Kengkij and Hewison 2009, 458–468; Puangthong 2013, 57–59).

PAD launched its street protests after Thaksin allegedly helped his family sell a prime land in Bangkok by evading tax. However, the movement managed to increase its momentum by drawing tens of thousands of people to join its mass demonstrations after the January 2006 sale of Shin Corporation to Singapore's state-owned Temasek. Thaksin's family did not pay tax from the deal. PAD seized the opportunity to accuse Thaksin of not only being corrupt and immoral but also of putting Thailand's national interests and national security at stake (see Hewison 2008, 203; Kengkij and Hewison 2009, 467). Army Chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin also claimed that the sale of Shin Corporation to Tamasek would allow Singapore to listen to phone conversations in Thailand. Thus, it was a grave concern for Thailand's national security (Pavin 2009, 452).

As the anti-Thaksin sentiment reached peak momentum, the palace gave the green light to the military to stage the coup (Hewison 2008, 199, 204). Military tanks and trucks moved into Bangkok and occupied key positions in the city. At the time of the coup, Thaksin was on an official visit to the United States. He could not return to Thailand to face a series of charges against him. He chose to live in self-imposed exile mainly in Dubai, but have also travelled to Cambodia on several occasions. The coup leaders appointed General Surayud Chulanont, a member of King Bhumibol's Privy Council, as the Prime Minister of the new interim government.

The 2006 military coup had negative consequences for Thailand-Cambodia relations because after the coup Thailand experienced a period of political instability. Bangkok became a site of frequent mass demonstrations by PAD or the Yellow-Shirts and the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) or the Red-Shirts and other groups. Thailand's successive governments that came to power after the coup were prevented from performing their tasks effectively due to the mass demonstrations and power struggle among the Thai elites. They were prevented from cultivating a

more productive relationship with their Cambodian counterpart, especially in resolving border issues.

In a speech he gave during the inauguration of public works in a province, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen commented that the 2006 coup in Thailand destroyed the plan that the two governments had agreed on for speedy progress on the demarcation of the Cambodia-Thailand border. According to Hun Sen, he and Thaksin had a plan to fly in a helicopter together along the border and would stop to have a friendly lunch at Preah Vihear Temple.<sup>21</sup> The coup also deprived both countries of a rare opportunity to transform the Preah Vihear Temple from a symbol of enmity to a symbol of friendship. Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sok An had also agreed with former Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai on 25 March 2004 that both countries would jointly develop Preah Vihear Temple; the joint development would represent “the long-lasting friendship, based on mutual benefits and understanding between the two countries.” (International Crisis Group Report 2011)

On a personal level, Hun Sen was also upset when Thaksin was ousted from power. He called Thaksin his close friend. In a speech, Hun Sen said that his wife was greatly saddened to hear about the coup. Her heart went out to Thaksin and his family. She became teary-eyed. His wife asked him to prepare a house for Thaksin should the deposed Thai prime minister want to live in Cambodia.<sup>22</sup> Hun Sen’s personal comments provided a glimpse of his government’s preference to work with Thaksin’s government and those of his allies than with anti-Thaksin governments even though his government has recognised every government that came to power in Thailand. Hun Sen’s personal relationship with Thaksin was later manipulated by anti-Thaksin groups in Thailand, especially the PAD, in their efforts to overthrow the People’s Power Party, and thus Cambodia was drawn into Thailand’s polarised political conflict.

### ***Preah Vihear Temple as a world heritage site amid political crisis in Thailand***

UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee meeting in Quebec City in Canada endorsed Cambodia’s proposal to have Preah Vihear Temple inscribed as a World Heritage site on 7 July 2008 (8 July 2008 in Cambodia and Thailand). The temple’s

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<sup>21</sup> I remember from watching his speech on television in Cambodia in 2007 or 2008.

<sup>22</sup> I remember what Hun Sen said from watching his speech on television in Cambodia in 2007 or 2008.

listing gave rise to outbursts of joy and celebrations in Cambodia and a public uproar in Thailand. Soon afterwards, the temple region became a contested site between Cambodian and Thai troops. The border stand-off caused about a dozen rounds of deadly fighting between both militaries from 2008 to 2011, and severely damaged ties between both neighbouring countries. In fact, the temple's listing should not have resulted in conflict if Preah Vihear Temple had not been embedded in the broader historical and contemporary tension between both countries as I have discussed earlier. Thailand's increasingly polarised domestic political conflict after the 2006 military coup and the PAD's extreme nationalism and irredentism intensified the tension and prevented the governments in both countries from resolving the dispute. In the paragraphs below, I provide an account of the Preah Vihear conflict from 2008 to 2011, which hopefully will provide some insights into the complexities of the dispute.

Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen first sent a letter to UNESCO's Director General in 2001 informing him of his government's decision to propose the inscription of Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage site. Subsequently, the Cambodian government prepared a portfolio of the proposal and submitted it to the Paris-based World Heritage Centre on 30 January 2006. After having received the portfolio, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an advisory unit to the World Heritage Committee, sent its representatives to conduct technical evaluations at Preah Vihear Temple between 23 and 29 October 2006. After the completion of the fieldwork mission and receiving additional supporting documents from the Cambodian government, ICOMOS made a recommendation in its report on 21 January 2007 that Preah Vihear Temple be added to the World Heritage List (Kingdom of Cambodia 2010, 9–13). During the 31<sup>st</sup> Session of the World Heritage Committee meeting in Christchurch, New Zealand, between 23 June and 2 July 2007, the committee made the following points in their decision. They had taken note of the statement by the Chairperson of the World Heritage Committee as saying:

The State Party of Cambodia and the State Party of Thailand are in full agreement that the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear has Outstanding Universal Value and must be inscribed on the World Heritage List as soon as possible. Accordingly, Cambodia and Thailand agree that Cambodia will propose the site for formal inscription on the World Heritage List at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the World Heritage Committee in 2008 with the active support of Thailand. (UNESCO 2007a, 153–154)

The committee also recognised that “the Temple of Preah Vihear is of great international significance and..., agrees in principle that it should be inscribed on the World Heritage List and notes that the process for inscription is in progress.” (Ibid, 154) They requested Cambodia “to strengthen conservation and management at the site by making progress in developing an appropriate management plan, which progress will enable its formal inscription by the committee at its 32<sup>nd</sup> session in 2008.” (Ibid)

It is worth noting that, according to the statement of the Chairperson of the World Heritage Committee, the Thai government of Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont in 2007 supported the Cambodian government’s nomination of Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage site. The 31<sup>st</sup> Session of the World Heritage Committee meeting in 2007 decided that the temple was pending formal inscription at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session in July 2008. At the 31<sup>st</sup> Session in 2007, Surayud’s government did not oppose the temple listing, but it only raised concern about Cambodia’s proposed temple’s vast buffer zone covering 2642.50 ha, since Thailand considered parts of the buffer zone also come under its sovereignty (Kingdom of Cambodia 2010, 24; see also Puangthong 2013, 49).

According to Puangthong (2013, 33–46), the Thai government’s support of Cambodia’s nomination of the ancient temple was within Thailand’s grand strategy of economic linkage with its neighbouring countries. It was part of Thailand’s pursued tourism strategy of integrating tourist sites in neighbouring countries into Thailand’s tourism hub. In response to the Thai government’s concern, the Cambodian government revised the perimeter of the proposed zone for inscription by reducing it to only 644.113 ha (Kingdom of Cambodia 2010, 24). The Cambodian government discussed the revised map of the proposed zone with the Thai government. Different agencies in Thailand including the Royal Survey Department, the Department of Treaty and Legal Affairs of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Security Council agreed that the Cambodia’s revised map and file prepared to be resubmitted to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the World Heritage Committee meeting did not encroach on nearby territories claimed by Thailand (see Puangthong 2013, 50–52).

In December 2007, Thailand held its first general election after the 2006 military coup. The Thaksin-backed People’s Power Party was swept to victory and Samak Sundaravej became the new Prime Minister of Thailand in early 2008. Samak appointed Noppadon Pattama, who was Thaksin’s former lawyer, as his government’s

foreign minister. He also attempted to restore Thaksin's reputation (Pavin 2009, 455). The victory of the Thaksin-backed party came as a shock to anti-Thaksin forces and angered them greatly. Therefore, the PAD or more commonly known as the Yellow Shirts renewed their protest campaigns in February 2008 with the primary objective of overthrowing the Samak government. They accused his government of being a Thaksin's proxy and that the government would serve the interests of the exiled former prime minister (Puangthong 2013, 60).

In the beginning, the PAD's anti-government campaign did not gain much publicity. However, when news circulated that the PPP government had signed the Joint Communiqué with the Cambodian government supporting Cambodia's nomination of Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage site, the Yellow-Shirts leaders seized the opportunity to increase the momentum of their street protests. Together with the Democrat Party, they provoked Thai nationalist outrage by accusing Samak's government of 'selling' Thai 'land' to Cambodia in exchange for Cambodia's support of Thaksin's business interests in the country (see Pavin 2009, 456; International Crisis Group Report 2011; Puangthong 2013, 37). The PAD painted the PPP government as having committed treason because its signing of the Joint Communiqué would result in the 'loss' of Thai territories to Cambodia although the agreement stated clearly that the temple listing would not prejudice any future border demarcation between both countries (International Crisis Group Report 2011). It is also stipulated in the provisions of Article 11/3 of the World Heritage Convention that "the inclusion of a property situated in a territory, sovereignty or jurisdiction over which is claimed by more than one State shall in no way prejudice the rights of the parties to the dispute." (UNESCO 2007b, 16) PAD leaders also maintained that Thailand still had legal grounds to claim ownership of Preah Vihear Temple and that the Samak government's support of Cambodia's nomination of the temple would jeopardize Thailand's chance of reclaiming it (International Crisis Group Report 2011). They ignored the fact that the 1962 ICJ Judgment was final and without appeal.

As I have discussed in earlier sections, it is worth noted that Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama's signing of the Joint Communiqué with Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister Sok An and UNESCO's representative on 18 June 2008 simply followed the course set by previous Thai governments in enhancing Thailand's economic linkage in

the region and repositioning it as a regional tourism hub. However, the PAD and the Democrat Party politicised it to undermine the legitimacy of Samak's government and whip up public anger by reviving Thailand's constructed historical discourses of territorial 'loss' and 'victimisation'. Thus, Cambodia was quickly drawn into Thai domestic political conflict by the PAD and was labelled along with the PPP government as the 'villain' or 'enemy' of the Thai nation. The Yellow Shirts leaders' nationalist rhetoric thus revived the memory of the deeply ingrained historical animosity between Thailand and Cambodia.

Under mounting pressure from the PAD and the Democrat Party, Noppadon attempted to revoke the Joint Communiqué and persuaded the Cambodian government for joint nomination of the temple. His attempts failed, however. On 7 July 2008, at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the World Heritage Committee meeting in Quebec, the committee unanimously endorsed Cambodia's proposal to have Preah Vihear Temple inscribed on the World Heritage List (see UNESCO 2009, 220–222). In Cambodia, the news of the temple listing was greeted with joy. Celebrations took place in Phnom Penh and in some provincial cities. A big celebration was organised at the Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh on the day the Cambodian delegation returned from the Quebec meeting. Prime Minister Hun Sen promoted the temple listing as a tremendous success his government had achieved for the Cambodian nation. The next day, on 15 July 2008, a group of Yellow-Shirts protested at the border opposite Preah Vihear Temple. Three protesters crossed the border to the temple site and refused to leave, at which point the Thai military moved troops to occupy areas near the temple—under the pretext of ensuring the protesters' safety (Kimly 2011, 22–23). On the day when hundreds of Thai black-clad soldiers walked up the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple, Cambodia had only a small border police unit there. Troop reinforcements from Preah Vihear province and from other places in Cambodia arrived later. A border stand-off ensued. The atmosphere was tense, but fighting did not erupt until three months later.<sup>23</sup>

In Thailand, the situation became worse for Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej's PPP government. His Foreign Minister, Noppadon Pattama, was ordered to resign by the Constitutional Court's ruling for his support of Cambodia's nomination of the temple. Samak was later disqualified from the Prime Minister's Office, also by the

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<sup>23</sup>Informants 33–36 (Appendix B).

Constitutional Court's ruling, for his acceptance of payment for hosting a cooking television show while he was serving as Prime Minister.

Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, assumed leadership of the PPP government in September 2008. He served as Prime Minister for only a few months, however, because the Yellow Shirts continued to protest against his government. Somchai was forced to relocate his office from Government House to other places, including the Don Mueang Airport after PAD protestors seized Government House. He was forced to resign in December 2008 after the PAD sent thousands of its protestors to occupy the Don Mueang and Suvarnabhumi Airports, disrupting all inbound and outbound flights and leaving passengers stranded. Thailand's Constitutional Court also ordered the dissolution of the PPP after the party was found to have violated electoral laws. A series of the Court's rulings against the pro-Thaksin government called into questions the Court's impartiality and independence. The Court came to be regarded as a political tool for the anti-Thaksin elites to end the political life of the pro-Thaksin governments (see McCargo 2014). With the Thai military's manoeuvres behind the scenes, Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat Party, was appointed the new Prime Minister of Thailand.

It was difficult for Abhisit to restore relations with Cambodia because he came to power through his alliance with the PAD. His rise to power through appointment rather than popular election also raised questions about his government's legitimacy in the eyes of the Thai public, especially those who supported electoral democracy. To divert public attention from his government's dubious legitimacy and to avoid upsetting his former ally, the Yellow-Shirts, he conducted a nationalist campaign portraying himself as a 'moral' leader and 'guardian' of the Thai nation, in contrast to the 'corrupt, traitorous' Thaksin and his proxy, who 'sold' the motherland to Cambodia. When he appointed Kasit Piromya, a PAD leader, as Foreign Minister, it became clear to Hun Sen's government that there would be no easy solution to the military stand-off near Preah Vihear Temple. It is worth noting that during the initial months of the border tension, Hun Sen appealed to Cambodian soldiers at the contested areas to be patient. He also used soft language by saying,

Cambodia and Thailand are neighbours. Although we have dispute with each other, like it or not we cannot take Cambodia away from Thailand and Thailand away from Cambodia. Both countries will remain neighbours into the long



future...We must not allow the dispute at Preah Vihear to affect other areas of cooperation between both countries.<sup>24</sup>

When it became clearer to Hun Sen that the complexity of Thai domestic political conflict would prevent Abhisit's government from changing its nationalist stance regarding the territorial conflict near Preah Vihear Temple and at two other small border temples—Ta Moan and Ta Krabei—he also chose to play the nationalist card to score political goals at home. His government promoted Preah Vihear Temple as a symbol of Khmer national pride and the prime minister as the defender of Cambodia's border territorial sovereignty and national cultural heritage against Thailand's aggression. Cambodia's government-controlled media also painted the Thai prime minister along with the Yellow-Shirts leaders and the Thai military as 'invaders', 'warmongers' and 'thieves' (see Chapter 4).

Against this backdrop of complex domestic politics, relations between Cambodia and Thailand during the Abhisit government (December 2008–July 2011) greatly deteriorated. Hun Sen and Abhisit engaged in harsh verbal exchanges. Both governments recalled their respective ambassadors and expelled their respective diplomats. There were arrests of Cambodians in Thailand and Thais in Cambodia who were accused of spying. Abhisit's government also revoked the 2000 Memorandum of Understanding after Hun Sen rejected the Thai government's request for an extradition of Thaksin to Thailand and Cambodia appointed Thaksin as an economic advisor to Prime Minister Hun Sen. Thai Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban also threatened to close the Thai-Cambodian border. In response to the threat, Hun Sen dared Suthep to close the border because Thailand would have more to lose economically. The military stand-off near Preah Vihear Temple and at Ta Moan and Ta Krabei temples became increasingly tense as armed fighting erupted and became more severe, involving the use of heavy weapons and artillery (Kimly 2011, 22–23).

During the conflict, senior government officials from both countries held a series of bilateral meetings; however, they did not lead to any breakthrough because Thailand's negotiators needed to submit the minutes from the meetings to their parliament for approval. Thai parliamentarians were reluctant to consider and approve those minutes

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<sup>24</sup>I remember it from watching his speech on television in Cambodia during the initial months of the conflict.

because they were restricted by domestic political turmoil, a prospect of nationalist lawsuits, and constitutional provisions (International Crisis Group Report 2011).

Frustrated by this inaction, Hun Sen declared that bilateral meetings would lead nowhere therefore he would be seeking assistance from other regional and international venues. Abhisit accused his Cambodian counterpart of trying to internationalise the conflict and he insisted that the dispute be resolved through bilateral mechanisms. Hun Sen was not convinced, however. The Cambodian prime minister approached ASEAN, but he was frustrated by the regional organisation's indecision and reluctance to act. However, he appreciated Indonesia for trying to mediate. When the situation at the border degenerated further with the eruption of severe fighting between both countries' troops, Hun Sen wrote a letter to the UNSC requesting it to convene an urgent meeting. The UNSC accepted the request. In its decision, the Security Council urged both Cambodia and Thailand to accept Indonesia's mediation. Consequently, Indonesia was expected to send 30 unarmed observers to the disputed border area. While both Cambodian and Thai governments agreed to the plan, the Thai military opposed any such deployment, claiming it could threaten Thai security (Kimly 2011, 23). This raised questions whether the Abhisit government actually had the authority to order the Thai military.

In April 2008, when the fighting escalated once more, Cambodia's government filed an application with the ICJ requesting the Court to interpret its 1962 Judgment in the case concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear. While the judges pondered, Cambodia also requested the ICJ to order Thailand to withdraw troops and halt all military activity in the temple's vicinity. The Court issued a decision on provisional measures on 18 July 2011, ordering both Cambodia and Thailand to withdraw their respective troops from Preah Vihear Temple and the disputed surrounding areas. The decision came with a map which flagged a provisional demilitarised zone. The Court also ordered Thailand not to "obstruct Cambodia's free access to the Temple of Preah Vihear or Cambodia's provision of fresh supplies to its non-military personnel in the Temple." In addition, the ICJ asked both sides to cooperate with ASEAN by allowing Indonesian observers into the demilitarised zone (see ICJ Order of 18 July 2011, 19–21).

In the same month when the ICJ issued its order, Thailand held a general election and the Pheu Thai Party, another Thaksin-backed party formed after the dissolution of the People's Power Party, won a landslide victory. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, became Thailand's first female Prime Minister. Because of the good relations between her brother and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, relations between the two countries were quickly restored. Hun Sen sent a letter to congratulate his Thai counterpart and Cambodia's ambassador to Thailand became the first foreign diplomat to meet and congratulate Yingluck at the Pheu Thai Party's headquarters. Yingluck and her foreign and defence ministers made official visits to Phnom Penh in September that year. Both governments promised to honour the ICJ's decision and bilateral meetings at different levels resumed.

Moreover, in the spirit to boost ties, senior government officials from both countries played in a friendly football match on 24 September 2011 at Phnom Penh's Olympic Stadium. Hun Sen led the red team, the colour of the UDD or more commonly known as the Red-Shirts. Somchai Wongsawat captained the blue team, the colour representing Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party. Thaksin also celebrated Songran festival in Siem Reap in April 2012 with thousands of the Thai Red-Shirts, who came across the border to Cambodia by convoys of buses. The Cambodian government allowed the Red-Shirts to visit ancient temples at Angkor for free during their stay in Siem Reap.<sup>25</sup> In 2012, both countries also started a series of troop withdrawals from the Preah Vihear temple region (see Kimly 2012a). However, when I went on my third trip to the temple in December 2013, I still witnessed some troop presence in the areas around the temple though their number appeared relatively less than I saw during my previous trips.

### ***2013 ICJ Judgment still not implemented***

On 11 November 2013, the ICJ delivered its judgment on Cambodia's April 2011 application requesting the Court to interpret its 1962 Judgment. The Judgment declares:

The Court, unanimously, *Declares*, by way of interpretation, that the Judgment of 15 June 1962 decided that Cambodia had sovereignty over the whole territory of

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<sup>25</sup>Foreign tourists who visited ancient temples at Angkor were required to buy entry tickets, which cost US\$20 for one day visit.

the promontory of Preah Vihear, as defined in paragraph 98 of the present Judgment, and that, in consequence, Thailand was under an obligation to withdraw from that territory the Thai military or police forces, or other guards or keepers, that were stationed there. (ICJ Judgment of 11 November 2013, 36)

It is worth noting that while the 2013 ICJ Judgment interpreted the term “vicinity [of the Temple] on Cambodian territory” in the 1962 Judgment as the entirety of the Preah Vihear promontory, it did not rule whether Cambodia or Thailand owns the remaining disputed territories outside the promontory, citing the reason that they are outside the territorial scope that was the subject of the dispute resolved by the 1962 Judgment. The Preah Vihear promontory and the nearby Phnom Trap (Trap Mountain) are “distinct geographical features” (see ICJ Judgment of 11 November 2013, 32–34). It explained, “In 1962, the Court did not have this wider area in mind and, accordingly, that it did not intend the term ‘vicinity [of the Temple] on Cambodian territory’ to be understood as applicable to territory outside the promontory of Preah Vihear.” (Ibid, 33) The Judgment added, “The Court considers that Phnom Trap lay outside the disputed area and the 1962 Judgment did not address whether it was located in Thai or Cambodian territory.” (Ibid, 34)

The 2013 ICJ Judgment gave Cambodian and Thai governments some space to tell their people that their respective countries won in some respects. In other words, they won because they did not lose all the territories they had claimed. The subject of the dispute was over an overlapping claim of an area of 4.6 square kilometres surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple. If based on Thailand’s claim, Cambodia would own only a very small area around the temple, not the whole Preah Vihear promontory. If based on Cambodia’s claim, Cambodia would own larger territories outside the promontory. It is clear from the Judgment that both countries need to negotiate and resolve the dispute over the territories outside the promontory, particularly Phnom Trap.

Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Thai counterpart Yingluck Shinawatra pledged that they would honour the Judgment. However, because of their improved relations, both governments preferred to keep it low profile. Cambodia’s Minister for Information Khieu Kanharith said, “We don’t want the Thai extremist to use this issue to [further] pressure the government of Ms Yingluck...If she can deal with these matters, she might not suffer the same fate as her brother...We won’t rush and put pressure on Thailand.” (*The Phnom Penh Post*, November 18, 2013)

Domestic political issues in Cambodia and Thailand from the second half of 2013 also prevented both governments from implementing the Judgment. Cambodia held a general election in July 2013. Prime Minister Hun Sen's CPP won the election but with a loss of 22 parliamentary seats to the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Although it gained more seats, the CNRP did not recognise the result and accused the CPP of vote rigging. The opposition party boycotted the parliament and the party's leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha led mass street protests through Phnom Penh for months calling for an investigation into the alleged election irregularities and for Hun Sen to resign. From January 2014, tens of thousands of garment workers were also on strike demanding an increase to US\$160 for their minimum wage. Some of them joined the CNRP-led demonstrations in Phnom Penh. In February 2014, Hun Sen's government, which had opted not to confront demonstrators, finally decided to use state security forces to crack down on the anti-government demonstrations resulting in casualties and arrests of several protesters. The crack-down forced CNRP leaders to come back to the negotiation table with the CPP. Through a series of meetings, leaders from both parties struck a deal on 22 July 2014 thus effectively ending the CNRP's one-year long parliamentary boycott.

In Thailand, Prime Minister Yingluck also faced mass street protests in Bangkok against her Pheu Thai government after it attempted to pass a controversial political amnesty bill. Her political opponents alleged her government of attempting to help Thaksin return to Thailand free from trials. Former Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban from the Democrat Party capitalised on this public outrage against Yingluck's government to lead anti-government protests in November 2013. He urged protestors to occupy the government's various ministries. He said he wanted to "uproot the Thaksin regime" and replace it with a "people's assembly" selected directly from the public (see *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 30, 2013).

Prolonged demonstrations in Bangkok significantly destabilised Yingluck's government. She was forced to dissolve parliament and called a snap election in February 2014. Her Pheu Thai Party was expected to win but Thailand's Constitutional Court invalidated the poll because the opposition Democrat Party boycotted it and voters could not cast votes at some polling stations due to obstructions from anti-Pheu Thai protestors. Thus, her government served as care-taker until another election was

planned for 20 July 2014. Suthep continued to escalate protests against the care-taker government, which culminated in the military coup in May 2014. The military launched the coup under the pretext of restoring Thai social order, happiness, and harmony. The new military junta declared martial law and required many Pheu Thai officials, UDD leaders, activists and some academics believed to have anti-coup views to report to them.

The change of government in Thailand had an immediate impact on Cambodia. In early June 2014, the Thai military regime started raids on illegal migrant workers in the country, sending a mass exodus of Cambodian migrant workers across the border back to Cambodia. The regime viewed migrant workers as a source of social problems and instability to Thai society. State television channels showed the operations as ‘environmental cleansing’ to achieve a ‘pleasant’ society (see Thame 2014).

Fearing arrests and possible mistreatment by the Thai military, more than 240,000 Cambodian migrant labourers rushed back to Cambodia within a few weeks (*The Cambodia Daily*, June 30, 2014). The sudden flood of mass returnees was overwhelming and irritated senior Cambodian government officials. Cambodia’s Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sar Kheng was quoted in the media as saying, “After the military coup in Thailand, the Thai military leaders sent illegal Cambodian migrant workers in a rush without informing and discussing with Cambodia.” He added that eight workers died in traffic accidents in Thailand when they were trucked to the border. He said, “I think that the current leaders of Thai junta must be held accountable for what has happened.” (*Bangkok Post*, June 18, 2014) Prime Minister Hun Sen sent 150 military trucks to transport the returnees from the border back to their home provinces.

As Cambodian migrant labourers left Thailand, the military junta started to realise the importance of foreign workers from neighbouring countries to the Thai economy. They stepped back from their drastic migration policy and agreed to cooperate with the Cambodian government to facilitate the return of workers to their jobs in Thailand. The Thai military junta set up one-stop registration centres along the border with Cambodia to help workers return to Thailand expeditiously and legally. Thailand also expedited the processing of work permits from three to only one day (*The Cambodia Daily*, July 2, 2014). The Cambodian government also reduced the price of passports for

Cambodian migrant workers from US\$124 to only US\$4 to encourage them to have passports before they went to Thailand.

In the spirit to improve ties after some tension over the deportation of migrant workers, acting Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow paid a two-day official visit to Cambodia. During his visit, the Cambodian government freed Thai Yellow-Shirt activist Veera Somkwamkid by a royal pardon on 1 July 2014. Veera had been serving an eight-year imprisonment in Cambodia on espionage charges in 2010 (Ibid). In late July 2014, a Cambodia's military delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister General Tea Banh paid official visit to Thailand. The delegation also included Lieutenant General Hun Manet, Prime Minister Hun Sen's son (*Bangkok Post*, July 28, 2014). General Prayut, who was elected in August 2014 as Prime Minister of Thailand by his national legislature, visited Cambodia on 30 October 2014. Before his visit, Prayut told Thai media that he would propose to Hun Sen the possibility of reopening the entrance to Preah Vihear Temple from the Thai side of the border.

However, the Cambodian government killed this idea even before Prayut arrived. Koy Kuong, Cambodia's foreign ministry spokesman, said the reopening was "unnecessary". He was quoted by media as saying, "In my opinion, currently, a lot of tourists have visited the temple from Cambodia because of good roads and luxurious hotels in the surrounding area of the temple. Therefore, I think it is unnecessary to allow tourists to access the temple from the Thai side." (*Xinhua*, October 30, 2014) When he arrived in Cambodia and met with Hun Sen, Prayut did not propose it and both leaders did not discuss the Preah Vihear issue or the 2013 ICJ Judgment (*The Phnom Penh Post*, October 31, 2014).

As of March 2017 when I finalise my thesis for submission to the Australian National University for examination, both governments have not yet discussed the implementation of the 2013 ICJ Judgment. Perhaps the Cambodian government is waiting to discuss it with a new Thai government coming out of the general election in the future (if an election is to take place). So far General Prayut has not made clear whether he will allow a new election to take place and no one knows how long he will remain in power and what will be Thailand's next political episodes. The Preah Vihear

Temple region remains militarised, and troops from both countries are still on Phnom Trap. Although it is calm, armed fighting can reignite anytime.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The recent Preah Vihear conflict was embedded in the broader historical and contemporary tensions between Cambodia and Thailand. To understand why both countries could be easily drawn into military conflict over an area of land surrounding the temple, we need to look at the broader picture of the construction of symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple in both countries, the legacy of the past in shaping the present, the evolution of relations between both countries, the complexities of domestic politics in both countries, and the complex interplay of internal with global actors and forces.

The Preah Vihear conflict has provided interesting insights into some other aspects of bilateral, regional, and international significance. First, both countries and people have become increasingly and sophisticatedly interdependent economically. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians are working in Thailand. Hundreds of thousands of Thais visit Cambodia and a similar number of Cambodians visit Thailand annually. Trade volume between both countries has reached billions of US Dollars. However, some ultranationalist groups and politicians in both countries could still hijack the productive relationship, preventing it from moving quicker towards mutual prosperity. Second, ASEAN member countries have a plan of moving towards building a regionalism of shared economic, political, and socio-cultural communities. The recent military hostility at Preah Vihear temple region serves as a reminder to ASEAN to put words into actions, and not merely paying lip service. Third, the ICJ Judgment provides international moral grounds for these states in dispute to resolve conflict peacefully. However, it is hard to implement it on the ground when the domestic political situation in either state remains unstable.



## Chapter 3

### Norodom Sihanouk and the Politics of Postcolonial Nation-Building

#### 1. Introduction

Many contemporary Cambodian nationalists, political and educated elites commonly refer to Preah Vihear Temple as a symbolic representation of the Cambodian nation. However, little is known or understood about how the border temple complex has emerged from obscurity to symbolise the nation in Cambodian nationalist discourse. Therefore, this chapter seeks to examine the stakeholders, contexts, and specific national political situation in which the national power for the ancient temple was constructed. It links the temple's rise to national prominence to Prince Norodom Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building.

Emerging as Cambodia's independence leader, Prince Sihanouk's most immediate political priority was to transform national enthusiasm, hope and pride emanating from gaining independence into national development and nation-building, a new political ideology of modernisation widely aspired to by postcolonial leaders in the new international political context of nation-states. However, he lacked the necessary resources required to build a modern Cambodian nation-state similar to those in the West. Moreover, he faced major constraints to his political leadership caused by various domestic and external factors, which I will present in details in the section that follows.

Caught between Sihanouk's desire for nation-building and the constraints posed to his political leadership, the Preah Vihear temple conflict with Thailand was publicised as a significant national issue in ways that benefitted the prince's politics of nation-building. Preah Vihear Temple thus emerged in the national discourse to symbolise Khmer national identity, unity, and pride. In this context, there has been little attention given to the role of Sihanouk and his Sangkum Reastr Niyum [People's Socialist Community] regime in presenting the Preah Vihear Temple as a site of national heritage. Prince Sihanouk and his Sangkum have manipulated symbols, imagery, language, and rituals to concentrate national power in the temple in the national imagining of the nation. And in return, Sihanouk and his loyal political elites at the

apex of the state who vowed to safeguard the ancient monument against Thailand's aggression could achieve their political objectives of ruling postcolonial Cambodia.

I argue that Prince Sihanouk had strong stake in Preah Vihear Temple and the conflict over it with Thailand. His investment in nationalism project for the temple was an important alternative political resource enabling him to achieve his political objectives in the framework of his politics of postcolonial nation-building. I also argue that Sihanouk's Sangkum was successful in conjuring up an image of the ancient temple as representing the Cambodian nation, blending the primordialist ideas with potent modern beliefs about the state and its guardianship of the nation.

This chapter begins with the general discussion of Prince Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building and how Preah Vihear Temple fitted into it, followed by an examination of the state's campaigns to promote the temple as a national symbol. It concludes with an argument that Sihanouk's politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear temple conflict was an alternative and productive political resource useful for building the nation and his political power.

## **2. Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building and Preah Vihear Temple conflict**

During the '50s and '60s, I focused on defending our independence, regaining our territory and building up a modern Cambodia.<sup>26</sup>

Preah Vihear Temple came to the attention of the Cambodian people as a symbol of Khmer national identity and pride during Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime. It is, therefore, important to explore how Cambodia's national political situation and Sihanouk's role at that time helped bring the obscure ancient temple complex to the national attention. I argue that the temple's emergence as a symbol of the Cambodian nation is inextricably linked to its usefulness for Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building, which relied greatly on the manipulation of nationalism to build the nation and to define his place in relation to it.

Like other leaders of postcolonial states, Prince Sihanouk took great pride in attaining independence from France for his country. He proudly referred to himself as

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<sup>26</sup>Prince Norodom Sihanouk's statement from an interview with Bernard Krisher published in the *Los Angeles Time* in 1992 and republished in (*The Cambodia Daily*, October 31, 2008).

the Father of Cambodia's national independence.<sup>27</sup> He aspired to build the Cambodian nation and to achieve the level of political and economic progress and modernity for Cambodia similar to those civilised states in the West.<sup>28</sup> Hansen and Stepputat (2001, 10–11) noted that it was widely common for leaders of postcolonial states to have such an aspiration for nation-building and modernisation of their respective countries because they were influenced by the Western construction of the nation-state system which became universalised as the world's most powerful ideology of international political order and state system after the end of the Second World War.

Sihanouk's immediate political priority after independence of building the nation was also driven by the fact that he needed a nation that would provide him with a new framework or an arena to work with to rule Cambodia. He could not go backwards to adopt the precolonial political order or state system because colonial encounter had altered the political relationship between the ruler and the ruled and had introduced new ideas and concepts about power, politics, state and nation. Besides, post-independence countries were set in a forward motion. That meant he needed to work with the notion of nation to define Cambodia's place in the world of nation-states.

However, Prince Sihanouk's aspiration of modern nation-building soon faced with major constraints, which were typical to leaders of postcolonial states. Those constraints included the lack of sufficient resources, especially state revenue (Slater 2010, 3); the absence of strong state tradition (Myrdal 1968 cited in Reid 2010, 26); the state's limited ability to control territory (Slater 2010, 36; Roy 2007, 26); political fragmentation among political elites causing political instability (Slater 2010; Battersby 1998); challenges for ruling elites to produce effective leadership (Apter 1968, 48); leaders' difficulty in repositioning their countries in the new international economic and political system (Sidel 2012, 116), and suspicion between neighbouring

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<sup>27</sup>Other leaders, for example, Sukarno of Indonesia and U Nu of Burma also portrayed themselves as Father of national independence because such portrayal enhanced their political authority and legitimacy (see Pye 1962).

<sup>28</sup>Colonial encounter created a love-hate relationship among indigenous ruling elites towards their colonisers. They had resentment because their countries were colonised. They admired their colonial masters because the latter possessed more advanced technology, science and modern administration. Whatever pathways they adopted after decolonisation, the elites aspired to progress and modernity to achieve national pride. Nation-building was their common idiomatic expression for their desires. In Cambodia's case, Prince Sihanouk's taste for French wine and dishes and his sending of many young Cambodians to study in France in hope of their help to develop Cambodia upon their returns was a clear manifestation of his desire for building a modern Cambodian nation.

states making it difficult to forge mutual peaceful and productive relationship (Geertz 1973, 237).

In the case of Sihanouk, he faced a number of major political constraints on his post-independence nation-building aspiration, many of which were similar to those common issues presented above. First, he was unable to forge peaceful relationships with Cambodia's neighbours, Thailand and South Vietnam. Sihanouk was deeply suspicious and hateful of Thai Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who likewise disliked the Cambodian leader and accused him of being "a stalking-horse for communism in the region" (see Osborne 1994, 151–152). Sihanouk accused both leaders of being behind the assassination attempts and coup plots against him in 1959, which he managed to crush successfully (Ibid, 108–111).

Sihanouk also perceived the Thai state as a serious threat to the existence of Cambodia. His perception was influenced by a combination of factors—the historical legacy of enmity between Cambodia and Thailand; Thailand's support of Cambodian dissidents attempting to undermine and overthrow him;<sup>29</sup> Thailand's pro-America foreign policy stance in contrast to Cambodia's adopted policy of neutrality; and Thailand's seizure of the Khmer Temple of Preah Vihear in 1954. Osborne (2008a, 3) writes that from 1953 when Cambodia gained independence up until 1970, Cambodia and Thailand suffered strained relations. Diplomatic ties were suspended twice, once in 1958 and again in 1961 (Leifer 1961–1962, 365–366). Both Sihanouk and Thai Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat hurled accusations and insults at each other (Osborne 1994, 107–108). For example, Sihanouk mockingly called Sarit's Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman in Khmer *khormoan* [chicken sweet stew].<sup>30</sup> In Thailand, Charnvit (2003, 5) writes that a riddle was created to ridicule the Cambodian prince. He writes, "A Thai riddle asks, 'What color (*si*) do Thai people hate?' The answer is neither red (*si daeng*) nor black (*si dam*), but 'Si-hanouk.'"

The second major challenge to Sihanouk's nation-building was political fragmentation among the Cambodian political elites. His political authority was challenged by other political groups, who were vying for control of post-independence

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<sup>29</sup>From 1953 when Cambodia gained independence to 1970 when Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup and throughout the 1980s, Thai governments followed its traditional policy of supporting Cambodian resistance forces to destabilise and weaken governments in Phnom Penh (Osborne 1994, 95; Osborne 2008a, 3).

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Professor Khing Hoc Dy, Phnom Penh, 26 June 2012.

Cambodia. These political forces that presented formidable hurdles to Sihanouk's rule were the Democratic Party, Khmer communists with links to communist North Vietnam, and Son Ngoc Thanh's Khmer Serei [Free Khmer] movement (see Osborne 1994, 108–111). The Democratic Party was attempting to introduce modern political and parliamentary system to Cambodia. It was popular among Cambodian urban population. Sihanouk viewed it as trying to limit his monarchical power to only symbolic and ceremonial roles. Therefore, he needed to make sure that the Democrats would be weakened and eliminated. For Khmer communists, they were still operating as a secret political cell with limited political influence in the 1950s and early 1960s. It thus posed relatively less threat to him. Sihanouk's most bitter political foe was Son Ngoc Thanh, who was an ethnic Khmer from Kampuchea Krom, the lower Mekong delta region of Southern Vietnam. He was an intellectual and a leader of a dissident force operating in Cambodia's border regions with Thailand. Thanh's Khmer Serei movement received support from the Thai and the South Vietnamese governments. It operated to undermine the Phnom Penh government from the early 1950s up to 1970 through sporadic guerrilla attacks and anti-government radio broadcasts from their Radio Phnom Dangkaek.

The third major constraint to Prince Sihanouk's postcolonial nation-building effort was the repositioning of Cambodia's foreign policy in the new international political context of the Cold War tension between the world's superpowers. He adopted neutrality and non-alignment as the guiding principle for his country's foreign policy, which meant Cambodia chose a middle path of neither being an ally nor an enemy to either of the two competing political blocs. However, he found it increasingly difficult to maintain this path as domestic, regional and international political situation grew increasingly complex and fluid. As a result, his foreign policy veered off course.

As a leader of a small and politically fragile state surrounded by unfriendly neighbours, Sihanouk had limited space and resources to manoeuvre between the superpowers. He found himself unable to manage both the pressure and the lure from them. Soon after the Geneva Conference on Indochina in 1954, the United States established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to contain the spread of communism in the Southeast Asian region. The United States made efforts to persuade Sihanouk to place Cambodia under the treaty's protection, but the Cambodian leader

rejected it (Osborne 1994, 94; Kiernan 2004, 169). However, he agreed to receive military aid from America, while he assured Beijing and Hanoi that this decision did not mean that Cambodia was on American side (Kiernan 2004, 169). Although Sihanouk adopted a neutral stance for Cambodia's foreign policy, he became increasingly irritated by the arrogant behaviour of the United States and its allies Thailand and South Vietnam towards Cambodia. In February 1956, Sihanouk made his first visit to China where he was greeted and honoured with a grand reception. He signed with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai a Sino-Cambodian declaration of friendship (Osborne 1994, 102). He declared from Beijing, which was broadcasted on Radio Phnom Penh, that China was Cambodia's number one friend.<sup>31</sup>

Caught between his aspiration to build a modern nation of Cambodia and the constraints on his political leadership, Prince Sihanouk had to rely on, among other things, nationalism as one of the important alternative political resources to achieve his political objectives. Geertz (1973, 237) notes that ruling elites in postcolonial countries relied greatly on nationalism for nation-building of their countries. Nationalism became "normalized as a universal project in the postcolonial world" (Gupta 1998, 14). Similar to other postcolonial leaders, for example, Indonesia's President Sukarno (see Strassler 2009, 75), Prince Sihanouk tried to establish himself as the embodiment of the Cambodian nation in a bid to unify the disparate population behind him and to discredit his political opponents, who were also laying competing claims to representing the nation. Sihanouk skilfully weaved his public body as a leader with the abstract body of the nation. Barnett (1990, 122) writes that Sihanouk instilled in Cambodian people the perception that Sihanouk is Cambodia and Cambodia is Sihanouk. Cambodia without Sihanouk would be catastrophic.

This intricate relationship between the public realm of the leader and the realm of the nation elucidated the significance of the politics of nationalism for Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building. In this sense, nationalism was an alternative and productive political resource for him to build the nation. Unlike other concrete resources for nation-building such as money, technology, political institutions, and human resources, which would take tremendous effort and lengthy time to achieve, nationalism was relatively much less expensive to invest, more readily available for

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<sup>31</sup>Interview with Professor Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 7 Sept. 2012.

manipulation or cultivation, and quicker to trigger responses from the population. It did not require much investment for Sihanouk to construct himself as the embodiment or the Father of the nation. Such a notion could be relatively easy to cultivate through nationalist symbolism, rhetoric and imagery, and state rituals, which were conveyed to the mass population through the state media, public education system, government officials and its army of public servants.

Moreover, another important way of enabling Sihanouk to achieve his politics of representing the nation was through the mobilising of old cultural symbols, practices and tradition and sacralising them as ‘national’ symbols or ‘national’ identities in what Hobsbawm (1983) calls “inventing traditions”. He positioned himself skilfully as the defender, guardian and promoter of these national cultural symbols. Sihanouk’s politics of nationalism implemented through inventing traditions was politically viable for his nation-building project since Cambodia’s geographical landscape was rich with cultural and traditional fragments such as ancient monuments, religious sites, popular music, dance, and folklores. They scattered throughout the country and were thus readily available for him to use at his disposal to the advantage of his politics of nation-building.<sup>32</sup> Through this cultural politics of representing the nation, he was able to invoke the Cambodian people to re-imagine the country’s past in ways that linked his Sangkum government to the ancient Khmer Empire of Angkor.<sup>33</sup> Sangkum was depicted as prosperous and glorious as the Angkorian period, which is widely considered among the Cambodians as their country’s golden era. Therefore, Sihanouk’s mission of repairing and building a prosperous post-independence Cambodian nation was projected as proudly achieved. Cambodia was restored to its former grandeur and pride.

It was under this dynamic and broader context of Sihanouk’s politics of nationalism for postcolonial nation-building that the Cambodian state under Sihanouk invested in transforming Preah Vihear Temple from a site of cultural and religious worship to a site of national significance. The temple conflict with Thailand was publicised as a

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<sup>32</sup>See Daravuth and Muan (2001) about his government’s sending of public servants to the art sector and to various provinces throughout the country to document and collect cultural, traditional and local practices, dances, musical instruments, folklores and others under the state’s project of preserving and promoting them.

<sup>33</sup> During the colonial period, the French introduced the cultural politics of representing the nation to lead the Cambodian population to re-imagine their past in ways that justified French colonial rule of Cambodia and their so-called civilising mission. Through their activities, the French showed that they were repairing the body of the Cambodian nation in order to restore it to its former glory and prestige as it was during the Angkorian period (see Edwards 2007).

major national issue that was threatening the nation and required Cambodian people to rally behind Sihanouk's government to defend it.<sup>34</sup> When the ICJ ruled in its Judgement declaring Cambodia's victory over Thailand for the ownership of Preah Vihear Temple, the government continued its campaigns to promote the temple as a symbol of national achievement, pride, unity and remembrance. It attributed the victory to Sihanouk's leadership as expressed succinctly in an article by one of his senior officials and published in the state-owned *Kambuja Surya Journal*.<sup>35</sup>

For the reunion of this precious antiquity with Cambodia, history will not forget it because this monument is the most valuable asset of our Khmer nation. This is an international victory and is an achievement under the brilliant leadership of Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk, the Head of State. (Huo Nim 1963)

### **3. State investment in nationalism projects: Preah Vihear Temple from obscurity to national symbol**

In this section, I investigate the Sangkum Government's important investment in nationalism projects to concentrate national power in Preah Vihear Temple, thus transforming the obscure border temple complex into a potent symbolism of the Cambodian nation in Sihanouk's grand official national discourse of nation-building.

#### *Theatre performance-Lakhaon niyeay*

*Lakhaon* [theatre performance] in Cambodia has a long history (Ly 1971). However, *lakhaon niyeay* [speaking theatre] was introduced into Cambodia during the later period of French colonial rule and did not gain popularity until the 1950s and 1960s. This modern form of performance was imported from the West. Hang Thun Hak, one of the most prominent names associated with *lakhaon niyeay*, studied in France. After Cambodia became independent in 1953, the palace and the state patronised *lakhaon niyeay* heavily. The state created a national troupe of speaking theatre performers called *krom lakhaon cheat nai brates Kampuchea* [the National Theatre Group of Cambodia]. In everyday language, people generally referred to

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<sup>34</sup>Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy, Ang Choulean and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June, 3 Sept., and 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>35</sup> It was the first Khmer language journal, launched in 1926 with the aims of promoting Khmer culture, tradition and religion. Although privately-owned printing houses started to open in Cambodia after 1910, they did not play any important role in the printing of Khmer language texts until 1920. The reason was that there was an opposition from conservatism-oriented monks. However, the opposition later on subsided and gave in to the force of modernism-oriented monks, thus paving the way for the establishment of *Kambuja Surya Journal* (see Khing 2007, 22–24).



*lakhaon niyeay* performed by this national troupe as *lakhaon cheat* [national theatre]. Considered a modern form of theatre, the speaking theatre was very popular. The group toured the country to perform in major events and ceremonies. *Lakhaon cheat* also had regular broadcast program on state-owned national radio (see Daravuth and Muan 2001, 63–140). It was through its regular program on the national radio that *lakhaon cheat* became important entertainment for both urban and rural dwellers.<sup>36</sup>

During the tense atmosphere of 1961, one year before the ICJ judgment, *lakhaon cheat* performed and broadcast the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo and the Legend of Nak Ta Kleang Moeung a few times in the popular *lakhaon cheat* program on the national radio.<sup>37</sup> Below are the synopses of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo and the Legend of Nak Ta Kleang Moeung respectively.

**The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo** told the story of twin brothers, born in Cambodia. The older brother was an ox called Preah Ko and the younger was a man named Preah Keo. Preah Ko possessed divine power. Both were believed to bring peace and prosperity to the land where they resided. Before long, news of them reached the Siamese King. The King of Siam wanted Preah Ko and Preah Keo brought to Siam so that his whole kingdom and people would be peaceful and prosperous. Therefore, the Siamese King came to Cambodia to propose animal contests with the King of Cambodia. Preah Ko, the ox, helped the Cambodian King by transforming himself into various animals to fight the King of Siam's animals. Preah Ko defeated the King of Siam's animals several times. Finally, the Siamese brought in a mechanical bull to fight Preah Ko. Preah Ko could not defeat the mechanical bull. Therefore, he flew up rescuing Preah Keo and Preah Keo's consort, Neang Pov, from Siamese capture. Preah Ko and Preah Keo took refuge in many places, one, the bamboo forest at Lovek. Finally, the Siamese captured them and took them to Siam. In Siam, soldiers guarded Preah Ko and Preah Keo in a gigantic palace days and nights, from where they could not escape back to Cambodia even until the present day.<sup>38</sup>

**The Legend of Nak Ta Kleang Moeung** told of the heroism of a Khmer army commander in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Khmer King Chey Aschar. Kleang Moeung dared to sacrifice his life to defend Cambodia from Siam's occupation. When the Khmer king was informed that troops of the Siamese king were on their way to attack his kingdom, he was worried because he had fewer military resources to withstand the enemy attack. He summoned his loyal officials and asked them for a strategy that could guarantee success for Cambodia. Kleang Moeung was the only one to respond. He was willing to sacrifice his own life to mobilise an army of ghosts to fight against the Siamese. He ordered a large pit dug with sharp blades at the bottom that would impale him when he jumped in. Before he sacrificed his life, he ordered all soldiers and officials to gather and listen to his last word. He said, "Please fight in this war

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<sup>36</sup>Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy, Ang Choulean and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June, 3 Sept., and 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 3 Sept. 2012. Professor Ang Choulean talked about the speaking theatre performance of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo, and Professor Khing Hoc Dy mentioned the Legend of Nak Ta Kleang Moeung.

<sup>38</sup> Adapted from (Kimly 2006, 1–2).

with all your heart and strength to liberate Khmer territory from the enemy's occupation. As for me, I am going to gather an army of ghosts. Please believe this. If you hear loud cheering like that of thunder seven days after my death, it will signify our victory." Soon after he finished his speech, he leapt into the pit, followed by his wife and two sons. Seven days later a loud noise was heard like the one Kleang Moeung had foretold. When Siamese troops arrived in Battambang, Kleang Moeung's army of ghosts weakened and caused chaos among the Siamese soldiers by making them sick. Thus, the troops of Khmer King Chey Aschar were able to defeat the Siamese troops easily.<sup>39</sup>

Both legends have their roots in historical relations between Cambodia and Thailand,<sup>40</sup> and both portray Thai kings, symbols of the Thai state, in a negative light. The Thai leaders are seen to have the evil intention of invading and capturing Cambodian territory and its national treasures and disturbing the peace. Therefore, choosing these two legends to be performed and broadcast on the state-owned radio in 1961 during the Preah Vihear temple dispute with Thailand was, without doubt, deliberate because the two stories contained strong nationalist appeals against Thailand and both showed distinctive national and ethnic identities, differentiating the Khmer from the Thai. Cambodia was shown as victim of Thailand's aggressions.

The Cambodian state sponsored the performance of these legends in *lakhaon cheat* to re-awaken Cambodian people's collective memory of their country's bitter historical experience with Thailand. In this way, the collective memory of events from the distant past and the collective memory of events of the 1950s and 1960s informed and reinforced each other, thus fostering a sense of Khmer ethnic identity and national cohesion, which was significant for the politics of postcolonial nation-building. Through this form of nationalist campaign, the state expected its people to perceive Thailand's attempt to occupy the Preah Vihear Temple as Thailand's malicious intention to capture Cambodia's national heritage. It also expected people to rally behind their national leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk to defend their ancestral heritage. The Cambodian state's reconstruction of the old legends employing *lakhaon cheat* as a modern mode of narrating the stories and communicating the performance to the masses through radio allowed listeners to travel en masse through time and space, and back and forth between past and present.

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<sup>39</sup> Adapted and translated from Khmer language text. See the legend in (*brachum roeung preng* Khmer [collection of old Khmer stories], Part 8, 2001: 1–19).

<sup>40</sup> Many Cambodian people and Cambodian scholars, Khing (1991) and Ang (1997), believe that the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo was composed to explain the capture of the Khmer capital of Lovek by the Siamese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, in my MA thesis I argue that it was a story that combined three major periods of Cambodian history together—Angkor, Lovek, and Oudong (see Kimly 2006).

Similar to Anderson's study (1990, 156–173) of cartoons in Indonesia as a mode of political communication, Cambodia's *lakhaon cheat* served a similar purpose. The Cambodian state used it to communicate the state's political agenda to the population. And during the Preah Vihear temple dispute with Thailand, the state used the popular speaking theatre to influence and shape public opinion. However, unlike the cartoons in Anderson's study, which rely on printing technology and employ written and visual language and symbols to communicate political meanings and require some audience familiarity to grasp the intended meanings, speaking theatre employs a variety of linguistic features that can communicate with audiences more effectively. Because speaking theatre can take the audience through time and space as well as back and forth between past and present, it can touch the souls and stir the emotion of the audience if performed in the right context. In an interview, Professor Ang Choulean who was in his early teens in 1961, said:

Although I was only a young boy, when I listened to *lakhaon cheat* performance of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo on the radio, I wept when it approached the end of the story, the point at which Preah Ko and Preah Keo were captured and taken to Siam and prevented from escaping back to Cambodia. Everyone, who listened, wept and felt pity for Preah Ko and Preah Keo. They also felt angry towards Siam.<sup>41</sup>

He also noted that nationalist sentiment against Thailand was strong and widespread among Phnom Penh residents at that time. He said, "Everyone was angry with the Siamese. Even though I was only a boy, I was also angry." However, the city people's nationalism was expressed only in the form of sentiment; it did not break out into mass protests.<sup>42</sup>

Speaking theatre continued to be relied upon as a valuable political resource by Prince Sihanouk's Sangkum government for its politics of nationalism against Thailand even after the ICJ's 1962 Judgment because the World Court's ruling did not yet resolve the conflict between the two countries. Military tension at the Preah Vihear temple region continued with some armed clashes reportedly erupted between 1965 and 1967 (see Cuasay 1998, 881). Around that time, Hang Thun Hak wrote a speaking theatre story about the Preah Vihear temple conflict and it was broadcasted on

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Professor Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 3 Sept. 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Cambodia's national radio. The story juxtaposed the contrasting trait between the Khmer and the Thais. It also included scenes of fighting in its episodes.<sup>43</sup>

Sihanouk's government then took a step further by having the speaking theatre story performed on stage at a big open space at Samraong train station, about 15 kilometres away from Phnom Penh. Van Molyvan, then serving as education minister, required high school and university students from across Phnom Penh to trek on foot to the site. School teachers and principals and university professors and rectors from the city also accompanied their students there on foot. The students along with their educators spent a night there watching the theatre performance. A big poster of Preah Vihear Temple was displayed as the stage's backdrop. The core messages that the performance intended to communicate to the crowd of viewers were about how Cambodia won over Thailand and how valuable Preah Vihear Temple as a national heritage was to Cambodia. The portrayal of Thailand and Sarit as villains having "ill intent and greed" of "stealing Khmer's belongings" was also a central theme of the performance.<sup>44</sup>

The state-organised mass trekking and theatre performance, whose themes were rich with nationalist and patriotic flavour, manifested clearly the Sihanouk Government's intention to homogenise collective memory and nationalism of the urban youth and educated elites. Such a homogenising project was significant for the ruling elites' politics of nation-building and state-building. It bolstered the patriotic image of the state elites and the national status of Preah Vihear Temple. Professor Khing Hoc Dy, who also participated in the event, said, "Walking and spending a night there together was an unforgettable experience for us. We believed in what the performers communicated to us... We were all behind Samdech Sihanouk."<sup>45</sup>

### *State media and propaganda about Preah Vihear Temple*

As Cambodia has gone through a long period of civil war, especially the horrendous period of Democratic Kampuchea regime (1975–1979) during which most documents and records from previous regimes were destroyed, it is difficult to conduct thorough research looking into the country's media prior to the DK regime. There is no statistical data available relating to, for example, radio and/or television-household

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<sup>43</sup>Interview with Professor Khing Hoc Dy, Phnom Penh, 26 June 2012.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

ratio, and how many newspapers on average were circulated daily by each agency during Prince Sihanouk's Sangkum regime. Although there is a book written by Harish C. Mehta, which documented Cambodian press under the country's six regimes (see Mehta 1997), the book does not cover some important aspects, for example, how much state-owned media penetrated Cambodia's rural life in the 1950s and 1960s and what were listeners' reactions to media reports. For these reasons, my writing in this section relies heavily on the accounts from interviews with three Cambodian scholars and historians, who were in their teens during the 1950s and who still have good recollections of the influence of state-owned media on Cambodia's urban and rural society in the 1950s and 1960s.

During Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime, both print and broadcast media were in operation. As for broadcast media, the state-owned National Radio Phnom Penh was the state's major broadcasting tool, reaching deep into Cambodia's rural areas.<sup>46</sup> The country's first television network, the Royal Cambodian TV Station, came into operation in February 1966. However, its broadcast was limited to only twice a week and over a radius of only 50 miles around Phnom Penh (Mehta 1997, 87).

As for print media, there were more than a dozen newspapers and magazines.<sup>47</sup> Many of them were government's mouthpieces (Mehta 1997, 37; Khing 2007, 25). Mehta (1997, 37) writes, "They rarely carried more than one opinion: that of chief of state Sihanouk." Newspapers were circulated in Phnom Penh and in major provincial cities,<sup>48</sup> suggesting their targeted readers were educated and urban dwellers. The most widely read and circulated state-owned newspaper was *Neak Cheat Niyom* [The Nationalist].<sup>49</sup>

The Preah Vihear temple conflict and the government's anti-Thailand nationalist propaganda were covered in the newspapers.<sup>50</sup> *Kambuja Surya Journal* also covered the topics extensively in its monthly publications between January and May 1963. Its articles touched on various aspects of Cambodia's victory over Thailand including the

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<sup>46</sup> Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang said they could listen to the national radio's broadcast in their respective provinces of Kampong Thom and Kampot.

<sup>47</sup> After independence, printing houses were able to increase their printing of texts in Khmer language, the national language of the newly independent state. Bookstores and printing houses also started to appear in major provinces, making it possible for the operation and circulation of newspapers and magazines (Khing 2007, 25).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Professor Khing Hoc Dy, Phnom Penh, 26 June 2012.

<sup>49</sup> It was a thick weekly newspaper containing about 30 pages, many of which were usually photos of Prince Sihanouk. Interview with Professor Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 3 Sept. 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 3 Sept. 2012.

legal battle between counsels representing both sides at the ICJ, celebrations at Preah Vihear Temple, and the association of the victory with Sihanouk's "brilliant leadership".<sup>51</sup>

While print media at that time played important roles in communicating the state's political propaganda and in enhancing what Anderson (1983) calls 'imagined political community', it was the national radio broadcasts that had much more far-reaching effects in influencing ordinary people's imagining of their Cambodian nation since the radio broadcasts could reach rural villages, home to the majority of the country's population. In the paragraphs below I will therefore focus mainly on how the national radio and its broadcasts of Prince Sihanouk's speech played a role in shaping ordinary people's views of Sihanouk and of Thailand and in promoting Preah Vihear Temple as Cambodia's national icon.

During the Sangkum regime, nearly every home in Phnom Penh had a radio. Many city dwellers heard of Cambodia's conflict with Thailand over the ownership of Preah Vihear Temple through the national radio.<sup>52</sup> Unlike the city, radios were scarce in the countryside in the 1950s. There were one or two in each village and it was usually peasant farmers with good incomes who could afford a big radio because it required between 40 and 60 batteries to operate. Villagers who could not afford a radio usually gathered in the evening at the houses of those who had a radio to listen to speaking theatre and other entertainment programs.<sup>53</sup> When transistor radios, powered by either electricity or batteries, were introduced into Cambodia in the 1960s, they quickly spread throughout the country (Daravuth and Muan 2001, 68). More and more peasants could afford one. News, songs, and entertainment programs on radio became an integral part of rural life and informed villagers of what was happening in the world outside their rural localities. Professor Ang Choulean said, "Although people were poor at that time, they tried to save some money to buy a radio because it was means for life beyond the village." He added, "I do not remember the exact year when transistor radio arrived in Cambodia, whether it was before or after our Preah Vihear victory at the ICJ, but I think it came in around that time."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>See (*Kambuja Surya Journal*, issues Jan., Feb., Mar., April and May 1963).

<sup>52</sup>Interview with Professor Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 3 Sept. 2012.

<sup>53</sup>Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>54</sup>Interview with Professor Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 3 Sept. 2012.

The news of Cambodia's conflict with Thailand over the ownership of Preah Vihear Temple and of Cambodia's victory over Thailand at the International Court of Justice was broadcast on the country's national radio by Ma Lao Pi, Cambodia's talented lyricist, poet and broadcaster during the Sangkum regime. According to Professor Ang Choulean, almost everyone in Phnom Penh heard it. He said:

At that time in Phnom Penh, let's say when there was news of a car killing a person on the road, people in the whole city heard about it and talked about it for weeks. So a national issue like the dispute with Thailand and the Preah Vihear case, everyone knew of. Unlike nowadays, Phnom Penh of that time was small and had a small population.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, it was not certain how well the news was received in the countryside. It was clear, however, that peasants who owned a radio knew about the ICJ decision. Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang, whose houses had radios, confirmed that they heard the news on radios in their respective provinces of Kampong Thom and Kampot.<sup>56</sup> News programs were usually inserted during the broadcast programs of speaking theatre and other performances to encourage people who were listening to the performances to also listen to the news. Professor Sorn Samnang said:

For rural villagers at that time, radio was usually intended for two things, news and entertainment. There were *silapak* [arts] programs on Wednesday and Friday nights starting from 8 pm. I cannot remember well whether it was *lakhaon* first or *yike* first. These were the two entertainment programs for people. So usually news was inserted during entertainment. The news program lasted about 15 minutes. Radio was usually turned on with high volume, and thus in a quiet night the sound could be heard one kilometre away.<sup>57</sup>

Besides news, people also knew about Cambodia's conflict with Thailand and their country's Preah Vihear temple victory at the ICJ through Prince Sihanouk's improvised speeches broadcast on national radio. During his Sangkum regime, the prince made frequent visits to different parts of Cambodia to preside over the inaugurations of his regime's achievements.<sup>58</sup> Chandler (1991, 88) remarked, "Indefatigably he crisscrossed his kingdom, inaugurating schools, dams, parks, factories, and hospitals. Sometimes it seemed that he was prepared to inaugurate anything that had a fresh coat of paint." He added, "On such occasions, he would

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<sup>55</sup>Interview with Professor Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 3 Sept 2012. According to the government's 1962 population census, Phnom Penh had a total population of 403,500 (Royaume du Cambodge 1962). In 2008, the city had a population of 1,325,681 (Kingdom of Cambodia 2008).

<sup>56</sup>Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Professor Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>58</sup>Interviews Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 7 Sept. 2012.

deliver speeches for hours to crowds.” Each of his improvised speeches was recorded and broadcast on the national radio at least three times on at least three consecutive days. His speech usually lasted between an hour and an hour and a half.<sup>59</sup> People in the countryside were generally very interested in the radio broadcast of Prince Sihanouk’s improvised speech. According to Professor Sorn Samnang, “They listened to it with great attention.” Unlike news programs, Sihanouk’s recorded speeches were not broadcast during entertainment. They were broadcast in daytime or in the evening.<sup>60</sup>

His speeches covered different aspects of national and international issues, about Cambodia’s friends and foes. He accused his domestic political opponents, Son Ngoc Thanh and Sam Sary, of colluding with Thai and South Vietnamese governments against Cambodia. Sihanouk also used the Preah Vihear temple conflict to discredit dissidents by arguing that they were not genuine Khmer nationalists because they were collaborating with the Thai state, which wanted to seize the Khmer Temple of Preah Vihear from Cambodia.<sup>61</sup> Sihanouk also criticised Thai Prime Minister Marshal Sarit Thanarat, South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh Diem, other foreign leaders, and foreign press perceived to have malicious intentions toward his country.<sup>62</sup> Osborne (1994, 151–152) observed that Sihanouk’s dislike of Sarit Thanarat and Ngo Dinh Diem ran deep. When the Thai prime minister died in 1963, the prince decreed a day of “national rejoicing” in Cambodia (Mehta 1997, 94).

Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang observed that people in the provinces generally believed what the prince said.<sup>63</sup> Professor Sorn Samnang stressed, “People believed his words with confidence and faith.”<sup>64</sup> Their accounts are also corroborated by Chandler (1991, 88), which noted that between 1955 and 1966 there was an affectionate relationship between Prince Sihanouk and his people. Chandler attributed people’s faith in the prince to his ability “to deliver much of what he promised” and his closeness “to the people than any Cambodian monarch had ever been before”.

The culturally and politically constructed ideas of divine or semi-divine power associated with Cambodian kingship also contributed to people’s faith in Sihanouk. Although Sihanouk abdicated and gave the throne to his father in 1955 to lead his

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<sup>59</sup>Interview with Professor Ang Choulean, Phnom Penh, 3 Sept. 2012.

<sup>60</sup>Interview with Professor Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>61</sup>Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Interview with Professor Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 7 Sept. 2012.



Sangkum movement, Stuart-Fox (2013) argues that it did not erode people's perception of him as possessing divine power. He explains:

For abdication is a constitutional act that in the Theravada worldview in no way diminishes the store of merit that ensured royal birth in the first place. In fact it may increase merit, as for example, when the king steps down to become a monk. Sihanouk's evident compassion for his people and concern for their welfare added to the store of his merit in the eyes of his people. The respect paid to Sihanouk by ordinary Cambodians was for his accumulated merit, which they believe ensures rebirth directly into one of the Buddhist heavens.

The belief that Sihanouk possessed divine power continued among many people especially the elderly until his death in 2012. Shortly before Boeing 747 of Air China, which transported Sihanouk's body from Beijing, landed at Phnom Penh International Airport, a big cloud was observed to be moving in front of the sun. The cloud acted as a giant umbrella, shielding the whole area of the airport and its vicinity from the heat and creating a gentle breeze. Many old and middle-aged people, who were waiting to pay their respects at the return of his body, quickly remarked linking this natural phenomenon with the King Father's divinity. During the three months when his body was in the Royal Palace, the myth continued. People in different provinces were reported to have seen Sihanouk's face smiling in the moon, and mourning crowds in front of the Royal Palace were reported to have seen the former king's face in clouds and in smoke from incense sticks.

Sihanouk's charm and his ability to entertain listeners added to his charisma in the eyes of the Cambodian people, whom he called his children. His language was well received by rural audiences because in his speeches he explained complex state affairs by using simple everyday language and diverse popular discourses ranging from jokes to supernatural powers.<sup>65</sup> For examples, he mockingly referred to Thailand's Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman as *khormoan* [chicken sweet stew], a popular Cambodian dish. He also said Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat was a very immoral person and a womanizer.<sup>66</sup> When Sarit died in 1963, the same year of the death of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem and US President John F Kennedy, National Radio Phnom Penh broadcast Sihanouk's speech in which he attributed Sarit's death to divine powers protecting Cambodia (Mehta 1997, 95). He said:

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<sup>65</sup>Interviews with Professors Khing Hoc Dy and Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 26 June and 7 Sept. 2012.

<sup>66</sup>Interview with Professor Khing Hoc Dy, Phnom Penh, 26 June 2012.

The death of Sarit is an example of the divine power of our ancient kings to safeguard our homeland. This shows that the power of our ancient kings is very effective because every two weeks—in just a month-and-a-half—those persons who led those countries, which are the enemy of our neutral and independent Cambodia, have died one by one. Only three enemies did Cambodia have, and the leaders of these three countries all died and went to hell—all three—in a month-and-a-half. (Quoted in Mehta 1997, 95)

The news broadcast on national radio about the Preah Vihear temple conflict and the charismatic leader's convincing words constructed the national imagining of Thailand as Cambodia's national enemy and Prince Sihanouk as a national hero. Therefore, Preah Vihear Temple, which was caught up in the definitions of national enemy versus national hero in the deep antagonism between Sihanouk and Sarit, emerged in the nationalist discourse to symbolise the Cambodian nation.

*Preah Vihear Temple conflict: Beyond media to other modes of nationalist propaganda*

The youth of Sihanouk's era are loyal to the beloved nation, religion and king. We pledge that we....until death. If any foreign country dares to violate our territory,...

The Mountain of Preah Vihear, which is Khmer's heritage, has been insistently claimed as their national heritage...

Chorus: Let's stand up Khmer!...<sup>67</sup>

Above is a nationalist song promoted during Prince Sihanouk's Sangkum era for the government's youth league officially known as *yuvak jun reach sangkum niyom Khmer* [Royal Khmer Socialist Youth] but more popularly referred to as the *yuvan*.<sup>68</sup> The youth league was established in 1957. According to its statute, the *yuvan* was Sihanouk's youth movement established with the aims of protecting the throne, defending the sovereignty, supporting state nation-building policy and state foreign policy of neutrality and non-alignment (Sihanouk 2005, 97–98). Members wore khaki uniforms, similar to those worn by policemen. Memberships to the *yuvan* were broad and diverse including secondary school and university students, public servants, and

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<sup>67</sup>Informal translation of the song from its Khmer version as sung to me by Professor Ang Choulean during my interview with him. However, he could not recall the song in its entirety.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

members of the government. Prince Sihanouk himself and his wife were also its members (Ibid, 100).

The song for the *yuvan* was significant for postcolonial Cambodia's nation-building and state-building more broadly and for Prince Sihanouk more specifically. Like other postcolonial states, the Cambodian state under Sihanouk was implementing homogenising nation-building projects. Nationalist and patriotic songs such as the one above were instrumental for the state to create a belief among its *yuvan*'s members, whose backgrounds were diverse, of a shared imagined community, a community which emphasised their allegiance to the three pillars of the nation: nation, religion and king. And as discussed above, the nation and its associated components were compactly personified by Sihanouk. Therefore, the Cambodian state expected the *yuvan* to imagine the nation by their shared allegiance to Prince Sihanouk. When Preah Vihear Temple as a heritage and a territory was incorporated into such a nationalist song, the temple, in the *yuvan* members' minds, was no longer simply a pile of stone; it was a potent national symbol, which required allegiance, protection, and, if necessary, life sacrifice as expressed in the above song.

The Cambodian state-led nationalism project about the Preah Vihear conflict was extended beyond raising nationalist sentiment among the *yuvan* through songs to requiring them to participate in nationalist actions. The Sangkum government required members of the youth league from higher educational institutions in Phnom Penh to attend a two-week military training at Kambol in 1965 or 1966, during which they were trained by military instructors and were told that the training would equip them with necessary skills to defend the nation's territorial sovereignty against Thailand's encroachment. Some weeks after the training, the government also organised the city youth to participate in mass trekking and camping over night to see the theatre performance of the story of the Preah Vihear temple conflict at Samraong train station.<sup>69</sup>

The youth league's chairman, Yim Dith, was also tasked by the government to be Prince Sihanouk's messenger or rapporteur conveying the prince's words about the Preah Vihear dispute to the *yuvan* in provincial schools.<sup>70</sup> Professor Khing Hoc Dy recalled that Yim Dith went to his school and the school director gathered the teachers

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<sup>69</sup>Interview with Professor Khing Hoc Dy, Phnom Penh, 26 June 2012.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

and students to listen to him. He talked about the Preah Vihear conflict. He talked ill of Thai Prime Minister Sarit saying that Sarit was “very immoral person, harassing girls and was involved in sex scandals”, in stark contrast to Prince Sihanouk, whom he compared to a god. He also talked at length juxtaposing the goodness of the Cambodian nation with that of Thailand. The audience generally believed in Yim Dith’s narrative because he was a “very good orator and respected person”.<sup>71</sup>

The government’s sending of Yim Dith to disseminate information to the *yuvan* in provinces manifested its use of exhaustive means to ensure that Prince Sihanouk’s investment in nationalism project for Preah Vihear Temple was widely known. It served as another important channel of information dissemination in addition to the state’s vast media resources. If news and Prince Sihanouk’s speeches about the temple conflict broadcasted on the radio did not reach provincial youth, Yim Dith could help convey them. It was from activities of such state actors as Yim Dith that Preah Vihear Temple’s symbolism was conjured up to represent the nation.

#### *State ceremony and rituals*

On June 16<sup>th</sup> 1962, one day after the ICJ’s judgment awarding the Preah Vihear Temple to Cambodia, a large crowd converged in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh to celebrate the victory. *The Cambodian Commentary*, a government monthly review published in English, in its May–June 1962 issue put the number of those assembled in thousands. The photo in the issue gives the impression that it was a state-orchestrated event. Looking at the photo, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that many of the people in the crowd were public servants. Placards containing the names of the government’s various ministries were displayed among columns of the crowd. In addition to the placards, some people carried portraits of Prince Sihanouk. At least one placard with the message “*baramei samdech euv* [sacred power of Prince Papa]” is seen in the photo, suggesting that a link had been established to attribute Cambodia’s victory over Thailand at the ICJ to Prince Sihanouk’s divine power. The whole crowd was in a cheerful, celebratory mood. Many of the people were seen smiling, clapping hands, and waving arms in the air (see *Cambodian Commentary*, May–June 1962, 26).

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

Prince Sihanouk then emerged on the balcony of the Salle *Chanchhaya*, a pavilion built into the Palace wall, to address the crowd. After expressing gratitude to members of the counsel team representing Cambodia at the ICJ, his speech touched on different cultural, national and political themes, which together conjured up an image of Preah Vihear Temple as the embodiment of Cambodia's national and cultural heritage just like the marvellous Angkor Wat Temple. He said:

So far as Preah Vihear is concerned, we should not forget that this is not merely a bit of territory without any special significance, but is a historic site containing a temple which, like Angkor, has incalculable importance in our eyes, representing as it does our past history, our civilization, our art and our religious faith. (Quoted in *Cambodian Commentary*, May–June 1962, 25)

In his speech, Sihanouk also constructed the symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple as representing national security. The temple ICJ win was interpreted as significant for the nation because it would prevent Thailand from further encroaching into Cambodia's territory. He said:

This victory gives us in the first place a sense of greater security, and is a warning to those who have imperialist designs on our territory, and more especially to Thailand which is likely to have been discouraged from further attempts at grabbing pieces of Cambodian territory. (Quoted in *Cambodian Commentary*, May–June 1962, 24)

Sihanouk also wasted no time in linking Preah Vihear victory to his narrative of nation-building. He constructed the symbolism of the temple victory as a clear testimony of his achievement for the nation. He related the temple victory to his national policy, proving that the latter was on the right track otherwise the former would not have been achieved. He used the temple victory as a political resource to call for national unity and support for his leadership. He said:

I should like to draw your attention to the inestimable advantage we derive from our unity. This victory, like the others which have preceded it, is to be ascribed to this factor. Without this unity, without the proper appreciation shown by our people where the national interest lies, without the unfailing and wholehearted support I received, our success would not have been possible. Many moral factors have contributed to this happy outcome, all of them rooted in national unity, and each of these factors has promoted in some way the triumph of our cause. This triumph is not to be ascribed solely, therefore, to me personally, but represents the successful conclusions of a task in which I have received the unqualified support of the entire nation. (Quoted in *Cambodian Commentary*, May–June 1962, 25)

The prince also took the opportunity during his public address to link his association with sacred power to Cambodia's victory at the ICJ, creating the impression that the Court win was possible partly because of Sihanouk's divinity because he was able to invoke assistance from the deities. He said:

Her Majesty The Queen and I made a number of vows to the Sacred Triple Jewel, to the Tevodas and to the August Memory of our Defunct Monarchs, when we implored their assistance in the Preah Vihear Case. We must now proceed, each in our own way, to fulfil these vows. In my case, I vowed to have my head shaved—it is ancient Cambodian custom to make such a vow on these occasions—and I will soon submit to this operation. (Quoted in *Cambodian Commentary*, May–June 1962, 25)

The celebratory atmosphere in front of the Royal Palace and Sihanouk's eloquent speech rich in symbolism and meanings together conjured up an image of Preah Vihear Temple as the embodiment of the Cambodian nation. The temple's status was now equivalent to Angkor Wat. Preah Vihear Temple was now not only a religious site, but also a representation of Cambodia's national identity, pride, unity, security, and achievement. Its promotion to a national symbol derived from its potent symbolism that could be manipulated to prove to the Cambodian population that Prince Sihanouk's nation-building was a successful story.

Seven months after the celebration in Phnom Penh and the completion of the construction of National Road 12,<sup>72</sup> Prince Sihanouk led his entourage to Preah Vihear Temple to preside over a grand religious and state ritual, which was significantly symbolic because it concentrated cultural and especially national power right at the temple site. The ceremony took place on 5 January 1963 and was attended by nearly 1000 people. Prince Sihanouk led his entourage on foot from the foot to the mountain top. *Kambuja Suriya Journal* described the ceremony in its January 1963 issue as follows:

On 5 January 1963, the beloved and respectful Prince Father of national heritage...continued his journey to the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple...to pay his respect to the Three Jewels in Buddhism; to make an offering of food to the monks in accordance with the Buddhist tradition; and to preside over the ceremony raising our Khmer national flag on the Mountain of Preah Vihear to symbolise the return to our beloved country of our Khmer ancestral heritage,

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<sup>72</sup>Prior to that, the road was simply an oxcart track (see Hun 1965, 531). After the ICJ victory, the government started construction to turn it into a national road. National Road 12 connected to National Road 6 in Kampong Thom and ran through Ravieng, Kampong Pranak, Choam Khsant and ended at the foothill of the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple (see *Kambuja Surya Journal*, January 1963, 81).

which was looted by Siamese military force in 1953. (*Kambuja Suriya Journal*, January 1963, 80–81)

The Journal also gave a long list of important guests and foreign dignitaries attending the event:

To show gratitude to the divine power of the Three Jewels and sacred objects at the Preah Vihear Temple, Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk, the Head of State, accompanied by many high-ranking military and civilian officials from the capital city and delegates from provinces, districts and communes in the Royal Kingdom including some royal family members, members of the High Council of the Throne, Presidents and members of the two Houses, HRH the Prime Minister and members of the Royal Government, and all provincial governors. As for foreign dignitaries, we saw ambassadors and representatives from embassies of India, France, Japan, British, Yugoslavia, Russia, Indonesia, Republic of China, Australia, America, Laos, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the United Arab Emirates, and foreign media correspondents and reporters. Two members of the counsel team representing Cambodia, Roger Pinto and Paul Reuter, both of the Paris Law Faculty, were also present. As for the monk delegates, we observed that there were more than 40 monks led by the Supreme Patriarch of the Maha Nikaya (Chuon Nath) and the Supreme Patriarch of the Dhammayut Nikaya (Kol Tes), who also went to Preah Vihear Temple. (*Kambuja Suriya Journal*, January 1963, 89–90)

The blending of traditional Buddhist religious practices with the state's ritual of raising the national flag on the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple were symbolically significant for the national culture, the Cambodian state, and for Preah Vihear Temple. By blending traditional primordial practices with modern concepts of nation and state, the Cambodian state created what Hobsbawm (1983) calls 'inventing traditions'. The purpose of inventing traditions is to create a sense of continuity with a suitable historic past and to serve a new national purpose (Hobsbawm 1983, 1–6). The Cambodian state, which received independence from France nearly ten years before, needed to ritualise this 'inventing traditions' to reconstruct Khmer traditional culture, an important source of power and authority for the postcolonial state ruling elites.

That Prince Sihanouk established a cultural link between Preah Vihear Temple and Angkor and that he often identified himself with the kings of Angkor show that he knew he could draw enormous power from his reconstruction of the past. He could achieve his political objectives through identifying himself with such potent symbolism. Kertzner (1988, 5) writes, "Through symbolism we recognize who are the powerful and who are the weak, and through the manipulation of symbols the powerful reinforce their authority." In this sense, Prince Sihanouk manipulated the symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple to reinforce people's existing perception and acceptance of

hierarchy of political power, one that placed Sihanouk at the apex of the power pyramid.

As for Preah Vihear Temple, the state's organised ritual at the temple site ingrained in Cambodian nationalist thought that the temple was a national icon. Cambodia's national flag, like national flags of other countries, is considered sacred and supposedly worshipped by people of the entire land. That the national flag, representing the life of the Cambodian nation, was raised at the temple site in the ceremony presided over by Prince Sihanouk, the highest government figure, and it was blessed by the Buddhist ritual conducted by the highest authority of Cambodia's Buddhist Sangha and the whole event was witnessed by foreign ambassadors, diplomats, and journalists attached grand national cultural meaning to Preah Vihear Temple. The ancient monument now, in Cambodian nationalist thought, has become a representation of the life of the Cambodian nation.



Figure 2. Prince Norodom Sihanouk at Preah Vihear Temple. (Source: Google domain.)



### *Creating Preah Vihear province*

One year after the ceremony on the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple, the Cambodian government redrew the country's national territorial space by creating a new province named after the border temple by a government's Royal Decree dated 22 July 1964. The newly created Preah Vihear province had four districts, three of which used to belong to Kampong Thom province and one newly established district which covered the areas of three communes taken from Siem Reap province (Royal Kingdom of Cambodia 1964). There is no population data at the establishment of the new province and in subsequent years due to the civil war.<sup>73</sup> Villages were concentrated near the provincial city in Tbeng Meanchey and in the areas close to Kampong Thom province, while a large area around the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple was covered in forest.



Map 2. Preah Vihear province, Cambodia. (Map by Cartography Unit, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.)

<sup>73</sup>There have been only three population censuses conducted in Cambodia--the 1962, 1998, and 2008 censuses. From the time the province was established right to the end of the 1990s, Preah Vihear was a sparsely populated province. Its 1998 population constituted only one per cent of Cambodia's population, while it was one of the country's largest provinces, with population density a mere 9 people per km<sup>2</sup> (see Kingdom of Cambodia 2002).

The Sangkum government's redrawing of the country's national territorial space was significant for its politics of postcolonial nation-building and state-building. It allowed the state elites to create territorial identity for Preah Vihear Temple. The politics of territorial identity is instrumental for the state to communicate its political ideology and agenda (Keith and Pile 1993, 2). It enabled the state to communicate such important notions of nation, society, and culture under its spatial control as distinctive from those in the territorial space controlled by other states (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 6). In this sense, the Sangkum government's creation of territorial identity for the border temple manifested its intention to draw a national, social and cultural boundary of Preah Vihear Temple as belonging exclusively to the Cambodian state, not Thailand.

The Cambodian state's effort to reinforce its exclusive ownership of the national, social and cultural dimensions of the temple provided an insight into the nationalist thought and the view of the Cambodian ruling elites towards the Thai state. It reflected the Cambodian elites' understanding of the power relations between a smaller, weaker Cambodia and a bigger, more powerful neighbour. Because of the perceived unequal power relations, it created fear of the Thai state. Cambodian rulers feared that the border temple, just some hundred metres away from the boundary line, may slip back into Thailand's hands because the Thai state and its nationalists did not show signs of giving up claims to the ancient Khmer monument.

After the ICJ ruled in 1962 that the Preah Vihear Temple and its vicinity were under Cambodia's sovereignty and ordered Thailand to withdraw its security forces from the ancient monument, the Thai flag and flagpole was carried from the temple into Thai territory in a standing position and placed in a nearby museum. Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat said that, although the ICJ's judgement gave the temple to Cambodia, the soul of the temple of Prah Viharn (the Thai name for Preah Vihear) remains with Thailand (Singh 1962, 26; see also St John 1994, 66).

The removal of the flag in such a manner and the words uttered by the Thai prime minister caused Cambodia's nationalist and ruling elites to suspect Thailand's intention in relations to their temple (Kimly 2012b, 20). The gestures and words of the Thai government were taken note of by Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its 1962 'Aide Memoire on Khmero-Thai relations'.<sup>74</sup> The state-owned *Cambodian*

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<sup>74</sup>See (Kingdom of Cambodia 1962, 74-77).

*Commentary* also shared similar concern about Thailand's continuing intention in regards to Preah Vihear Temple and Cambodia's western and northern border territories. In this context, the monthly review treated the temple as having significant territorial symbolism that could prevent Thailand from reclaiming its formerly controlled territories. It writes,

The importance thus attached to the possession of Preah Vihear is to be attributed largely to the conduct of the Bangkok Government which, after illegally occupying the site in 1954, had brushed aside all attempts by the Cambodian Government to obtain its restitution: an attitude which aroused grave misgivings concerning Thai intentions in regard to the territories in West, and North Cambodia seized by the Bangkok Government with indecent haste and Japanese support in 1940, on the grounds that they had been in Thai possession prior to the establishment of the French Protectorate; and, although these ill-gotten spoils had been handed back in 1946, there was good reason to suppose that this had been regarded merely as a temporary concession. (*Cambodian Commentary*, May–June 1962, 3)

Besides serving the state's politics of territorial identity of drawing a national, social and cultural boundary differentiating Cambodia from Thailand in the context of postcolonial international political order of nation-states, the establishment of Preah Vihear province also supported the Sangkum government's domestic state-building agendas in regards to centre-periphery relations. Postcolonial states often had problems in extending territorial control beyond the capital city to the outlying territories under their sovereignty (Slater 2010, 36; Roy 2007, 26). In this sense, the redrawing of territorial space and the creation of territorial identity for Preah Vihear Temple allowed Prince Sihanouk's government to increase state presence and power in the country's remote and porous border region. The formerly limited state space of Preah Vihear border region was now drawn into the organised administrative hierarchical power relations of spaces. Preah Vihear Temple, its surrounding areas, and the sparsely scattering indigenous minorities were now not expectedly a separate, isolated, and local entity but were closely related spatially and administratively to the Phnom Penh government.

Moreover, the creation of territorial identity for Preah Vihear Temple had significant nationalist dimensions for Prince Sihanouk's politics of postcolonial nation-building. The construction of territorial space has a role in the imagining of community (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 8). It can reinforce the "politics of community, solidarity, identity" (Ibid, 9). Cambodian people living in Phnom Penh and in other provinces

could in a way imagine their shared sense of belonging to the Cambodian nation through the belief that they had spatial and territorial connections with Preah Vihear Temple. This was a valuable political resource that Prince Sihanouk could capitalise on for his mass mobilisation politics. Preah Vihear Temple as having territorial identity could be manipulated to rally people for his political cause. It is difficult to mobilise people to participate in political actions without the just cause of protecting a place, motherland, country, border territory etc.

And an important mechanism that connected the construction of territorial space to the national imagining of community is the modern geographical map, which can represent the nation visually as having a potent geo-body (see Thongchai 1994). To borrow Thongchai's word of 'geo-body', when people look at the map of Cambodia, they see not only the geo-body of Cambodia, but also the geo-body of Preah Vihear province. Since the map is used for many different purposes and in many different places, it has familiarised Cambodian people with both the name and geo-body of Preah Vihear province. If Preah Vihear was only the name of the border temple, people would forget it since Cambodia has hundreds of ancient temples. Therefore, by creating a new province named after Preah Vihear Temple, the Cambodian state tried to make sure that henceforth the name of Preah Vihear would be used repeatedly and widely and its geo-body would be tightly bound within the geo-body of the Cambodian nation. Thus, Cambodia henceforth cannot afford to relinquish the Preah Vihear Temple back to Thailand. Its place is firmly fixed in the national imagining of the Cambodian community.

### ***Temple iconography on currency***

In 1963, one year after the ICJ's judgment that Preah Vihear Temple belonged to Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk's government issued a new currency that had the images of the temple on both sides of the note. It was a 100-riel note, printed in Germany by Giesecke & Devrient AG. The note contained the image of the beautiful iconic Gopura V, which is on the farthest north of the temple, on the front side and the architectural drawing view of the entire monument's 800-metre length on the back side (see Oldham 2012, 17). So what did the state's issuance of the new currency with Preah Vihear

Temple's iconography mean in relations to its politics of state-building and nation-building?

The significance of the political dimensions of national currency for the state's politics of state-building and nation-building has been well documented by scholars (see, for examples, Parry and Bloch 1989; Hymans 2004; Penrose 2011; First and Sheffi 2015). National currency is one of the important products of the modern nation-states. It is one of the potent symbolisms of state's national sovereignty over its territory and citizen (Helleiner 2003). It can be in a way compared to state's national border requiring outsiders to accept its authority by the act of changing money when they enter the country (Siegel 1997, 204). In this way, through the symbolic representation of money, the state can reinforce the modern ideas of its independence, sovereignty, and national self-determination, and of its place in the world of nation-states though its money may have lower exchange value than those of others.

Besides its symbolic representation as state's sovereignty, national currency provides the state with numerous advantages in its relations with the society. Money is an important link between the state and its citizens. It is one of the instruments of state infrastructural power for political control of the society through the state's role as guarantor of value for commodities exchanges (Mann 1984, 116–117). The state can capitalise on the potent power of money to transform society and culture in ways that serve its purposes (Parry and Bloch 1989, 3). It can influence and shape the views of its citizens about its legitimacy and authority through iconographic symbolism on money (Hewitt 1994, 11; Brunn 2011, 19). Moreover, money is also an important arena or site for the state to conceptualise what Abrams (1988) regards as state as idea. Through iconographic representation on money, state can invoke the public to feel about its existence and its ideas in visual symbolic forms. Such an arena is instrumental not only in designing the state (Brantlinger 1996; Foster 2002), but also in advertising and disseminating its “officially-sanctioned propaganda” (see Hewitt 1994: 7, 11).

And, undoubtedly, state elites can also draw political benefits from national currency. Studies have shown that there is a close relationship between political legitimacy of ruling elites and iconographic symbolism on money (see, for examples, Hymans 2004; Strassler 2009). Iconographic representation on currency serves as a vehicle for the elites to bolster their political legitimacy (Hymans 2004). When their

legitimacy is eroding or in crisis, money can be a site of political contestation. For example, towards the end of General Suharto's regime when the president's legitimacy was in serious crisis, defacement of Suharto and altering images on the country's national currency became one of the important political activities of the Indonesian public challenging the president's authority (see Strassler 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that when elites come to power, establish new regimes, or adopt new political ideology, they often discard the money of the preceding regime in favour of issuing new currency of their own. A case in point is Cambodia, a country which has experienced regime changes and changes in money many times.

In addition to its relevance for state-building and state elites, national currency is extremely significant for the state's politics of nation-building and national or collective identity formation. Ideas of nation and national identities are represented and communicated by symbols. And money provides a perfect site or space for such symbols to be communicated. Via the space on money, such ideas of national identities as collective memory, national history, and ethnic and territorial identities can be conceptualised and designed (First and Sheffi 2015, 332). As a result, money functions, in some ways similar to newspaper and modern geographical map, as a potent site of imagined community promoting national unity and solidarity among community members through time and space (see Helleiner 2003, 110–112; First and Sheffi 2015, 333–335).

And the mechanism that sustains national currency's function as imagined community is Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism (Helleiner 2003, 107; Penrose 2011, 429–430; First and Sheffi 2015, 332). People's daily exposure to the largely unnoticed visual symbolism on their country's banknotes reminds them every day of their commonality and their duty and loyalty to the nation-state (Penrose 2011, 429–430). Moreover, with its omnipresent nature, money is perhaps the state's most diffused instrument of banal nationalism transcending class, social, economic, political, religious, ethnic, and gender boundaries.

The concepts and theories discussed above are useful in helping us understand the political implications of Prince Sihanouk government's issuance of the new currency containing iconographic representation of Preah Vihear Temple. They help us understand the significance of the ancient temple's symbolism for Sihanouk's politics

of nation-building and state-building. The postcolonial leader needed different arenas or instruments to narrate his ideas of state and nation. Therefore, the issuance of the new 100 banknote offered his government an opportunity to exploit the space of the banknote to communicate those important stories. One story was about the role of Sihanouk's Sangkum government in defending the iconic cultural site and gaining victory over Thailand for Cambodia. Another story was about the use of the temple's symbolism on the new banknote to promote imagined community, national identity, and national unity, which were essential for his politics of postcolonial nation-building. Through this context of money, Preah Vihear Temple was no longer a far, fixed, and irrelevant place. Instead, it had become mobile, omnipresent, within reach, small enough to be put in pockets, and embedded in every individual Cambodian's daily activities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The formal transfer of power from France to Cambodia on November 9, 1953 was significantly symbolic for Prince Sihanouk and Cambodia. Enthusiasm, hope and national pride associating with independence, national sovereignty and self-determination were high for the future of Cambodia as a nation-state. The term *kor sang jeat* [nation-building] became a new, widely-used expression of what Sihanouk's government aspired to achieve for the country. That included national development, modernisation and progress in all sectors. However, Sihanouk soon faced with constraints and challenges to both his political leadership and nation-building efforts. Those constraints included the lack of sufficient state revenue, and other material, human, and technological resources. Political fragmentation and rivalry among political elites placed increasing pressure on the newly independent country. His government's relations with Thailand and South Vietnam were also deteriorating. His adopted foreign policy of neutrality and non-alignment was being undermined by the Cold War tension.

Against the backdrop of these constraints, Prince Sihanouk turned to nationalism as an alternative and productive political resource for his postcolonial nation-building. His Sangkum government invested heavily in the cultural politics of representing the nation. Old primordial cultural markers, practices and traditions were co-opted,

identified with, and attached with new national meanings and meanings of a modern nation-state. Through this cultural politics of representing the nation, Sihanouk managed to conjure up an image of himself as a strong patron and guardian of Khmer culture and traditions, an important source of political power and authority. The cultural politics also allowed him to compare his Sangkum regime to Angkor, articulating the former as having achieved similar level of progress and glory as the latter. In this sense, his government's mission in nation-building was projected as proudly accomplished. The nation was restored to its former pride and glory under Sihanouk's leadership.

Embedded in Sihanouk's broader politics of cultural nationalism for nation-building, Preah Vihear Temple emerged from an obscure border temple complex to embody the Cambodian nation. The Sangkum government invested in many projects in transforming the temple from a site of cultural and religious worship to a dynamic multifaceted and omnipresent symbolism of the Cambodian state and nation. It constructed the temple to symbolise not only Khmer cultural heritage, but also national identity, unity, solidarity, security, and pride, all of which were important ingredients for postcolonial politics of nation-building. In this context, Preah Vihear Temple became an alternative and productive political resource for Prince Sihanouk to build the Cambodian nation.

This presents a case study showing how politics of nationalism is instrumental in the politics of postcolonial nation-building. Several scholars tell us that it is (Geertz 1973; Gupta 1998). However, we do not know enough about the depth, scale and operation of such nationalism projects. In this study of Preah Vihear Temple, I break the politics of nationalism in Prince Sihanouk's postcolonial nation-building down into different components allowing us to see clearer its dynamism, nuances, and complexity.



## Chapter 4

### Hun Sen and Political Legitimation

#### 1. Introduction

Rising to power under Vietnam's patronage in 1979 after the collapse of the Democratic Kampuchea regime, incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen, currently Cambodia's longest-serving head of government and also Asia's longest-serving prime minister, has been Cambodia's most dominant and durable political figure. In fact, many of Cambodia's young people today were born during his long rule and have only known him as their country's top leader. Hun Sen has continued to retain his premiership since 1985 although Cambodia under his rule has experienced major political and economic transformations: from one-party socialist and planned economy state to multiparty hybrid regime and free-market economy; from a pariah state to a politically and economically integrated member of regional and global communities; and from an internally war-torn country to one characterised by peace, development, and contentious politics. His political resilience is relatively distinctive, and therefore should be subjected to academic scrutiny.

Scholarship on contemporary Cambodian politics predominantly views Hun Sen as politically powerful. Numerous works depict the prime minister as possessing relatively unmatched political resources, knowledge, skills and strategies in manipulating various state and non-state actors and institutions to consolidate his political power. In these studies, scholars explore diverse aspects related to Hun Sen's political power consolidation, such as his use of coercive and judicial repression against critics and political rivals (Heder 2005; Heder 2012), manipulation of electoral politics (McCargo 2005b; Hughes 2009; Thayer 2009), politics of gifts (Hughes 2006), patronage politics (Un 2005; Un 2006; Hughes and Un 2011; Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox 2013; Baaz and Lilja 2014; Strangio 2014; Morgenbesser 2017), politics of natural resource extraction (Billon 2000; Billon 2002; Un and So 2009; Milne 2015), co-optation of Buddhist religious authority into his ruling party's system (Kent and Chandler 2008), identification of himself with royal symbolism (Norén-Nilsson 2013),

personalised control of the armed forces (Chambers 2015), and patronage relations with business tycoons (Verver and Dahles 2015).

I do not object to these studies. Their research methods are academically rigorous. Their insights are illuminating and comprehensive. However, I feel that many of them tend to look at only one side of the coin, which is the way Hun Sen has built and exercised power or sources of power that he has identified with. We do not know sufficiently about the other side of the coin, the constraints to his rule or, in other words, the contexts of his political vulnerability which have prompted him to take certain political actions. As it is widely known, Hun Sen has constantly faced numerous constraints to his rule ranging from his controversial past of affiliation with the Khmer Rouge to modern forms of contentious politics posed by opposition political forces and critics against him and his ruling party. At the heart of his political vulnerability is the issue of his political legitimacy or his right to rule.

Political legitimacy has been a serious issue for Prime Minister Hun Sen since the beginning of his rise to power. His domestic and international critics and political opponents have constantly challenged his right to rule Cambodia. They have criticised him for a wide range of issues related to his person, his family and cronies, and his government. To overcome these constraints, Hun Sen has used whatever means or resources available at his disposal to ensure he can survive politically. Historian Margaret Slocomb noted that the leader is different from his predecessors in that he does not adopt any political ideology as guiding principle for his regime. And perhaps that explains his political longevity (2006, 376). However, in place of political ideology, he has identified himself with different sources of both traditional and modern ideas of political power and legitimacy to deal with the constraints to his rule and to legitimate his control of state power.

I, therefore, propose in this chapter to explore dimensions of Hun Sen's political power through the lens of political legitimation. I also propose a framework to study his claims to legitimacy by examining the specific constraints to his rule. I argue that only when we also include the investigation of his political vulnerability in our analysis do we gain a better understanding of the dimensions of his political power consolidation. This proposed framework of analysis also gives us a different perspective on Hun Sen. He is not so politically powerful as many political observers

have suggested; he is politically constrained and vulnerable. His political survival and durability have depended largely on how he managed to overcome the constraints and to recast his political legitimacy.

Following this proposed framework, this chapter argues that Prime Minister Hun Sen's investment in nationalism projects during the Preah Vihear conflict with Thailand (2008–2011) should be understood as attempts at political legitimation to overcome the constraints to his rule. He tried to cultivate his image as a nationalist defending Cambodia's iconic cultural heritage site and border territory against Thailand. This image was useful for his political legitimation in that it countered domestic critics, who often accused him of not paying adequate attention to the country's border territories. In this context, nationalism has bolstered his political legitimacy and served as a productive political resource to legitimize his rule.

Following this introduction, the chapter presents some explanatory approaches to autocrats' political resilience, and I also propose political legitimation as an important explanatory approach for autocrats' political durability. It is then followed by a section exploring the dimensions of Hun Sen's political legitimation. After that is a section looking into his government's investment in nationalism projects during the Preah Vihear conflict. The chapter ends with concluding remarks.

## **2. Some explanatory approaches to autocrats' political resilience**

Although the world has witnessed unprecedented political, social and economic transformations over the last few decades and especially a democratisation phenomenon which political scientist Samuel Huntington (1991) referred to as Third Wave Democracy, some authoritarian leaders still find ways to adapt themselves to the changes and survive politically. However, many of them have found it necessary to alter their regimes from closed authoritarian to some form of hybrid regime (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002; Brownlee 2007). The political survival and durability of those autocrats in the new international context are intriguing and have aroused scholars' interest in investigating the complex conditions underpinning them. As a result, various explanatory approaches have been put forward to illuminate our understanding of the complexity of the issue, which I will highlight in turn below.

One of the explanatory approaches adopted especially by political scientists is the election and political party institutional approach, which attributes autocrats' political survival and resilience to their adjustment of their regimes from closed authoritarian to some forms of hybrid regimes and their reliance on the institutions of their ruling parties for political resources, support and stability (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Nathan 2003; Hess 2013). Hybrid regimes are the terms refer loosely to regimes that adopt some elements of democracy, but still retain some elements of authoritarianism. They inhabit the grey zone between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism (Diamond 2002, 23; Schedler 2002, 37). These regimes allow some political opening including opposition political parties to contest in elections. However, the elections are not conducted in a fair and meaningful manner that might lead to incumbents' losing office. Elections are rather an instrument or mechanism the incumbents rely on to stay in power (Schedler 2002, 36; Brownlee 2007, 6–8).

Two types of hybrid regimes that adopt elections as the cornerstone of the incumbent autocrats' political dominance are Andreas Schedler's concept of electoral authoritarianism (2002) and Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's competitive authoritarianism (2010). In electoral authoritarian regimes, incumbents organise elections and allow some pluralism and interparty competition, but they also "violate minimal democratic norms so severely and systematically" (Schedler 2002, 36). They rely on what Schedler calls "The menu of manipulation" to skew the elections in their favour (Ibid, 42–46). Levitsky and Way's concept of competitive authoritarianism also concurs with Schedler's view that elections favour ruling autocrats more than opposition political parties. Unlike electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism includes "all authoritarian regimes with multiparty elections—both competitive and hegemonic". In other words, it includes both competitive and non-competitive authoritarian regimes that hold elections (Levitsky and Way 2010, 16). In competitive authoritarian regimes, competition between incumbents and opposition for power through democratic institutions is "real but unfair" because the playing field is skewed in favour of the incumbents (Levitsky and Way 2010, 3, 5). Both Schedler, and Levitsky and Way suggest that we should neither consider various forms of hybrid regimes as transitioning to democracy, nor use adjectives in front of democracy to

refer to them (for examples, pseudodemocracy, illiberal democracy, semi-democracy etc.), but should rather use adjectives in front of authoritarianism to describe them.

In this election and political party institutional approach, various institutions under ruling elites' control are important arenas providing power, resources and stability to them, thus shielding the incumbents from internal and external threats to their rule. One of the important institutions is incumbents' ruling parties. According to Brownlee (2007), the institutions of ruling parties are critical to autocrats' political survival and durability. They are "the root cause of regime persistence" in many parts of the world despite the pressure from democratic tide (Brownlee 2007, 3). Even in a one-party state like China, the institutionalised rules, norms, values, and regulations governing relations among the communist party's elites are key to stability and resilience of the regime (Nathan 2003). Another important institution for autocrats to rely on to extend their rule is the legislature (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Legislature provides a favourable arena for autocrats to incorporate various opposition political forces and forge important coalitions to broaden their support base, thus they can "neutralize threats" of rebellion against the regime from various social groups (Ibid, 1280). In short, this approach emphasises autocrats' adoption of some elements of global democracy discourse into local national political framework to release social and political tension as an important explanatory factor of political resilience of authoritarian leaders in many countries throughout the world.

Another explanatory approach focuses on political economy (Przeworski and Limongi 1993; Sanhueza 1999; Gasiorowski 1995; Smith 2004; Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009; Bader and Faust 2014). This model analyses the interaction between various forces or dimensions of the economy with the political domain of authoritarian leaders. Przeworski and Limongi (1993) and Gasiorowski (1995) study the economic growth and economic crisis respectively and their implications on political regimes. These authors attribute political regime change or stability to economic conditions. Sanhueza (1999) examines the relationship between economic wealth and authoritarian regimes' resilience. Smith (2004) explores the link between revenue from oil export and regime survival in developing countries. Based on the analysis of data from 1960 to 1999, he argues, "Oil wealth is robustly associated with increased regime durability, even when controlling for repression, and with lower likelihoods of civil war and antistate protest"

(Ibid, 232). Rodan and Jayasuriya (2009) look at the complex relationship between capitalist development and political durability of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia. They find that capitalist development has not provided favourable conditions for democratic development. Instead, it has strengthened the social basis for the persistence of authoritarian elements. They argue that state capitalism is key to explain autocratic durability in Singapore (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009, 26). Other scholars study the implications of money from foreign governments and donors to governments in developing countries on matters of democratisation and politics in the recipient countries (Ahmed 2012; Ear 2013; Bader and Faust 2014). They found that foreign aid, which is intended to support democratisation, good governance and political reforms, is in fact entrenching authoritarian rule. Bader and Faust (2014, 576) argue, “Autocratic recipients governments use foreign aid at least partly for their survival, be it by redistributing additional rents to strategic groups or by financing repression.” In summary, this political economic model sees economic forces or economic dimensions as the defining factor on whether an autocratic regime will decline or endure.

Other scholars study autocrats’ political durability through the lens of patron-client network politics. They attribute the ruling elites’ political survival and dominance to their ability to build, maintain and reinforce their patron-client networks (Scott 1972; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Morgenbesser 2017). In his seminal work on patron-client politics, Scott (1972) argues that the analysis of patron-client politics is key to understand how politics plays out in Southeast Asia, how political elites compete, collaborate, or manipulate elections to consolidate power. The patron-client politics is intricately woven with the landscape, process, and institutions of political power. In electoral politics, political elites’ ability to establish patron-client relations and to mobilise and distribute resources to voters in their networks is critical to their electoral victory. And it is usually ruling parties or incumbent politicians who have more advantages over opposition politicians because they have relatively more resources at their disposal (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Weiss 2016; Morgenbesser 2017). In Cambodia, Morgenbesser (2017) finds that patron-client politics is the key to keeping the ruling Cambodian People’s Party in power for lengthy periods. It is also a major factor obstructing free and fair elections and preventing regime change and eventual democracy.

Other scholars propose the analysis of political durability of authoritarian regimes or autocrats through other lenses, namely the role of repression (Escribà-Folch 2012; Escribà-Folch 2013; Hadenius and Teorell 2007) and autocrats' use of populism (Dimitrov 2009). Escribà-Folch (2013, 543) writes, "Repression is one of the two basic instruments dictators use to stay in power." He also argues that repression coupled with restrictions on civil liberties is also an effective instrument autocrats can rely to deal with threats from organised groups and collective action (Ibid). Repression can take different forms, the "violation of physical integrity" and the "restrictions on individuals' civil rights" (Escribà-Folch 2013, 544). In Southeast Asia, Heryanto and Mandal (2003, 6) show that repression is a tool used by authoritarian incumbents against political opponents and government critics. Repression takes different forms and varies from countries to countries. In Indonesia under General Suharto, repression often took the form of military brutality, while in Malaysia it is the law and courts that exercise repressive power to protect the incumbents and weaken the opposition political forces.

Populism is also crucial to maintaining autocratic leaders in power (Dimitrov 2009). In his article, *Popular Autocrats*, Dimitrov (2009, 78) suggests that not all autocrats are the same when it comes to popular appeal. Some are popular, while others are not. Those who receive mass popularity tend to persist. He writes, "Broadly speaking, popular incumbents have managed to hold on to power in post-communist Eurasia, while unpopular ones have eventually been unseated." He attributed populism as the explaining factor. He writes:

The popularity of authoritarian incumbents may help us to account for the persistence of authoritarian resilience in the region. Popular autocrats, in contrast to their unpopular counterparts, enjoy the support of the electorate and rarely have to resort to the use of brute force. (Ibid)

Populist autocrats in his study often adopt three main strategies to build their mass popularity: "economic populism, anti-Western nationalism, and muzzling the media". Russian president Vladimir Putin's enormous popularity among his people rests on these three populist pillars (Dimitrov 2009, 78–79).

### *Political legitimation as an explanatory approach to autocrats' political durability*

The approaches described above have proved extremely useful in explaining autocrats' political resilience. However, the main weakness of many of these explanatory approaches is that they seem to have overlooked one important political concept, which is embraced or relied upon by political leaders of all regime types. It is political legitimation or claims to political legitimacy. In real world political arena, no authoritarian leaders rely only on one political resource or strategy to help them remain in power, whether it is repressive power, resource wealth, or organisational and institutional resources. They need to rely on an amalgam of several political concepts, resources and strategies, one of which is political legitimation.

Furthermore, whatever political instruments autocrats rely on to extend their rule, whether it is electoral manipulation, party and legislature institutions, patron-client networks, wealth, repression or populism, they are all about politics. And politics needs to be communicated through language, imagery, rituals and symbolism to be understandable and interpretable in various contexts of power relations (Anderson 1990; Bourdieu 1991; Kertzer 1988; Geertz 1980). It is here at the communication phase, either to the mass public or to other political elites, that one clearly sees the intricate relationship between political legitimation and ruling elites' everyday political life. In their communications, the elites need to justify or seek to justify their various political actions regarding their exercising of state power. For example, when they use state repressive power against government's critics or protestors, they often justify such an action as for the sake of restoring law and order and protecting peace and stability. The coup makers in Thailand, who overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014, claimed legitimacy for their military takeover of the country in the name of restoring order and bringing harmony and happiness back to Thai people. Given the important roles of political legitimation in ruling elites' everyday political communications, I therefore propose it as also an important explanatory approach to autocrats' political durability.

There are important studies which suggest political legitimation is significant in elite politics (Barker 1990; Barker 2004; Beetham 1991; Alagappa 1995; White 2005; Burnell 2006; Gerschewski 2013; Kailitz and Stockemer 2015). In such studies, political legitimation is seen as enhancing ruling elites' political power and authority



(Alagappa 1995; Barker 1990; Beetham 1991); providing stability and effectiveness for governments (Beetham 1991; Gerschewski 2013); and increasing cohesion and confidence among ruling elites (Barker 2004; Kailitz and Stockemer 2015). Building on these arguments, I argue that political legitimation or claims to legitimacy is also instrumental for autocrats' political survival and durability. Increased political power and authority, government's stability and effectiveness, and elites' cohesion and confidence are all crucial factors for autocrats' political resilience.

Before I discuss further the relationship between political legitimation and autocrats' political durability, I wish to highlight some important definitions, meanings, and differences between political legitimacy and political legitimation. Political legitimacy or the right to rule is defined as:

The belief in the rightfulness of a state, in its authority to issue commands, so that the commands are obeyed not simply out of fear or self-interest, but because they believe to have moral authority, because subjects believe they ought to obey.  
(Barker 1990, 11)

Therefore, political legitimacy focuses on “qualities of a political system”, while political legitimation refers to “activity or the making of claims to authority, which was one of the defining characteristics of all government” (Barker 2004, 9, 13). In other words, legitimacy is an “ascribed attribute”, while legitimation is “the action of ascribing”. Legitimation “is an activity which can be observed, it is something that people do”, while legitimacy is abstract, not observable, and from the point of view of others. All government leaders, to varying degree, engage in political legitimation to convince the governed and themselves that they possess legitimacy (Barker 2004, 22, 24). They are perceived to have legitimacy when their actions are justifiable based on established legal and moral grounds and the express consent of the subordinate (Beetham 1991, 3–19). Therefore, political legitimacy and political legitimation are mutually related and contexts-dependent. For political legitimation of ruling elites to be effective, it also needs to rely on other communicational, organisational, financial, material and symbolic resources. It also needs to be able to overcome the competing political legitimation from opposition political forces.

I will now discuss the relationship between political legitimation and autocrats' political durability. As shown earlier, political legitimation creates three important conditions favourable for autocrats' political resilience. First, it enhances their political

power and authority (Alagappa 1995; Barker 1990; Beetham 1991). Political legitimation helps cultivate the belief among the subjects in state elites' legitimacy or the rightfulness of their power. The perception that the elites' legitimate power is based on moral grounds and for the interest of the society not for their own benefits encourages the governed to obey and accept the rulers' commands (Alagappa 1995, 2–4, 11; Beetham 1991, 26, 46–47). Thus, the state elites' power and authority over other social groups prevail.

Second, political legitimation provides stability and effectiveness for governments (Beetham 1991; Gerschewski 2013). When a government's legitimation of power enhances its legitimacy in the eyes of the public, that legitimacy contributes to “the order, stability and effectiveness of a system of power” (Beetham 1991, 33). The government's legitimacy benefits the government not only in the maintenance of order but also gaining cooperation from the governed, two important conditions enhancing a government's effectiveness. The effectiveness of state elites depends not only on resources and organisation, but also on their legitimacy (Ibid, 29). The shortage or erosion of legitimacy will lead the elites to rely increasingly on the use of repression to maintain order and coercion to force the subjects to cooperate. However, frequent and extensive use of repression is costly to maintain and will reduce the government's effectiveness because the government's attention as well as a bulk of its resources are diverted from productive uses and sacrificed just for the sake of maintaining order (Beetham 1991, 28; Alagappa 1995, 4; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1281). Therefore, political legitimation is a significant factor providing stability and effectiveness to power of authoritarian leaders. Thus, it enables them to extend their rule.

Finally, political legitimation increases cohesion and confidence among incumbent elites (Barker 2004; Kailitz and Stockemer 2015). It is a significant political instrument for the elites not only to influence the mass but also to create internal cohesion among themselves and to convince themselves of their rights to rule. A strong claim to legitimacy minimise uncertainty among members of the ruling elites, thus fostering unity and cohesion among them (Kailitz and Stockemer 2015, 2). Through rituals, rhetoric and symbolism on various occasions and on diverse state materials ranging from architecture to coinage and portraits, the elites create their

identities, legitimate themselves, and to impress themselves to raise their own sense of confidence. In other words, political legitimation is used not only for outward but also for inward purposes, for “self-confirming, self-justification” (Barker 2004, 5–14). It makes the elites feel good and see values in themselves (Ibid, 17). No dictators want to be called dictators or seen as monsters. Instead, they hold noble titles and see themselves as patriots. For example, North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Un has official title as “Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un”. Thus, political legitimation has an effect on autocrats’ own sense of confidence and self-worth, which is significant for their political resilience.

There are a few scholars who also suggest a link between political legitimation and autocrats’ political durability (Kailitz and Stockemer 2015; Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). However, they address the issues only at the conceptual and theoretical levels. Moreover, they argue that political legitimation is crucial for autocrats’ political durability because it fosters unity among ruling elites (Kailitz and Stockemer 2015) and helps autocrats to endure politically during times of external pressure and international sanction on their regimes (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). Here I argue that political legitimation is instrumental for autocrats’ political endurance because it bolsters their political power and authority, provides stability and effectiveness to their governments, and creates cohesion and confidence among the ruling elites. All three factors are the backbone of autocratic regimes’ durability. Furthermore, I explore the complexities and dynamics of the concept of political legitimation at the empirical level by examining Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, one of the world’s longest-ruling autocrats and a known skilled manipulator of political legitimation.

### **3. Hun Sen’s political legitimation: between constraints to rule and right to rule**

Born in rural Kampong Cham province in 1952, Hun Sen was sent by his parents to Phnom Penh at the age of 13 to pursue his secondary education. He stayed at a Buddhist pagoda during his study in the city between 1965 and 1969. When Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup and a new government was formed in Phnom Penh led by Marshal Lon Nol, he quit his study to join the Khmer Rouge resistance forces in the jungle in 1970.

Hun Sen rose rapidly through the ranks and was appointed an East Zone chief of special regiment at the age of only 23. He escaped to Vietnam in 1977 from Pol Pot's mass purge of East Zone cadres, and, with the help of the Vietnamese army, the Cambodian forces he was part of managed to overthrow Pol Pot in 1979. In that same year, he was appointed foreign minister of the new government. In 1985, he was elected prime minister by his one-party national assembly, making him the world's youngest prime minister at that time (see Mehta 1999, 13–74). He has been in that position since then, although Cambodia has held regular elections since 1993, making him Cambodia's most dominant political figure and one of the world's most durable autocrats. Mehta (1999, xiii–xiv) writes of him as, “This man who had risen out of crushing poverty to become the most powerful leader Cambodia had ever known—more powerful even than Prince Sihanouk who was easily toppled, and more resilient than Pol Pot.”

Scholars of Cambodian politics attribute the prime minister's political power consolidation and his long rule to various factors, namely his use of repression against critics and political opponents (Heder 2005; Heder 2012); his manipulation of elections (McCargo 2005b; Hughes 2009; Thayer 2009); his extraction of natural resource wealth (Billon 2000; Billon 2002; Un and So 2009; Milne 2015); his exploitation of foreign aid and corruption (Ear 2013; Biddulph 2014); his cultivation and maintenance of complex vast patron client networks with rural people, the armed forces, the business elites, the bureaucrats, and the Buddhist religious authority (Hughes 2006; Un 2005; Un 2006; Hughes and Un 2011; Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox 2013; Kent and Chandler 2008; Baaz and Lilja 2014; Strangio 2014; Chambers 2015; Verver and Dahles 2015; Morgenbesser 2017); and his identification of himself with royal symbolism (Norén-Nilsson 2013).

These explanations for Hun Sen's political power and durability fall within the above mentioned explanatory approaches to autocrats' political durability, namely elections and political party institutions, political economy, patron-client network politics, and repression. The explanations from the existing studies provide rich insights into Hun Sen's enduring power. However, they have neglected one important dimension, which is the relationship between political legitimation and his political durability. Although political legitimation is mentioned here and there in the literature

about the prime minister, it has not received adequate attention or systematic analysis despite its ubiquity in speeches, political rituals, political activities, propaganda, images and portraits by Hun Sen and his government officials.

Furthermore, the existing literature has paid little attention to the justification or identification dimension of the rightfulness of power, or in other words, political legitimation, which often goes hand in hand with other political power consolidation strategies. For example, when Hun Sen recruited bureaucrats, military officials and business tycoons into his patron-client network, he justified his action based on moral grounds, which are his clients' ability, sacrifice, and contributions to the nation. The recruitment arrangements are marked by rituals and symbolism in the form of photo-taking with the prime minister, the conferment of distinguished state Orders, appointments to government and his personal advisory positions, and the promotion of his clients to higher ranks in the government or the armed forces. When his government used violence on demonstrators, it was supposedly for the sake of restoring law and order and protecting peace and stability. When the government jailed its critics or opposition politicians, it defended its action by broadly interpreting the law, specifically the defamation and incitement law.

Based on these multidimensional uses of political legitimation in his politics, one should not overlook or underestimate the significance of political legitimation to Hun Sen's political resilience. It has legitimated the reciprocal relations in his patron-client network, thus contributing to the ruling elites' cohesion. It has convinced some of the population to believe in the rightfulness of his use of state repressive power against his critics and opposition politicians, thus contributing to his regime's stability. Therefore, I propose political legitimation as another important explanatory approach to Prime Minister Hun Sen's political durability.

I argue that political legitimation is important for his political resilience. It is also a key plank of his strategy to hold on to power. I propose a framework for analysing Hun Sen's multidimensional use of political legitimation by examining the specific contexts of constraints on his power, or in other words, his political vulnerability. I argue that the prime minister has been politically vulnerable and his political survival and resilience has depended on whether he is able to make strong claims to legitimacy.

Although Hun Sen is politically powerful, it does not mean that his power is not contested or he is not politically constrained. As Yang (1989, 26) writes that power is never total and static. It has “two faces”, which means power can be both centralised and diffused (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Power has boundaries or limitations and is governed by social rules (Beetham 1991, 3, 19, 35). And it is not independent of social forces (Olson 1993, 572; Foucault 1980 cited in Yang 1989, 26). It is relational and interactive. In other words, it is not a one-way street. Therefore, Hun Sen may use his power to influence others, but the responses or reactions from others can also influence or shape his power and actions. He may use his power to constrain others, but these others also have various strategies and resources that they can manipulate to undermine or constrain him, although frequently in less proportional and effective ways.

Besides, what has formed the basis of his power is also what has constrained it. In other words, what has empowered him, whether it be patron-client relations, wealth or repression, is also what have made him vulnerable. Yang (1989, 26) writes that power holds within it “internal contradictions”. When Hun Sen came to power through Vietnam’s patronage, his critics accused him of being a Vietnam’s ‘puppet’. When he built his power through patron-client relations with bureaucrats, business elites, and military officials, his critics accused him of favouritism, nepotism, and cronyism. When he suppresses his critics and anti-government protestors, he is accused of not respecting human rights and democracy. When he personifies the nation’s achievements by saying that what Cambodia and its people have today have come from his effort and leadership, he also becomes the person whom people quickly link to every problem facing the country and their everyday life.

To overcome the constraints and reduce his political vulnerability, Hun Sen has relied on political legitimation as one of the important political strategies to extend his rule. Therefore, I argue that his government’s huge investment in nationalism projects in the recent Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand should be analysed through the framework of his political legitimation. Nationalism in this context is a productive political resource because it has helped him counter domestic critics, who have accused him of being submissive to neighbouring countries, and it has at the same time bolstered his political legitimacy as a nationalist and patriot. Before I discuss the Preah Vihear case, I need to highlight some important contexts of Hun Sen’s dynamic uses of

political legitimization for his political purposes. They will contextualise the significance of political legitimization as Hun Sen's instrument for political survival and resilience. And they will allow us to see with clarity the link between the government's investments in the Preah Vihear dispute and the broader political legitimization framework of this politically resilient autocrat.

***Nation's saviour, peacemaker and political stability guarantor as the 'moral' rights to rule***

Prime Minister Hun Sen's most important political legitimization strategy is the perpetual portrayal of himself and his ruling Cambodian People's Party as the saviour of the Cambodian people from Pol Pot's brutal regime and his significant role in ending the country's civil war, achieving peace,<sup>75</sup> and maintaining political stability. This particular claim to political legitimacy has taken the forms of political speeches, state-sponsored rituals, photos, documentary videos, and museumization of former DK torture and killing sites, Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek in particular. And they have been widely publicised by his government-affiliated media outlets, history textbooks in public schools, his party's national and local officials, and the ubiquitous display of the 7 January symbolism in public spaces.

7 January refers to 7 January 1979, the day Hun Sen says Cambodian forces led by him and other senior officials backed by several Vietnamese army's divisions defeated and pushed the DK government out of Phnom Penh. It has since become an annual public holiday and state festive celebration. 7 January is the CPP's most staple political legitimization symbolism. It has been constructed to represent the 'second birth' of the Cambodian people and everything they have today. The CPP also uses it to highlight the contrast between Pol Pot's regime and Hun Sen's. The former killed people and destroyed the country, while the latter has saved lives and built the nation.

This construction of the '7 January' symbolism has given rise to a notion of colossal debt which the Cambodian people have to repay Hun Sen and his government through

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<sup>75</sup>Hun Sen has, on several occasions, argued that the mission of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in the early 1990s was a failure. It did not end the country's civil war. It was his Win-Win policy that made the Khmer Rouge stop their anti-government resistance and brought total peace to Cambodia. However, scholars argued otherwise. They attributed Hun Sen's success in putting an end to the Khmer Rouge's struggle to severe internal fractions among the Khmer Rouge and the desire among their leaders to strike corruption deals with the government or known as the "elite pact" (Hughes and Un 2011, 8–9; Baaz and Lilja 2014, 12; Verver and Dahles 2015, 53).

expressions of gratitude and continued loyalty such as voting for his party in every election. Anyone who does not commemorate 7 January is accused of being ungrateful, immoral, and supportive of Pol Pot's brutality. Through the manipulation of the symbolism, Hun Sen has positioned himself as the leader with the high 'moral' rights to rule Cambodia because, as he has often argued, he has made sacrifices and contributions to the country more than anyone else.

Hun Sen's government has used this particular political legitimization narrative for three main political purposes. First, it is used to counter international criticism of his regime for its lack of respect for human rights and democracy. The prime minister and his government officials have often argued otherwise, citing its liberation of the people from Pol Pot's mass atrocity as the manifestation of its respect for human lives. The government have even accused those international critics of being hypocritical about human rights because they supported the Khmer Rouge against his Phnom Penh government during the civil war by securing a seat at the United Nations for the tripartite Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, a coalition government-in-exile of which the Khmer Rouge was part.

Second, the political legitimization strategy has also been used to counter domestic critics and to discredit opposition politicians. Hun Sen's critics and his political rivals have often criticised his government for its authoritarian nature. And they have also disputed the meaning of the date 7 January by interpreting it as a day Cambodia lost its independence as a sovereign state and came under Vietnam's occupation for a decade. The government has responded by accusing those with anti-7 January views as supporters of the Khmer Rouge's crime against humanity (see, for example, *The Cambodia Daily*, January 9, 2017). It also accused opposition political parties' leaders of enjoying a comfortable life abroad during the civil war period while it was fighting against Pol Pot's return to power and was struggling to rebuild the country. Opposition leaders only returned to the country to reap the benefits.

Lastly, Hun Sen has used the political legitimization narrative to win elections. He has often reminded people of the date 7 January as their 'second birth' and his roles as saviour, peacemaker and political stability guarantor. He warned people of war and instability if he lost power (see, for example, *The Cambodia Daily*, October 26, 2015). This political legitimization strategy has been effective in helping his ruling party win



elections because of people's general tendency of favouring peace and stability, and some people's sense of obligation to pay back the debt of gratitude to their saviour. Even a recent study by a Swedish scholar about popular attitudes to the CPP's gift-giving in two rural communities shows that the most typical reason of pro-CPP vote among the respondents is their sense of gratitude for liberating the people from the Khmer Rouge regime (Norén-Nilsson 2016a, 810). As illustrated above, this particular political legitimization strategy has performed multifaceted roles, which has significantly contributed to Hun Sen's political resilience.



Figure 3. A billboard displaying the 38th celebration of 7 January. (Photo by the author.)

### ***Development, economic growth, and modernization as proof of wise and competent leadership***

Although Hun Sen's portrayal of himself as the saviour of the nation, peacemaker, and political stability guarantor is a strong claim to legitimacy, the prime minister remains politically vulnerable due to competing political legitimization narratives from his critics and opposition politicians. They have argued that Hun Sen and his government officials were incompetent to build a modern Cambodia, citing a whole range of issues including the leadership's inferior education,<sup>76</sup> widespread corruption in the government, poverty, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, social insecurity and injustice, the inflow of illegal Vietnamese immigrants, inadequate job opportunities, etc. Opposition politicians have used this competing political legitimization narrative persistently against the prime minister and his government. They have portrayed Hun Sen as being incompetent and possessing poor leadership skills which are damaging the Cambodian nation. Hun Sen's most prominent critic and opposition party leader, Sam Rainsy, often uses this narrative to argue that the prime minister is unfit for the job and has, on several occasions, called for him to step down. He urges people to vote for his Cambodia National Rescue Party in order to 'rescue' the nation from great danger.

To counter this anti-government political legitimization, Hun Sen and his officials began promoting his image as a competent and brilliant leader. He has accumulated at least 13 honorary doctorates from both local and foreign universities. Government officials regard the conferment of the degrees as recognition of the prime minister's extraordinary leadership experience (see *The Cambodian Daily*, October 16, 2015). Furthermore, they refer to increased infrastructure development, strong annual economic growth,<sup>77</sup> and the changing to modernity of Cambodia's urban and rural landscapes as strong proof of the prime minister's wisdom and brilliant leadership. In short, Hun Sen has come to personify all national achievements. The phrase "under the brilliant leadership of Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen" has become

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<sup>76</sup>That Hun Sen and many senior government officials had peasant background and received low education has made him and his government vulnerable to criticism when it comes to public comparison of educational achievements with opposition politicians, many of whom have elitist backgrounds and have received education abroad. Funcinpec Party's leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh, Hun Sen's most formidable political rival in the 1990s, has a PhD in law from France. Sam Rainsy, leader of the opposition CNRP and currently Hun Sen's major political rival, has received postgraduate education in France.

<sup>77</sup>Cambodia had strong annual economic growth of more than 7 percent between 2004 and 2013 and the country's poverty rate fell significantly (see World Bank Report 2013).

ubiquitous in domestic news about national achievements. It has also been integrated into government officials' speeches. In these speeches, the phrase has to be made distinctive from the rest of the text, for example, in bold letters so that the official who reads the speech will not miss it.

Hun Sen himself has often claimed during the inauguration of development projects that his current regime is the most joyful and modern era that Cambodia and its people have ever seen (see, for example, *The Cambodia Daily*, August 1, 2014). He has linked this constructed notion of national joy and modernity directly to his leadership. The prime minister has referred to his era as *samai Techo Sen* [the period of *Techo Sen*]<sup>78</sup> and contrasted it with previous regimes. He talked about how poor Cambodia was and how hard life was under those regimes. He talked about the shortage of public infrastructure in the past when students had to travel many kilometres to reach their schools or live away from home to pursue their studies. Sick people had to spend hours crossing rivers by boats and travelling on bad roads before they could reach the hospital. Unlike those regimes, his government has built schools close to students' homes. Sick people are transported quickly to hospitals, thanks to newly built bridges and roads. His government has also created many job opportunities and raised people's living standards. He has often said the opposition politicians are only good at criticising and making empty promises, but not at achieving any concrete development for the country. He has challenged his political rivals to build schools, roads, and bridges to prove that they are capable of leading the country. Such a political legitimisation narrative has allowed Hun Sen to refute the claims made by opposition politicians. It has reduced his political vulnerability and, at the same time, has constructed his image as a competent and brilliant leader whom Cambodian people should support.

### ***Elections as the rights to rule forever***

Existing literature shows that elections are important for autocrats because they serve as a mechanism or instrument that can be manipulated for political survival and resilience during the global wave of democratisation. In existing studies, scholars focus

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<sup>78</sup>*Techo* comes from Hun Sen's full title of *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Pedei Techo*, which Heder (2012, 104) translates as "exalted supreme great commander of gloriously victorious troops".

on various strategies the incumbents use to win elections, such as the creation of an uneven playing field, the dominance of the electoral arenas, and the strengthening of the ruling party's organization for both unity and resources (Schedler 2002; Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002; Brownlee 2007). Literature on Cambodia's elections also adopts these discourses by studying how Hun Sen's CPP has won elections and their implications for the country's democratisation. The question of whether the elections are free and fair and Hun Sen's institutionalised patronage politics with diverse stakeholders are the central focus in these studies (Peou 1998; Hughes 1999; Un 2005; Un 2006; Morgenbesser 2017; Baaz and Lilja 2014). While I concur with the findings of existing studies, one major drawback of this approach is that it paid little attention to the legitimization dimensions of elections by the ruling elites. I argue that the legitimization discourses of elections are also important for the consolidation of Hun Sen's political power.

Of course, Hun Sen has employed a wide range of strategies, as shown in the existing studies, to prevent the opposition parties from winning elections. They are all important instruments for controlling the election outcomes in favour of his ruling CPP. However, the legitimization discourses of his party's electoral victory are also politically significant for his power consolidation at least for four reasons.

First, they have legitimated his long rule and countered the calls by the opposition party leaders for him to step down. Opposition party leader Sam Rainsy has often criticised the prime minister's long rule and led post-elections demonstrations calling for him to resign. Hun Sen defended his 30-year rule by employing the legitimization discourses of being the 'elected leader' and the notion of his party's electoral victory as the manifestation of people's continued support for him. Hun Sen has said that as long as people continued to vote for him, he would continue to be their leader. He stated that he would serve as prime minister until he was 90 years old. He later on changed his mind that he would rule until he was 74 (if people continued to vote for him) (*The Phnom Penh Post*, March 4, 2015).

Second, Hun Sen's legitimization discourses of his party's electoral victory have somehow legitimated his government's crackdowns on post-elections demonstrations. As stated earlier, opposition party leader Sam Rainsy led post-elections protests in 1998, 2003, 2008, and most recently 2013 against the election results. Every time he

asked the prime minister to step down. And every time the government responded with violent crackdowns. Hun Sen has often used the narrative of his ruling party's electoral victory as the justification for the state's brutal crackdowns on anti-government demonstrators. He often argued that his mandate came from people's votes. Any call for him to step down was against the will of the Cambodian people and anti-democracy. If he was to be removed from power, it had to be through elections, not through such demonstrations.

Third, Hun Sen has used political legitimization discourses of electoral victories not only for countering the opposition politicians but also for stabilising and consolidating his power within his party. The legitimization discourses have provided him with sufficient legitimacy to lead the government, thus preventing internal rivalry for his position. There has been a widely-held public belief about internal rivalry in the ruling party between two factions, one of which was led by the late Chea Sim, former CPP's chairman and senate president, and another was headed by prime minister Hun Sen (see Chambers 2015, 188). Chea Sim's faction was relatively weaker due to the chairman's ailing health; moreover, some of its members were targeted for arrest by the Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU), a governmental unit established in 2006 and headed by one of Hun Sen's top advisors (Heder 2012, 104). Hun Sen's image has often eclipsed that of his party. Through his patronage networks, he has sponsored thousands of public infrastructure projects throughout the country, and many of them bear his name. He has often argued that his party's electoral victories came from his mass popularity and that people voted for his party because they wanted him to be their prime minister.

Last, Hun Sen's legitimization discourses of his party's electoral victories have also created international legitimacy for his regime. This took the form of international recognition of his government and annual foreign aid worth hundreds of millions of US dollars to his government. Undoubtedly, this foreign aid has greatly benefitted his ruling party (Hughes 2009, 31; Roberts 2010, 522). Therefore, the political legitimization discourses of election victories are significant for Prime Minister Hun Sen's political resilience because they have enabled him to deal with not only national political constraints to his power but also to gain international recognition of his regime.

### ***Gift-giving as a discourse of meritorious benefactor and righteous leader***

Gift-giving has been another of Prime Minister Hun Sen's major political legitimization investment for his political survival and resilience. It is a massive political project which has been launched and vigorously pursued after his CPP lost in the 1993 general election to the royalist Funcinpec Party of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, King Norodom Sihanouk's son.<sup>79</sup> Realising that Funcinpec's election victory had derived largely from its capitalising on Sihanouk's mass popularity with rural people and that his own political legitimacy needed to rely on electoral popular support, Hun Sen began to establish mass patronage with rural people in a similar fashion to Sihanouk during his Sangkum regime (see Hughes 2006, 473; Stuart-Fox 2013). He toured Cambodia's provinces, delivered gifts to people, and sponsored thousands of rural and infrastructure development projects. Thus, the prime minister has managed to garner enormous popularity and turn rural areas into his CPP's strong electoral support bases, which help guarantee his party's victory in subsequent elections.

The diverse forms of gifts, and rural and infrastructure development projects handed out by the prime minister and his party's officials have been communicated to people as *omnaoy* [donation/gift] and Hun Sen and his officials, the gift-givers, as *saboraschon* [meritorious benefactor] (see Hughes 2006; Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox 2013, 18). The phrase "*omnaoy dol thlai thla robos samdech Hun Sen* [A precious gift from Samdech Hun Sen]" is omnipresent. It is attached to or written on diverse items from bags of rice and sewing machines to big public infrastructure projects such as schools, roads and bridges. And Hun Sen's *omnaoy* has recently even taken the form of whole new villages.<sup>80</sup>

Gift-giving practices are rooted in Cambodia's political traditions of patron-client relations and merit-making, both of which are important political strategies to enhance the power of the gift-givers (Hughes 2006, 460–470). Gift-giving as a way to pursue patron-client relations is common throughout Southeast Asia, not just in Cambodia. It denotes the hierarchical status between the givers and the receivers and the reciprocal

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<sup>79</sup>Funcinpec won 45 percent of the votes to the CPP 38 percent. Although it lost, the CPP was still able to force Funcinpec to accept an equal power-sharing arrangement in the government. Thus, Cambodia for the first time had co-prime ministers, with Prince Ranariddh as the first and Hun Sen as the second.

<sup>80</sup>During the recent Preah Vihear conflict with Thailand, the Cambodian government created several new villages in the border province of Preah Vihear. The government has called the villages *omnaoy* from Prime Minister Hun Sen and named them after him (see Kimly 2016, 216, 226–227).

exchanges between them (Scott 1972, 92). Gift-giving as merit-making, or *omper savoras* in Khmer, is rooted in the Buddhist religious concept of *tver bon* [merit-making]. It also denotes different hierarchical status between the givers and the receivers. The givers occupy a higher social status or possess more *bon* [merit] and by donating gifts to the poor receivers, the donors will accumulate more *bon* thus enhancing or elevating their current status. If the gift-givers are leaders, they are considered to be righteous leaders. According to the Buddhist religious tradition, one important virtue of a righteous leader is *tver bon* or *dak tean* [charity/generosity] to the poor or making contributions to the construction of pagodas and public infrastructure for the public good. King Jayavaraman VII of the Khmer Empire of Angkor is considered a righteous leader because he built many hospitals, rest houses, and roads for public use during his reign (see Monychenda 2008, 313–314).

With independence, this tradition was reinvented to suit Prince Norodom Sihanouk's new political discourses of nation-building and national development. And as Cambodia has embraced multi-party electoral regime, Prime Minister Hun Sen has invoked its symbolism to suit his new purposes of winning elections and bolstering his political authority. In this new political context, the symbolism of gift-giving has significantly benefited Hun Sen. It has legitimated his authority as both the big patron and the meritorious benefactor.

Although Hun Sen's gift-giving is both loved and loathed and viewed differently by receivers and non-receivers, and though it has started to lose its political significance based on findings in recent studies (see Norén-Nilsson 2015; Norén-Nilsson 2016a), one cannot deny the political significance of its dual functions as both political legitimation and patron-client relations strategies to strengthen Hun Sen's political resilience. It has helped him deal with the constraints to his rule when Cambodia adopted electoral democracy. It has allowed him to compete with and overshadow the royalist Funcinpec and other opposition parties for popular legitimacy among rural voters, thus securing his victories in all the post-1993 elections.

### *‘Neak mean bon’ as reinventing primordial legitimate and moral power*

Prime Minister Hun Sen also incorporated ancient Khmer concepts of legitimate power and moral authority into his political legitimization framework for political resilience. He sponsored political legitimization narratives to construct his image as a *neak mean bon* [man of merit or holy man], a person who possesses high moral and divine power. In the *neak mean bon* project, Hun Sen identified himself with ancient Khmer kingship by holding the royal title of *Samdech* [Prince] and sponsoring a narrative depicting him as the reincarnation of a sixteenth-century Khmer person called King Kân (Norén-Nilsson 2013; see also Ros 2007). His government-affiliated media also propagated a narrative portraying him as possessing great moral and divine power and spiritual connection to the late King Father Sihanouk, Cambodia’s last god-king.

The ‘*neak mean bon*’ is a traditional concept of political representation denoting high moral and legitimate power, which was also typical in other mainland Theravada Buddhist states (see, for example, Wilson 1997; Baird 2013; Bowie 2014). This notion of potent power is rooted in ancient kingship in which a king was supposed to be a divine and moral figure or *neak mean bon*. The king’s high accumulation of *bon* [merit] could create harmony between the earth and the universe, thus bringing peace and prosperity to all living beings in his kingdom (Harris 2005, 80; Kent and Chandler 2008, 2). However, when the king was believed to have lost his *bon* or his *bon* was eroding, it led to disaster and unrest. Thus, the political legitimacy that he embodied became contested by other men of prowess, who also cultivated power from the concept of *neak mean bon* to claim legitimacy and to mobilise popular uprising against central authority (See Chandler 1975; Wilson 1997; Baird 2013; Bowie 2014).

In contemporary Cambodian politics, Prime Minister Hun Sen has invested in this political legitimization project of cultivating his image as a *neak mean bon*. The project has allowed him to claim that he embodies the aura of royalty, divinity and morality. The main reason underpinning his investment in the *neak mean bon* project came from his sense of political vulnerability after Cambodia adopted multiparty electoral democracy in the early 1990s. The most formidable political rival whom he had to compete against in elections was Prince Norodom Ranariddh, Funcinpec Party’s leader. Of royal birth and son of King Sihanouk, hugely popular and widely revered by Cambodians as a semi-divine figure, Prince Ranariddh bore more legitimacy as a ruler



than Hun Sen according to Khmer traditional concept of legitimate power associating with kingship. As Hun Sen came from a peasant background, he lacked legitimacy in that respect.

In dealing with this constraint to his right to rule, the prime minister sponsored legitimization narratives associating him with ancient Khmer kingship and depicting him as a *neak mean bon*. In the mid-1990s, he received from King Sihanouk the princely title of Samdech Hun Sen, a title which was previously reserved only for royalty and supreme patriarchs in Buddhism, thus enabling him to claim that he embodied divine and moral power associating with kingship (see Edwards 2008, 221–223). If the title's royal symbolism was still inadequate for him to challenge Prince Ranariddh as the rightful representation of Khmer kingship, Hun Sen added another legitimization narrative portraying him as the reincarnation of a sixteenth-century Khmer, King Kân, a commoner who usurped the throne. He said King Kân represented the quality of Khmer kingship better than the king whom Kân had overthrown (see Norén-Nilsson 2013).

When former King Sihanouk passed away in 2012, Hun Sen continued to cultivate his image as a *neak mean bon* and the rightful embodiment of Khmer kingship. His government-affiliated media propagated a narrative of the 'miraculous' event during the lighting of the pyre to send Sihanouk off. According to tradition, King Sihanouk would light the pyre, but the flame failed to ignite. The media commentators reported that the queen mother and the supreme patriarch of Buddhist Thammayut order also attempted to light the pyre, but they were not successful. Only Hun Sen managed to light it and perform the ritual successfully. The commentators attributed the phenomenon to the prime minister's possession of great merit and spiritual connection with the late king. Through this narrative, Hun Sen has positioned himself as the exclusive embodiment of Sihanouk's spiritual legacy (see Norén-Nilsson 2016b, 13–14). Such political legitimization narratives constructing Hun Sen's image as a *neak mean bon* have been politically significant for the prime minister to overcome the constraints to his rule, thus contributing to his political resilience.

### *Facebook ‘Likes’ and online populism as new political legitimization strategy*

Although Prime Minister Hun Sen has invested in many political legitimization projects, to date he remains politically vulnerable due to the emergence of new threat to his power: the new public sphere on the internet such as Facebook and other online social networking sites. The social media platforms have presented a new challenge for the prime minister and his government because they allow people to build and expand complex networks, exchange views, and find people who share similar views in a much quicker fashion than in traditional public sphere settings. Moreover, they enable people to share and have access to a broad range of news sources, bypassing the traditional media outlets.

For years, Hun Sen’s government has relied on an almost complete monopoly of traditional media to communicate political messages and influence public views about the government’s legitimacy to the disadvantage of opposition political parties. However, the advent of the internet and its associated features such as social and digital media has changed the rules of the game. They have provided opposition politicians with alternative channels to communicate with their supporters and recruit more members. They have also given politicians with new platforms and tools to contest Prime Minister Hun Sen’s legitimacy.

Observers of Cambodian politics have attributed the ruling CPP’s loss of many votes to the opposition CNRP in the 2013 election to the rising political significance of this new social and digital public sphere and the opposition party’s cleverly tapping into it for their political gains (see, for examples, Sophat 2013; Tiquet 2016). Prior to the 2013 election, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling elites did not much appreciate or see the dynamism of social and digital media as politically relevant to their power framework. The prime minister himself did not even recognise a Facebook page created under his name, “Samdech Hun Sen, Cambodian Prime Minister”. Instead, his government still relied heavily on traditional media and his ruling party’s nationwide patron-client structure to conduct politics.

In contrast, opposition party leader Sam Rainsy saw promise in social and digital media as instrumental to his political ambitions. He created a Facebook page in April 2013, a few months before the election, and used it to his political advantage. He was quoted as saying about his move to create the page, “It was a unique opportunity and

the only way for the CNRP, given its limited means, to develop and reach a vast audience.” (*The Cambodia Daily*, January 6, 2017) Sam Rainsy used his Facebook page to mobilise popular support, connect with his party’s grassroots, and disseminate highly contentious and critical news about the government such as issues of land-grabbing, corruption, deforestation, illegal Vietnamese immigration. His posts attracted hundreds of comments and shared thousands of times on the social media domain.

The opposition leader also used his Facebook page to contest Prime Minister Hun Sen’s political legitimacy by claiming that he was more popular than the prime minister on social media. Rainsy proudly organised a press conference and hosted a party at his party’s headquarters on 16 December 2014 after his Facebook page received one million ‘likes’, while Prime Minister Hun Sen’s unofficial page received a little less than 600,000 ‘likes’ (*The Phnom Penh Post*, December 17, 2014). Furthermore, Sam Rainsy used his Facebook page as a vehicle for his populist politics. He posted video clips of his visits to markets, selfie photographs with market vendors and ordinary Cambodians, and photographs of him in T-shirt carrying water buckets and watering vegetables for farmers. His online populism was intended to communicate that he was a more accessible and connected leader to ordinary Cambodians than Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Sam Rainsy’s popularity on Facebook and his online populism presented a serious challenge to the Prime Minister’s right to rule. Hun Sen was therefore prompted to adopt the social media platform and online populism as his new political legitimisation strategy. He needed to compete with the opposition leader for supremacy in social media and online populism. When the number of ‘likes’ on the Facebook page created under his name reached one million in September 2015, the prime minister’s cabinet issued an announcement acknowledging the page as belonging to Hun Sen. Since that time onward, a vigorous campaign has been carried out to increase the number of ‘likes’ on his page with a government minister urging the ruling party’s loyalists “to push the page whenever possible” (*The Cambodia Daily*, January 6, 2017). Within the span of five months, Hun Sen’s Facebook page received more than three million ‘likes’, surpassing that of Sam Rainsy’s which at that time had 1.83 million fans. However, analysts suggested that there were irregularities with the prime minister’s

rapid surge in popularity pointing out that more than half of his page ‘likes’ came from foreign countries particularly India and the Philippines. Analysts explained that the ‘likes’ could be bought from companies using offshore ‘click farms’ (*The Phnom Penh Post*, March 3, 2016). Wherever the origins of his fans were, it did not matter to Hun Sen since his political legitimization strategy was to have more ‘likes’ or to show that he was ahead of Sam Rainsy in social media popularity.

Hun Sen’s political legitimization strategy was to compete not only for more Facebook page ‘likes’ but also for populist supremacy on the social media platform. He posted video clips, photographs, and updates on a daily basis. Some of those populist photos included his eating Khmer noodle and jackfruit being sold on a sidewalk in Phnom Penh and his selfies with market vendors, students, garment factory workers, and ordinary people. This populism has portrayed a different Hun Sen, from a ‘strongman’ image to an image of a simple and accessible leader who is connected to ordinary Cambodians and social media users. His Facebook page has also been used as a channel to livestream football matches of Cambodia’s national team and The Voice Cambodia program. Moreover, Hun Sen has also used his Facebook page to carry out official duties. Through his page, he announced government decisions, made changes to traffic rules, solved numerous complaints raised on his Facebook page. He put a halt to road tolls, waived annual road taxes for motorbike users, and promised public market vendors ownership of their stores and the right to pass that ownership to their children. The prime minister’s adoption of Facebook and online populism speaks to his broader view of political legitimization as significant for his political survival and resilience. He would not hesitate to reinvent his claims to legitimacy through whatever forms or modes when there was any major threat to his power.

#### **4. Government investments in the Preah Vihear conflict for nationalist symbolism**

So far I have highlighted some of the important constraints on Prime Minister Hun Sen’s power and how he has used different political legitimization strategies to overcome them. Hopefully, this analytical framework, which treats political legitimization as a response to threats to his power and a strategy to extend his rule, helps us see the relevance of Hun Sen’s use of nationalism during the Preah Vihear

conflict with Thailand as consistent with this approach to power. The identification with nationalist symbolism is a major source of political legitimacy for ruling elites; accordingly, elites often try to cultivate a nationalist or patriotic image for themselves. If the governed have cause to doubt their nationalist credentials, their political legitimacy will be undermined or contested.

This is the situation in which Prime Minister Hun Sen found himself before the eruption of the Preah Vihear border conflict in 2008. Although he was overwhelmingly popular at that time, owing to his patronage politics, he was vulnerable on nationalist grounds. Critics frequently pointed to the nationalist question as the incumbent's Achilles heel. In the decade leading up to the border conflict, the leader was relentlessly portrayed as a 'servant' of Vietnam than of the Cambodian people. Since the early 2000s at least, his opponents have concentrated almost exclusively on the leader's lack of nationalist credentials as their mass mobilisation strategy to win power. Another constraint the incumbent faced was his inability to vigorously counter that perception for fear of damaging relations with the neighbouring countries.

Despite these constraints, Hun Sen handled the Preah Vihear conflict rather capably. Thanks to the Thai Yellow Shirts, who provoked the conflict in the first place, Hun Sen was given the opportunity to perform some symbolically meaningful but low-cost posturing and rectify his nationalist deficit. Through the government-affiliated media and state-sponsored nationalist projects, the prime minister was able to conjure up an image of himself and his government as the defender of Preah Vihear Temple and border territories against Thailand's aggression. In this context, nationalism proved to be a productive political resource for the incumbent's symbolic legitimisation politics. The sub-sections that follow explore various nationalism projects that his government had invested in during the conflict.

### ***Preah Vihear Temple's listing as a historic and proud victory***

This is another new pride for our people and for the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia as well as for people in the region and in the world that Preah Vihear Temple was recognized by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) as Khmer's great architectural masterpiece of universal value and was therefore listed as a world heritage site.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>A quote from Prime Minister Hun Sen's official statement to the Cambodian people about Preah Vihear Temple's world heritage listing, see (*Rasmei Kampuchea Daily*, July 9, 2008).

It was night time in Cambodia when the late Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, head of Cambodia's delegation to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee meeting, announced from Canada's Quebec City via local Cambodian Television Network (CTN) live report Cambodia's success in having Preah Vihear Temple listed as a world heritage site. The next morning, on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2008, Prime Minister Hun Sen issued an official statement to his countrymen, which was read on all local television channels. Soon after that, the government organised celebrations at various venues throughout Phnom Penh. Municipal and local government officials led celebrations at Phnom Penh City Hall, markets, universities, and schools throughout the city.

Vibrant nationalist rhetoric and political messages promoting Hun Sen's government were communicated to gathering crowds at those celebration venues. All were intended to persuade public opinion that the temple's listing was Cambodia's historic moment and a proud victory for the Khmer people and, at the same time, linking this national victory to the 'brilliant' leadership of Hun Sen and his government. The prime minister and his senior government officials were, therefore, portrayed as great nationalists and patriots.

Such nationalist and political communications were expressed succinctly by Kep Chuktema, who was Phnom Penh's municipal governor at that time. Leading a celebration at City Hall, which was aired on local television channels, the governor and his officials were seen waving Cambodia's national flag and shouting in unison, "Victory, the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia! Victory, Preah Vihear Temple! Victory, Khmer people! Victory, Samdech Techo Hun Sen! And Victory, Deputy Prime Minister Sok An!" (see *Koh Santepheap Daily*, July 9, 2008). The governor also gave a speech in front of a large crowd at a separate celebration at Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh City's historic and iconic landmark. He said:

It is a historic day for which Cambodian people have great pride because the Preah Vihear Temple, which is Khmer's priceless heritage, was listed by UNESCO as a world heritage site. This great honour has derived from the government's leadership with Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen as the prime minister who has done his best to lead and defend the national soul. (*Koh Santepheap Daily*, July 10, 2008)

Similar celebrations were also organised at Preah Vihear Temple and at various provincial cities. The government also instructed Buddhist pagodas throughout the

country to beat drums at noon on that same day to celebrate Preah Vihear Temple's listing (see *Koh Santepheap Daily*, July 9, 2008).

Another major celebration was also held on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2008 at the Olympic Stadium to welcome the Cambodian delegation's arrival home from Canada. The event was jointly hosted by Phnom Penh City Hall and Bayon TV, a station controlled by one of Hun Sen's daughters. The celebration was broadcast live on local televisions. Local Khmer language newspapers estimated the number of flag-waving participants in the tens of thousands. They were waiting for the arrival of Deputy Prime Minister Sok An and his delegation, who travelled straight to the stadium upon their arrival at Phnom Penh International Airport (*Koh Santepheap Daily*, July 15 2008; see also *Rasmei Kampuchea Daily*, July 15, 2008).

It was a big celebration, full of nationalist and political messages. After Cambodian singers and film stars performed Khmer traditional dances and sung nationalist songs, Sok An gave a long speech to the audience. He talked about the government's more-than-six-year effort to have Preah Vihear Temple listed as a world heritage site. The government had to go through a very complex process and overcome several hurdles before the temple was finally inscribed a world heritage site. His narrative, of course, gave the impression that the government had made a lot of sacrifices for the cause of the Cambodian nation. After his speech ended, the deputy prime minister led the crowd in singing Cambodia's national anthem, the *bangsavatar* song. The celebration concluded with the participants' chorusing, "Victory, Preah Vihear Temple!" "Victory, Samdech Techo Hun Sen!" and accompanied by fireworks launching (*Koh Santepheap Daily*, July 15, 2008; see also *Rasmei Kampuchea Daily*, July 15, 2008). Sok An's speech together with the nationalist spectacles in and around the stadium aroused great nationalist sentiment, triggering a national imagining that Cambodian pride was restored to its former grandeur under Hun Sen's government.

The government's political legitimization of itself as nationalist was not limited to only nationalist celebrations, but also extended to include congratulatory messages. They appeared continuously for many days on front pages of local Khmer-language newspapers after Preah Vihear Temple's listing. They were sent by government officials and tycoons to Prime Minister Hun Sen. Those congratulatory messages

contained photos of the prime minister and Preah Vihear Temple and followed by exactly the same wordings. Below is my translation of the message.

Under Samdech’s wise leadership and high wisdom, Preah Vihear Temple, which is a Khmer outstanding architectural masterpiece, was listed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO...This is a national pride and a history...This is a significant achievement in promoting the national prestige with Samdech as Cambodia’s leader...(Koh Santepheap Daily, July 15, 2008).



Figure 4. Congratulatory message with photos of Prime Minister Hun Sen and Preah Vihear Temple in Koh Santepheap Daily, July 10, 2008.

In addition to using Preah Vihear temple’s world heritage inscription to legitimate Hun Sen as a nationalist, ruling party officials also used the temple’s new status as a strategy to win the next election. Their campaigns prior to the 27 July 2008 election promoted the temple’s listing as the ruling party’s significant achievement for the nation (see, for example, Koh Santepheap Daily, July 12–13, 2008). The ruling party won an unprecedented landslide election victory that year, garnering 90 out of the national assembly’s 123 seats. The 2008 election victory was probably Hun Sen’s strongest and most legitimate victory. That election showed Hun Sen to be truly on top



of his game in the arenas of patronage politics and nationalist symbolism. The opposition parties simply could not compete with him at the height of his power and, in fact, Funcinpec crumbled.

### ***Investing in nationalist symbolism through media***

It is widely known that media is a powerful instrument that governments, particularly autocratic ones, can rely on to enhance their legitimacy. Through media, the incumbents can communicate their identities versus the identities of their adversaries. In Cambodia, Hun Sen has long recognised the political significance of media and has used it skilfully for his political legitimation. For example, during the Preah Vihear conflict, the government used all of its media resources to create and project for the incumbent and the people in his network of power an image of nationalistic and patriotic zeal.

The government-affiliated media's almost daily coverage of the conflict took the form of news, commentaries, and analyses. CTN, Bayon and Apsara television channels even had programs dedicating to analysing the border temple dispute and Thailand's difficult domestic politics. Prominent media commentators such as Soy Sopheap, Sam Chhaya, and Chum Kosal, among others, were the frequent faces of the programs. The media reports and analyses, all of which seemed to favour the prime minister's politics of symbolic legitimation, painted two contrasting images of Cambodia and Thailand.

The first image was that of a peaceful and united Cambodia versus a divided Thailand. Videos and photographs from Thailand that accompanied news commentaries and analyses on Cambodia's media often showed Thailand as deeply divided between two antagonistic forces, the Yellow-Shirts and the Red-Shirts. Thailand was heading towards serious instability and possibly civil war. In contrast, the media portrayed Cambodia as fortunate to be under Hun Sen's leadership. Peace, national unity and development prevailed in Cambodia. The incumbent and his government were defending the country's national territorial sovereignty and national interests. These contrasting portrayals of Thailand and Cambodia benefitted Hun Sen politically, giving him not only a legitimating nationalist symbolism but also a narrative of him as builder and guardian of Cambodia's peace.

The second image was that of Cambodians as peace lovers versus Thais as aggressors, warmongers and thieves. During the dispute, Cambodian media often referred to Thailand as aggressor and *chao siem* [Siamese thief]. The Thai military and the ultra-nationalist Yellow-Shirts were often portrayed as having the malicious intention to “steal” Cambodia’s Preah Vihear Temple and border territories. The discourse of Thai people as aggressors and *chao* [thief] is deeply rooted in Cambodia’s historical accounts and myths about its past relations with Thailand. More often than not, these historical narratives and myths portray Thailand as having taken or “stolen” land, culture, tradition and treasure from Cambodia. Therefore, the Thai military’s deployment of troops to Preah Vihear temple region was perceived as Thailand’s continued ill will and intention of capturing Cambodia’s land and heritage. In contrast, the media portrayed Cambodians as sincere and peace loving, people who had no choice but to defend their nation and heritage against Thailand’s threat. Hun Sen himself also invoked historical discourses by saying that Thailand was historically able to capture Cambodia’s land but it could not do so anymore on his watch. He would not allow Thailand to take even one centimetre of his country’s land. Such discourses linking historical with contemporary incidents and portraying Thailand as the enemy other allowed Cambodia’s media to cultivate for Hun Sen an image as a national hero and defender of the country’s national cultural heritage and border territories.

### ***Border defence funds and hero soldiers***

Another major investment in the Preah Vihear conflict, which had significant nationalist and political implications for Hun Sen and the ancient temple, was the creation of the border defence funds and hero soldiers. During the border military stand-off, local television stations joined the Cambodian government’s border defence efforts. They created border defence funds to raise money in support of Cambodian soldiers at the contested border sites at Preah Vihear, Ta Moan and Ta Krabey temples. The funds were also intended to support road building projects in the border regions.

Among the local television stations, CTN of Tycoon Kith Meng and Bayon TV of Hun Mana, Hun Sen’s daughter, played leading roles in raising the defence funds. In the initial months of the dispute, both television stations held fundraising events in which Cambodia’s famous singers and film stars were shown answering phone calls

from government and military officials and businessmen who wished to donate to the fund. The events were aired live on both television channels. The nationalist spectacle being displayed conjured up an image of the whole government and its associated organs, such as the military and the business community, were acting in cohesion and solidarity for the cause of defending the nation.

The televised fundraising events were also intended to raise nationalism among Cambodian television viewers thus inspiring them to make contributions to the funds. The atmosphere, imagery, and rhetoric used during the fund-raising campaigns communicated to viewers that Cambodia's border temples and territories were in grave danger. Cambodian people from all walks of life needed to be united and rally behind the government to defend them against Thailand's seizure. A master of ceremony announced during the televised fundraising event that even some beggars had contributed their meagre cash to the border defence funds.

The nationalistic appeals from the fundraising campaigns prompted many people in Phnom Penh and businessmen from provinces to send donations to both television stations. The donations included money, dry and canned food, clean drinking water, boxes of instant noodle, medicines, clothes, blankets etc. The exact total amount of money both stations had raised during the years of the border tension is not known. From available data on media, we know they had raised millions of US dollars. In the first few months of the conflict, CTN alone distributed food, camping equipment, and medicines worth \$146,989 to troops at the border temples. And the station was raising another one million US dollar to fund a local road building project to Ta Moan Temple (*The Cambodia Daily*, October 23, 2008). Bayon TV also delivered several rounds of donations to border soldiers. Donations were also used for financing the renovation of the mountain road to Preah Vihear Temple, which cost nearly two million US dollars (*The Phnom Penh Post*, March 11, 2009).

The Cambodian government and its media outlets also raised funds to give to families of Cambodian soldiers who were killed and injured during clashes with Thai troops. The second gunbattle near Preah Vihear Temple on 15 October 2008, which lasted about an hour, killed two Cambodian soldiers and injured three others (*The Cambodia Daily*, October 16, 2008). Seven soldiers were injured on the Thai side and one of them died about a week later (*The Cambodia Daily*, October 22, 2008). The

families of the deceased and injured Cambodian soldiers each received US\$8,000 and US\$2,021 respectively from the Cambodian government and another US\$1000 and US\$500 respectively from King Father Norodom Sihanouk (*The Cambodia Daily*, October 20, 2008). It was a huge amount of money for families of ordinary soldiers, whose monthly salary was then less than US\$50. (Some frontline soldiers in the Preah Vihear temple region jokingly told me during my field trip that they wished they had been injured during the fighting).

The government treated the deceased and injured soldiers like national heroes. It was unprecedented and completely different from how it had treated ordinary soldiers killed and wounded during the civil war period. A Buddhist ceremony was organised at Batum Vetei Pagoda in Phnom Penh to honour the deceased soldiers. General Neang Phat, Secretary of State of the Ministry of National Defence, presided over the ceremony, which was attended by 100 journalists and artists. Wreaths were displayed to honour the soldiers. Behind the wreaths was a banner with the words, “We all would like to bow our heads to respect the souls of all Cambodians who died for the sake of the nation” (see *The Cambodia Daily*, October 22, 2008).

Apart from the border defence fund and hero soldiers projects, Prime Minister Hun Sen launched the so-called “*samoraphum kroy phsar phajoab samoraphum mok* [rear battlefield establishing linkages with front battlefield]” campaign, in which he called on government ministries, state institutions, provincial municipalities, Phnom Penh City Hall and its district offices, and private companies to directly support border military units. As a result, delegations from those institutions made trips to the border region to distribute their donations to the soldiers; each one of their trips was reported by local media. Hun Sen’s initiative could be seen as a desire to see broad participation from both state and private sectors in his nationalist campaign. It was also a way for people in his patronage network to demonstrate their loyalty to him. It also made those army units dependent on his patronage network and thus ready to defend it (Verver and Dahles 2015, 62; Chambers 2015, 194).

### ***Investing in Preah Vihear Temple iconography***

During the Preah Vihear border conflict, Prime Minister Hun Sen's government also invested in iconography projects featuring Preah Vihear Temple. One of them was the issuance of new public servant ID cards in 2010. On the front side of the card is the iconography of Angkor Wat Temple and on the back side is Preah Vihear Temple. Cambodia has hundreds of ancient temples. Angkor Wat is considered the most outstanding Khmer architectural masterpiece and is thus a representation of the Cambodian nation. Since French colonial times, its image has always been on the country's national flag regardless of what regime has come to power. That Hun Sen's government chose to put the iconography of Preah Vihear Temple alongside that of Angkor Wat suggested the government's intent to communicate that they are defending a temple that is of equal national significance to Angkor Wat. It also used the symbolism of Preah Vihear iconography to inspire its hundreds of thousands of public servants all over the country to participate in the nationalist project led by Hun Sen. Through such a project, the incumbent could claim legitimacy as a nationalist and patriot.

### ***Investing in neak ta Dy, the guardian spirit of Preah Vihear temple region***

#### *Sacred topography and the narrative of neak ta Dy*

Like other Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist states, Cambodia's topographical landscape is dotted with spirits residing in houses, objects, stones, animals, trees, forests, mountains, rivers, statues, temples, paddy fields, etc. Among the diverse types of spirits, there is the *neak ta*, or tutelary spirits. Souyris-Rolland (1951, 162 cited in Harris 2005, 53) categorises *neak ta* in Cambodia into three types—those associated with natural phenomena; ancestral spirit; and Brahmanical deities and various mythical heroes.<sup>82</sup> Some *neak ta* are important lords holding royal and aristocratic titles of *preah ang* [prince], *preah neang* [princess], *lok m'chas* [lord] and exercising sphere of influence over vast area of land. Some *neakta* are minor lords with their realm of power over small local areas, sometimes administering an area of only a few meters. The higher-ranking *neak ta* and the lower-ranking *neak ta* are believed to have

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<sup>82</sup>See also (Chandler 1976).

channels of communication with one another. In Thailand there is also a similar pattern of hierarchical relationship between spirits. The anthropologist Andrew Walker called it “the hierarchy of spirit administration,” noting that it is believed to be operating in a parallel fashion to the hierarchy of the state administration (2012, 101–107). The Preah Vihear temple region is guarded by a powerful *neak ta* commonly called *lok ta* [a respectful term used to address an elderly man] Dy. During the recent border temple dispute with Thailand, *lok ta* Dy’s rank has been promoted from a local guardian spirit to a national hero by the Cambodian state. I will talk about the state’s nationalising of this *neak ta* in details in the next section. According to popular local narrative collected from villagers and soldiers during my fieldwork trips in 2012 and 2013, *lok ta* Dy was a local Khmer military commander who led his troops fighting against Siamese soldiers in the Preah Vihear temple region several centuries ago. When his troops were defeated by the Siamese, he threw himself from the cliff at the end of the promontory of the Mountain of Preah Vihear Temple to avoid being captured by the Siamese. The local Siamese military commander ordered his troops to search the forest for Dy’s body, but they never found it.

There are some slight variations in details in the narrative told by the people there. Some said that after Dy jumped from the cliff, he went to another world, the world of ghosts, to raise an army of ghosts to defeat the Siamese troops. This part of the narrative is similar to or perhaps influenced by the story of *neak ta* Kleang Moeung, another famous Khmer mythical hero who was willing to sacrifice his own life to mobilise an army of ghosts to fight against Siamese troops.<sup>83</sup> Some said Dy did not leap down the cliff, but hid himself in the cave at the end of the promontory. Two soldiers assigned to look after *lok ta* Dy’s shrine in the cave said:

After his troops were defeated, *lok ta* Dy escaped and hid himself in the cave. He did the meditation here and the Siamese could not find him. They wanted to arrest and force him to sign his consent to transfer Cambodia’s ownership of Preah Vihear Temple to Thailand.<sup>84</sup>

The story of Dy’s military struggle against the Siamese invasion is not found in Cambodia’s *bangsavatar* [chronicles]. It is not part of the official national history. Cambodian historians are not certain as to what century or period of Khmer history the

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<sup>83</sup>For the summary of the Legend of *neak ta* Kleang Moeung, see (Chapter 3).

<sup>84</sup>Informants 50, 59 (Appendix B).

incident took place or whether the story was real or mythical.<sup>85</sup> The legend has been passed on orally by villagers in the border region. The villagers believe Dy's spirit ascended to the status of a powerful *neak ta* after his death.

The cave at the end of the promontory commonly called *poy lok ta Dy* is a sacred site for worshipping the guardian spirit. In Cambodia, places where powerful guardian spirits reside are believed to emanate powerful energy (Guillou 2012, 221). The power radiating from the place can be either harmful or benign depending on the nature of the relationship that individual persons forge with the spirits. In *poy lok ta Dy*, there is a shrine to worship the *neak ta*. Two soldiers were assigned to take care of this shrine. They helped worshippers conduct ritual to honour the spirit. And if any visitor was curious about the story of *neak ta Dy*, the soldiers were ready to narrate the legend.



Figure 5. *Lok ta Dy's* shrine or *poy lok ta Dy*, Preah Vihear Temple. (Photo by the author.)

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<sup>85</sup>Interviews and informal conversations with Cambodian historians and scholars, Phnom Penh, March–October 2012.

Cambodian local communities, tourists and soldiers to Preah Vihear Temple often pay respects to *lok ta Dy* at his shrine and seek protection and blessing from him. They believe that his warrior and heroism backgrounds made him a powerful representative of both the moral order and military power in the peripheral region. During the military clashes near Preah Vihear Temple, local Cambodian villagers and soldiers alike prayed to the guardian spirit for his protection. However, they did not rely only on one single source of protective power. They also invoked other sources of sacred power when they prayed to *neak ta Dy*. They believed doing so would increase their sense of security in such life-threatening situations.

In my fieldwork's interviews, many frontline soldiers said that during the gun battles with Thai soldiers they also prayed to their ancestral spirits and other powerful territorial spirits from their native provinces for protection. Some also invoked protective power from such sacred objects as *katha* [amulet], Buddha image, tooth or hair of their deceased parents, *yantra* etc. These objects are to be worn around the neck or around the waist or kept in shirt pockets. Harris (2005, 60) notes that the use of such sacred objects has a long tradition in Cambodia and they are found carved on Angkorian era temples.

Besides his protective power for the soldiers and villagers, *neak ta Dy* is also known to have helped those who have faith in him achieve success in their business or recover from illness. There are stories of the *neak ta* performing his miracles. A soft drinks seller at the temple said:

*Lok ta Dy* is very powerful. Many businessmen came to seek help from him and when their business became successful, they came back and made offerings to him and some even conducted lavish rituals at his shrine.<sup>86</sup>

An old layman at the Buddhist pagoda near the temple said:

A girl in the provincial town was very sick. Doctors in the town could not cure her. *Kru Khmer* [Khmer traditional healers] could not cure her. Her parents were desperate. Finally, they came to *poy lok ta* and asked for his help. While they were making a wish in front of *lok ta's* shrine, someone at their home phoned the parents telling them that their daughter had recovered.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Informal conversation, Preah Vihear Temple, 20 Dec. 2013.

<sup>87</sup>Informal conversation, Preah Vihear Temple, 20 Dec. 2013.



*From a local tutelary spirit to a national hero*

The recent Preah Vihear dispute between Cambodia and Thailand saw a previously little-known local tutelary spirit, *neak ta Dy*, raised to national prominence.<sup>88</sup> The legend of his military struggle against the Siamese, which is based on oral local history and not found in Cambodia's chronicles, was also reinvented and promoted as part of the national history by Hun Sen's government. The Cambodian military, state-controlled media, the government and scholars, especially those from the Royal Academy of Cambodia, played significant roles in the (re)construction of the legend and the promotion of *neak ta Dy* at the national level.

The reason the guardian spirit had not gained national attention prior to the recent conflict is that the Preah Vihear Temple is located in a remote area far from Phnom Penh. Although there was a brief attempt to connect the temple region with Phnom Penh during Sihanouk's regime, Cambodia's plunge into a long civil war left the ancient monument and anything associating with it, including its guardian, out of the national radar. After the last of the Khmer Rouge surrendered to the government in the late 1990s, Chea Sophara, the then Governor of Phnom Penh, attempted to reconnect the Preah Vihear temple border region with Phnom Penh. But his removal from office after the anti-Thai riot in the capital city in 2003 once again distanced the periphery from the centre. It was not until the recent border dispute that the temple region received wide public and national attention as the Hun Sen government launched a massive nationalist campaign to promote the defence of the temple and its border region.

*Neak ta Dy* rose to national prominence against the context of Cambodia's huge imbalance of military power relations to Thailand. Any person who followed news reports on the border tension between the two countries would not forget the stark contrast between Cambodian and Thai soldiers in terms of numbers, uniforms, and weapons. During the initial months of the military stand-off, Cambodian soldiers were dressed in old baggy military uniforms; some were even seen wearing flip-flops and sandals. They mostly carried old AK assault rifles and RPG-2, or B-40 as commonly

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<sup>88</sup>*Neak ta Dy* is not found among Cambodia's prominent national and regional *neak ta* recorded in *Brajum rioeng preng Khmer* [Collection of old Khmer stories], Part VIII of the Buddhist Institute (see Buddhist Institute (2001)). During my several visits to the National Archive in Phnom Penh in 2012, I also did not find this guardian spirit mentioned in news articles about Preah Vihear temple dispute in the 1950s and 1960s.

called in Cambodia. In contrast, Thai soldiers dressed in proper fit military uniforms and were equipped with far superior weaponries. Moreover, the Thai military also attempted to demoralise its Cambodian counterpart by flying fighter jets in its airspace near the temple.<sup>89</sup>

Aware of their inferior military capabilities relative to Thailand, Cambodian military commanders in charge of the Preah Vihear temple region promoted the myth of *neak ta Dy*'s supernatural power along with the constructed notion of Prime Minister Hun Sen's wise leadership as backup military strategy. The commanders tried to combine nationalism with the military side of *neak ta Dy*'s sacred power to raise fighting spirit and national allegiance among the Cambodian troops. During the initial months of the military stand-off, myths about *neak ta Dy*'s power protecting Cambodian soldiers while harming Thai soldiers were widely circulated. Examples of such myths included a swarm of angry bees chasing Thai soldiers out of a contested area; poisonous snakes biting Thai soldiers; Thai soldiers stepping on landmines; and the sudden death of one Thai soldier from an unknown cause.<sup>90</sup>

The myths about the guardian spirit's performing his supernatural power were then picked up and reported by Cambodia's pro-government media outlets, thus bringing *neak ta Dy* to the attention of national audiences. The legend and the myths were also integrated into news content about the Preah Vihear temple dispute in ways that made the public believe they were real. Out of this media's nationalist agenda, *neak ta Dy* emerged as Cambodia's national hero, watching over Cambodia against Thailand's aggression.

Perhaps aware of *neak ta Dy*'s powerful symbolic nationalist dimension, which could be integrated into Hun Sen's grand nationalist symbolic political legitimisation framework regarding the Preah Vihear conflict, the government sponsored the construction of *neak ta Dy*'s statue in equestrian style in 2010. The statue was erected

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<sup>89</sup>This huge imbalance of military power relations was a wake-up call to the Cambodian government and prompted it to embark on efforts in the subsequent months and years to upgrade its military. It recruited thousands of young men to join the army (see *The Cambodia Daily*, October 23, 2008). It imported new weapons including anti-aircraft missiles and ammunitions transported by Antonov planes from an Eastern European country and they were equipped to battalions throughout the country. Troops at the contested areas also started to receive new uniforms and weapons. At least three shipment of armoured personnel carriers (APCs), tanks, and BM-21 launch vehicles arrived through Sihanoukville Port. Hun Sen said he would push for the increase in military budget. Therefore, the defence budget was increased in the 2009 draft budget sent to the National Assembly (see *The Cambodia Daily*, November 6, 2008).

<sup>90</sup>Many Cambodian soldiers I interviewed in the Preah Vihear temple region said they heard about the myth of *lok ta Dy* and his supernatural power against Thai soldiers from their respective commanders (Informants 31, 32, 50, 59 in Appendix B).

in front of the newly-built Samdech Techo Hun Sen Eco-Global Museum of Preah Vihear. By placing the statue in front of the museum, the government was promoting the territorial spirit as a national guardian spirit and a symbolic power of Hun Sen's because the museum construction was financed by the prime minister and his wife, and the museum itself is under direct supervision of the national administration instead of the province. The Cambodian government's book on Preah Vihear Temple acknowledges *neak ta* Dy's contribution to Cambodia as follows:

The statue of the legendary warrior LOKTA DY who had devoted his entire life protecting the Temple of Preah Vihear and all the areas under Cambodian sovereignty is finally erected under the mausoleum at the entrance of the eco-global museum of Preah Vihear.<sup>91</sup>



Figure 6. *Lok ta* Dy's statue, Preah Vihear province. (Photo by the author.)

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<sup>91</sup>See (Kingdom of Cambodia 2010, 82).

### *Neak ta Dy in Hun Sen's power network*

Prime Minister Hun Sen's identification with *neak ta Dy* is part of his broad political legitimization strategy of co-opting potent symbolic powers into his power network.<sup>92</sup> *Neak ta Dy* represents diverse ideas of power. He is a sacred protective spirit in Khmer cultural thought. He represents local Khmer military resistance against Thailand's aggression and symbolises the powerful idea of sacrifice one's life to defend the motherland in nationalist thought. Therefore, by enlisting the guardian spirit in his network of power, Hun Sen could enhance both his patronage politics and nationalist credentials.

His recruitment of the *neak ta* into his power network could reinforce his mass patronage relations with residents in the border region. Cambodian people's beliefs and practices of spirit worship are complex and diverse. However, they tend to cultivate their relationship with spirits in their localities more often than with spirits in distant places. Therefore, by drawing *neak ta Dy*, the most powerful spirit of the Preah Vihear temple region, into his power domain, Hun Sen positioned himself as the big patron delivering to the border people not only gifts but also spiritual protection.

The symbolic enlisting of the *neak ta Dy* into his network also reinforced the incumbent's dynamic investments in nationalist symbolism for his political legitimacy. His government invoked the nationalist and military dimensions of the mythical *neak ta* to solidify the government-sponsored nationalist narrative of Thailand as a threat to Cambodia and Hun Sen as the defender of the nation and guardian of Khmer national cultural heritage. For such a narrative to be emotionally appealing, it needed to incorporate powerful myths such as Dy's to portray historical incidents as continuing into the present. Continuity of struggle against a historical enemy's aggression is a powerful nationalist theme. Therefore, *neak ta Dy*'s symbolism supported Prime Minister Hun Sen's projection of himself as a nationalist.

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<sup>92</sup>There is a longstanding tradition in Cambodia of political leaders trying to cultivate power from guardian spirits. After Cambodia's independence, Sihanouk sponsored the construction of an enclosure around the statue of *neak ta Kleang Moeung* in Pursat province (see Harris 2005, 53). The enclosure and the statue were damaged during the Khmer Rouge regime. Prince Ranariddh and his wife sponsored the construction of the shrine to house the statue of the guardian spirit when he was the prime minister (see Guillou 2012, 223). Lon Nol had Kleang Moeung's name written on some armoured vehicles and tanks of his army.

## 5. Conclusion

Hun Sen is Cambodia's most resilient head of government, serving continuously as the country's prime minister for more than three decades. He has mastered remarkable political skills and strategies. Moreover, the incumbent has demonstrated impressive judgment in assessing situations and the ability to reinvent himself and his regime during times of major political and socio-economic transformations. These have enabled him to manipulate different actors and manoeuvre through different political hurdles to maintain his position at the apex of Cambodia's political power structure.

Many studies have been conducted to explore the various dimensions of Hun Sen's power. They provide diverse explanations about aspects of the leader's power consolidation and political resilience. The explanations include the use of repression, the maintaining of patron-client relations with diverse stakeholders, the manipulation of elections, and the control over the armed forces, the judiciary and the legislature. Through those studies, we also know about his ruling party's grasp of local-level rural and provincial politics and Hun Sen's folksy skills as an orator who can appeal to rural voters. However, one important aspect of what has made his rule so long has been less commonly appreciated in the existing studies. It is the incumbent's skills at symbolic political legitimation. Therefore, in this chapter I propose Hun Sen's reliance on political legitimation as also an important explanation of his political durability. It supplements the gaps left by the current scholarship.

Following this framework, I argue that Hun Sen's investment in nationalist symbolism during the Preah Vihear conflict should be analysed through the lens of political legitimation. Prior to the conflict, the incumbent was politically vulnerable and had a serious legitimacy deficit in that his opponents had portrayed him as a 'puppet' of Vietnam who did not dare to challenge acts of border encroachment by Cambodia's neighbours. Therefore, Hun Sen's positioning of himself as a nationalist and defender of Cambodia's border territories during the Preah Vihear conflict with Thailand should be seen as his political legitimation strategy to win the argument on the nationalist front thereby eliminating his vulnerability to opposition criticism. In this context, Hun Sen's nationalist posturing was a productive political resource, helping him overcome the constraints to his rule and, at the same time, bolster his political legitimacy.

Although this chapter focuses on Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's dynamic uses of political legitimation as a key plank to hold power, it also speaks to the broader scholarship on autocrats' political durability. Existing literature illuminates various factors underpinning their political persistence such as their manipulation of elections, creation of hybrid regimes, reliance on ruling party and state institutions, uses of repression, patronage politics, and exploiting resource wealth, among others. However, the relationship between political legitimation and autocrats' political durability has been less appreciated in the existing studies. Therefore, my empirical and case study of Hun Sen, one of the world's most resilient autocrats, addresses the current gaps. It also benefits future studies of long-ruling autocrats in other parts of the world.

## Chapter 5

### Urban People and the Politics of Empowerment

#### 1. Introduction

The recent Preah Vihear border conflict (2008–2011) was an interesting moment to observe nationalist phenomena in Phnom Penh. The general tone of urban nationalism in the city was high at that time. According to one survey, 97 per cent of Cambodian respondents regarded the Preah Vihear temple conflict as an important issue (International Crisis Group Report 2011). Many city residents participated in a nationalist movement to defend Preah Vihear and to express their support for the defence of Cambodia's national borders. As one motorbike repairman told me: "I am a peace lover. However, we have to defend our temple and border at any cost even through war with Thailand."<sup>93</sup> This sentiment was also expressed by other informants during my interviews and informal conversations.<sup>94</sup> Many city people expressed their anger at Thailand. A security guard said, "Preah Vihear Temple belongs to Khmers. The Khmers built it. The Court's verdict also states clearly that the temple belongs to us. I am really angry that they want to take it away from us."<sup>95</sup> Urban residents also discussed and exchanged views about the Preah Vihear conflict widely and intensively with people in their multiple networks. A motor-taxi driver said, "I followed the news about the conflict from various sources. My fellow *moto dop* [motor-taxi drivers] and neighbours also paid close attention to it. We talked about it almost every day. Preah Vihear is very important to the Khmers."<sup>96</sup>

Observing this phenomenon, I wanted to understand why these Phnom Penh people expressed their support for the defence of the nation's territorial integrity and national cultural heritage site. Why did city people demonstrate and mobilise to express their support for the nation's territorial integrity?

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<sup>93</sup>Informant 21.

<sup>94</sup>Informants 8, 10, 16, 18, 22, 24.

<sup>95</sup>Informant 22.

<sup>96</sup>Informant 9.

This was not the first time that the city's residents had expressed such nationalist sentiment. Nationalism has been present as a powerful force at various junctures in modern Cambodian history. However, the nationalist feeling that erupted during the Preah Vihear border conflict was unprecedented in Phnom Penh in that it was relatively spontaneous. Furthermore, the nationalist sentiment developed into widespread but largely uncoordinated nationalist movement for defending and rescuing the nation. This urban nationalist movement was independent and 'autonomous' of the Cambodian state and was expressed through channels that differed from the official nationalism described in the previous two chapters about the national leaders, Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Hun Sen.

During the Preah Vihear conflict, many Phnom Penh residents got involved in donating their resources to various border defence funds. Some city people even organised their own trips to the Preah Vihear border region to give moral support and distribute donations to Cambodian soldiers there. An NGO worker said, "I raised funds when the Preah Vihear conflict took place and we arranged a trip to the temple with colleagues and friends to distribute our donations to our soldiers."<sup>97</sup> This is just an example of many of such cases in which individuals or groups moved patriotically and autonomously to participate in the movement to defend the border and support the troops at Preah Vihear.

What important underlying factors have made urban nationalism in Phnom Penh emerge as a significant political force? In other words, what were the contexts for this kind of autonomous nationalist attitudes and sentiments? A conventional analysis would suggest that the city people's nationalist responses to the Preah Vihear conflict derived from their sense of belonging to the imagined community of Cambodia. They imagined that their country was being invaded, so they had to react. However, a close analysis reveals that such widespread nationalist attitudes among city people were deeply rooted in their frustration with Cambodia's political system. They felt frustrated that their country's politics had often not played out the way they had expected. It was also rooted in the various constraints the urban people faced in their everyday life as a consequence of Phnom Penh's recent rapid transformations.

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<sup>97</sup>Informant 4.



In light of their disaffections and constraints, it did not come as a surprise that urban people have relied on nationalism as an important political resource to express themselves and gain a sense of empowerment. In various collective actions, they have demonstrated that they are more concerned about Cambodia's national interests than the political elites. However, their nationalist project is more than a critique; it is a strategy to sidestep the state to gain control and betterment in a rapidly changing city. This urban nationalist phenomenon marks a major departure from Phnom Penh's urban nationalism in previous decades when nationalism was monopolised by elites and revolved around cultural and ideological issues. Current urban nationalism is embodied by diverse individuals and groups; it originates in everyday life frustrations and anxieties; and it furnishes its exponents with an immersive experience of collective empowerment.

The chapter starts with a section exploring the historical development of Phnom Penh as a breeding ground for autonomous political and nationalist ideas and actions. It is followed by an overview of Phnom Penh's recent transformations and their influence on urban nationalism and politics. It then examines Phnom Penh people's nationalist responses to the Preah Vihear dispute. The chapter ends with concluding remarks.

## **2. Phnom Penh as a breeding ground of political and nationalist ideas**

One aspect making contemporary urban nationalism noteworthy is its autonomous quality. Urban people of varying occupations, backgrounds and political affiliations in a wide variety of contexts were moved to speak about the urgent need to defend Preah Vihear. For a period of time, at the height of the conflict it appeared that residents of Phnom Penh were talking about little else. The nationalist sentiments I heard at that time appeared to me to be an expression of popular feeling rather than instruments deployed by political leaders in a project of state construction and legitimation. I wondered about the conditions that gave rise to such vocal, passionate and widely shared feelings. To shed light on these sentiments, it is necessary to examine the historical context of the rise of popular nationalism. This section traces a history of urban nationalism and looks at the city as its breeding ground.

Phnom Penh was chosen as the site for the new capital city for a brief period in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when King Ponhea Yat relocated his city from Angkor. However, its

establishment as Cambodia's long-term capital city did not come until four centuries later. Soon after establishing their colonial rule over Cambodia in 1863, French colonialists persuaded King Norodom to move his royal city from Udong to Phnom Penh and build his new palace from concrete (Osborne 2008b). Penny Edwards, in her book, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation*, places great importance on the roles of the French colonial officials, architects, artisans, and engineers in modernising Phnom Penh. They oversaw many construction projects that greatly transformed the city's spatial landscape. Some of their constructions and urban landscaping like the Naga Bridge and Wat Phnom integrated Angkor's architectural style, conjuring up an imagery of a link between Phnom Penh and Angkor. Thus, the French effectively situated the power of Angkor in Phnom Penh to justify their colonial presence in Cambodia (see Edwards 2007, 44–50).

The French also constructed an official national narrative for Cambodia with the promotion of Angkor as the country's pre-eminent national symbol and the Khmer as a declining race rescued from extinction by the French. This notion influenced a small group of Cambodian elites who received education in French schools in Phnom Penh, Saigon and Paris. Hence, the elites started to imagine their country and race as a nation, with Angkor Wat as the symbol of Cambodian national and cultural sovereignty (Edwards 2007, 44–50; Osborne 2008b, 87–89).

The abstract discourses of the Cambodian nation were further promoted by the Phnom Penh-published Khmer vernacular nationalist newspaper, *Nagara Vatta* (Nokor Wat/ Angkor Wat), established by nationalists Son Ngoc Thanh and Pach Chhoeun in 1936. They were also propagated by the city-based Buddhist Institute's monthly publications of Khmer language journal, *Kambuja Surya*. Chandler (1986, 83) writes that *Nagara Vatta's* weekly circulation of 5000 copies meant that the newspaper was widely read. The publications of the newspaper and the journal in Khmer vernacular language spread the seeds of nationalism more widely and brought to light more terms and notions related to nation and nationalism.

Observers of Cambodian history suggest Phnom Penh's urban nationalism flourished in the period of the 1930s and 1940s. Several school clubs, newspaper groups, and literary associations were established. Their members represented different segments of urban society, especially the emerging class of *neak-cheh-doeng*

[intellectuals] (see Edwards 2007, 15, 210–241). In other countries as well as in Cambodia, the intelligentsia is widely known to have contributed significantly to nationalist projects in their colonial and postcolonial societies (see Shils 1960; Anderson 1983, 116–119; Said 1986, 45, 58; Chatterjee 1993, 35). Phnom Penh's urban nationalism was also heightened during the above mentioned periods by domestic and world events—Siam's reoccupation of Battambang and Sisophon, the decline of French military influence in Indochina, and Japan's expanding imperialism into Southeast Asia.

The notions of the Cambodian nation and nationalism continued to thrive in post-independence Cambodia during Prince Norodom Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyom regime. The Sangkum regime was a remarkable period of nation-building activities. The regime's most prominent urban architect and landscape planner, Vann Molyvann, put it succinctly during an interview:

I want to tell you that, at that time, we were building the nation as a whole, in all areas. Under the leadership of HM King Norodom Sihanouk, we were extremely enthusiastically working to build a nation, our own nation, which had just recovered its independence. (Quoted in Daravuth and Muan 2001, 9)

Phnom Penh was a favourite site for Sihanouk's cult of nation-building.<sup>98</sup> In other words, the capital city represented the face of his new nation state. Landmark buildings like Independence Monument, Olympic National Stadium, Chatumuk Conference Hall, universities and several others were constructed in the city during his Sangkum. Khmer traditional concepts of architecture were integrated into the architectural designs of several of those buildings in the creation of modern concepts of building, space, and people.<sup>99</sup> Wide orderly parks adorned with flowers and lined trees were also integrated into the regime's urban landscaping.

Those grand urban public buildings, beautiful parks, and the concepts of an orderly city allowed Sihanouk to communicate his nation-building narrative, which portrayed his Sangkum regime as having restored the nation to its former pride and splendour. The urban spatial transformation was publicised as a representation of a high level of national achievement comparable to that achieved during the Khmer Empire of

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<sup>98</sup>The capital city experienced a construction boom that saw its areas expanded twice between 1953 and the late 1960s (see Osborne 2008b, 125–133).

<sup>99</sup>See (Daravuth and Muan 2001, 3–23) for an interview with Vann Molyvann about Phnom Penh urban planning and architectural designs of urban public buildings during Prince Sihanouk's Sangkum regime.

Angkor. In this context, the state-sponsored urban landscaping and the invented narratives associated with it benefited Prince Sihanouk's politics of nation-building.

Print media helped generate discussions in the public sphere of Phnom Penh about Cambodian nation and politics during the colonial and Sangkum periods. However, the broadcast media, the state's National Radio Phnom Penh, had farther-reaching effects on Cambodian nationalism since it offered the ruling and nationalist elites a better and more effective means in communicating their political messages to their country's people. Nearly every house in Phnom Penh in the 1960s had radios, meaning that ordinary urban dwellers who could not read or afford time to read newspaper could also have alternative access to information and news by turning on their radios (for details, see Chapter 3). Thus, Phnom Penh dwellers were better informed of national political developments than their rural counterparts. During her fieldwork in a village in Kampong Cham in the mid-1960s, Kalab (1968, 529) observed that rural people "show interest in local matters only". While her statement was a bit exaggerated, it showed a relatively low level of interest among villagers in national issues.

Improved transport technology and more roads construction during Sangkum regime linking Phnom Penh with the provinces allowed more interactions between Phnom Penh and provincial people, and had important implications for urban nationalism. They enabled urban people to visit the provinces and people from the provinces to come to Phnom Penh to work as seasonal labourers or to pursue study. Roads and transport technology enabled some Phnom Penh people to visit Angkor and other parts of Cambodia, thus giving them the opportunity to experience the nation with their own eyes, beyond imagining the nation from the media, photographs and maps. The introduction of transport technology, such as railroad, and the construction of the Phnom Penh-Kampot road during the colonial period had an important role in consolidating and expanding colonial power to reach into Cambodia's hinterlands from the colonial capital of Phnom Penh (Edwards 2006, 427).<sup>100</sup> However, travelling remained limited. It was not until the 1950s that there was an expanded bus system (Ebihara 1973, 361). Other national highways were also built during Sihanouk's Sangkum regime.

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<sup>100</sup>This transport technology transfer was a common trend during colonial period, which also happened to other Southeast Asian countries (see Dick and Rimmer 1998, 2307).

Prince Sihanouk's nation-building and urban building projects were interrupted in the late 1960s when the war in neighbouring Vietnam became intensified and had spillover effects upon Cambodia. The United States started massive bombing campaigns on Vietnamese communist troops who took sanctuary in the Cambodian eastern border provinces. The US air campaign destroyed Cambodian villages and inflicted heavy civilian casualties (see Chandler 1992b; Becker 1998; Kiernan 2002). Domestic communist rebels, whom Sihanouk called the Khmer Rouge, also started mounting an insurgency against the government's military in the countryside. The multitude of challenges—the impact of the Vietnam War, the presence of Communist Vietnamese troops inside Cambodian territory, domestic insurgency, and domestic economic crisis—were beyond the ability of Sihanouk's regime to handle. As a result, the crisis culminated in a coup overthrowing the prince on 18 March 1970 by forces from within his own government (Kiernan 2002, 484–485). The coup leaders were Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak and long-time Sihanouk loyalist, General Lon Nol.

The Phnom Penh middle class supported the coup and felt a sense of patriotism and national pride (Slocomb 2006, 381). Immediately after taking power, the coup-makers adopted Neo-Khmerism and an uncompromising stance against North Vietnam. They renamed the country from Kingdom of Cambodia to the Khmer Republic (1970–1975). Moreover, they declared war against communist Vietnam and convinced the general Cambodian population to go to war with them in order to guarantee Cambodia's survival as an independent country (Ibid, 381–384). Kiernan (2001, 188) writes, “The Lon Nol regime... drew much of its propaganda strength from its ability to persuade Cambodians that Ho Chi Minh, in the will made before his death in 1969, had called upon his fellow Vietnamese to take over Cambodia.” Anti-Vietnamese sentiments and ethnonationalism were high in urban areas, leading to the massacre of many ethnic Vietnamese living near Phnom Penh in the Chruoy Changva region (see Osborne 2008b, 137).

Ruling the country from Phnom Penh was a great challenge for Lon Nol's Khmer Republic regime. Slocomb (2006, 381) writes, “The dual task of conducting war while managing the state proved too much for these inexperienced republicans.” Their military suffered heavy casualties, and corruption was rife in the government. The regime had to rely heavily on American aid and loans to manage its depressed

economy. As the war raged on, the country was in chaos, and so was Phnom Penh. Towards 1975, the Khmer Rouge intensified their attacks from all directions. Lon Nol's military were not able to contain Pol Pot's forces from advancing towards the city. Cut off from the rest of the country, Phnom Penh suffered considerable damage and civilian casualties as the Khmer Rouge bombarded the city with artillery and mortar shells. On 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge succeeded in capturing Phnom Penh. Their forces entered the city from all different directions. The people of Phnom Penh, hoping that the war was over, came out to the streets to cheer the arrival of the black-clad troops. Little did they know that they would soon be evicted from the city and forced to work on rural and agricultural labour camps.

Immediately after they took over Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge forced the city's two million people out of their homes and resettled them with rural people in the countryside. The newly established Democratic Kampuchea government labelled the urban residents "new people", while rural people were termed "base people" [*neak moultanh*] (Kiernan 2002, 485–486). The DK government kept only a small population in Phnom Penh to work for the regime's administration and state-owned factories. The city was home to only around 30,000 people when the Vietnamese troops arrived in Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, and looked like a ghost town (Osborne 2008b, 181). Under DK's rule, over one and a half million of Cambodia's eight million people died from execution, overwork, starvation, and disease (Kiernan 1996; Hinton 1998a, 93–94). Out of this number approximately 650,000 were "new people" (Kiernan 2002, 486).

The DK regime was led by a group of educated elites, who were educated in Phnom Penh, Paris and Bangkok. They intended to turn Cambodia into a utopian, egalitarian agrarian society. How did these intellectuals become ultra-nationalists and perpetrators of such heinous crimes? Edwards (2007, 1–12) suggests that their ideas were rooted in the authenticity discourse of Khmerness with the emphasis on the glorification of Angkorian period. DK leaders believed that they could restore Cambodia to its past grandeur by eliminating what or who were considered not authentically Khmer. Barnett (1990) and Kiernan (2001) place emphasis on Cambodian historical and nationalist discourses. The country was said to have occupied vast areas of land covering much part of present-day Thailand, Laos, and Southern Vietnam; its borders became greatly

reduced in size due to the annexation of its territories by Thailand and Vietnam. Looking at a modern geographical map of Cambodia and its immediate neighbours, Khmer Rouge leaders must have felt sad and angry about lost territories, and at the same time fearful that Thailand and particularly Vietnam would continue to swallow up the remainder of Cambodia's land. The new regime, as a result, pursued irredentism by waging war against Vietnam in the hope of restoring *Kampuchea krom*<sup>101</sup> [lower Cambodia].<sup>102</sup> They also purged a huge number of people working for the regime, whom they accused of acting as spies for Vietnam and other countries. Hinton (1998a) and Hinton (1998b) argued that DK leaders' ultra-nationalism and brutality originated from a "Cambodian cultural model of disproportionate revenge" and Cambodian socio-cultural beliefs related to "face and honour".

While I generally agree with the above scholars' arguments, I think attention should also be paid to the roles of cities in influencing and shaping Khmer Rouge leaders' perspectives of Khmer ethnicity and nation. Ironically, it was the urban spaces of Phnom Penh and Paris which enabled the young communist-educated elites to establish connections, meet like-minded people, and empower their movement. If Saloth Sar, whom the world came to know as Pol Pot, had not come to pursue his study in Phnom Penh and Paris, his views of Khmer ethnicity and nation, which informed his policy when he came to power, would have been different and perhaps he would not have been able to rise to political prominence.

Pol Pot and several other DK leaders were born in the provinces, but came to pursue their studies in cities in their youth. Pol Pot was born with the name Saloth Sar in Kampong Thom province; Ieng Sary and Son Sen in *Kampuchea krom*; Khieu Samphan in Svay Rieng; and Nuon Chea in Battambang. Pol Pot became friends with Ieng Sary when they were students in Phnom Penh, and their wives, the sisters Khieu Ponnary and Khieu Thirith, were also students at Lycée Sisowath. Khieu Samphan also studied there. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan went further to pursue their studies in Paris in the 1950s and became active in the Khmer Students' Association there. As for Nuon Chea, he spent his youth years studying at Thammasat University in Bangkok where he became involved with the Thai communist movement (see Chandler 1992b; Heder and Tittmore 2001; Kiernan 2004).

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<sup>101</sup>For detailed discussion of the history, the people, and the land of *Kampuchea Krom*, see (Taylor 2014).

<sup>102</sup>For discussion of DK's war with Vietnam, see (Heder 1979).

The experience of being away from rural villages and encountering urban culture must have had some degree of influence on the young Saloth Sar and other future Khmer Rouge leaders, and made them compare life and culture in their villages with what they saw in the new places. This may have led them to redefine their own identities in relation to the broader identities of space, ethnicity, culture and nation to which they were exposed in the urban setting. They may have found Phnom Penh people's ethnic and cultural diversity alien and contaminated, not as authentically Khmer as rural peasants. Put succinctly, urban living may have engendered in them an identity crisis leading them to adopt extreme views of what constituted and did not constitute Khmer cultural, ethnic and national identities. There is a literature documenting similar cases elsewhere where young people from rural areas became fundamentalists after they had encountered urban modernity and felt uprooted from their own traditions (see, for examples, Pye 1956; Muzaffar 1987; Anwar 1987).

The social spaces of the Lycée Sisowath in Phnom Penh and dormitories and universities in Paris allowed Saloth Sar to find other students from rural areas who shared similar views. Through their networks and associations, their shared views gained amplitude and started them to think of rescuing the nation. They began to exploit the urban space to proclaim themselves as the defender and saviour of the Cambodian nation. When he was a student, Saloth Sar wrote letters which were published in newspapers in Phnom Penh under his pseudonym *Khmer da'em* [Original Khmer] (see Kiernan 2001, 193; Edwards 2007, 1). After his return from France, he spent some years in Phnom Penh where he continued to recruit more young people into his secret political movement. In 1960, senior Khmer Rouge leaders held a secret meeting behind Phnom Penh's Railway Station, during which they established the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Some urban youth who had benefited from Sihanouk's educational system also joined Pol Pot's underground movement out of frustration at the lack of jobs commensurate with their qualifications and poor prospect of upward mobility (see Kiernan 2002, 484).

Over three years of Pol Pot's brutal rule came to an abrupt end and DK leaders escaped to the Cambodian-Thai border when Vietnamese troops entered Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979. A new Vietnam-backed government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, was formed in Phnom Penh. The new PRK leaders were former Khmer



Rouge's cadres who had escaped to Vietnam following Pol Pot's purge of the party ranks. Among them was a young Hun Sen, who emerged as a dominant political figure and went on to become Cambodia's longest-serving prime minister.

After the fall of Pol Pot's regime, the weary survivors walked towards different destinations, some back to their homeland, others to the refugee camps at the Thai border, and still others to Phnom Penh. For the new PRK government, rebuilding the devastated country was a daunting task. Hughes and Un (2011, 1) write, "The economy was shattered, society in chaos, and institutions of state all but destroyed." It was also a great challenge for them to rebuild Phnom Penh. Simone (2008, 188) writes, "Infrastructure for the provision of sanitation, water and power that had stood vacant for several years had to be reworked step by step."

I remember my own childhood experiences of travelling to the city with my parents from our house in Choam Chau commune, which was a few kilometres from the then Pochengtong Airport. Phnom Penh throughout the 1980s was a quiet and dark city at night. There were not many vehicles on the streets. Many city dwellers used oil lamps and candle lights to illuminate their houses just like people in my village. Several roads in the city were potholed, flooded during the rainy season and dusty during the dry season. Unlike at present, there was little sign of wealth in the city. During the PRK regime, commonly referred to by local Cambodian people as Heng Samrin's regime, the city was largely isolated from the global economic system. In 1989, the city had a population of only 600,000 residents (Shatkin 1998, 383), most of whom were gripped by a struggle to rebuild their own lives and had little time for contemplating the adversities facing the wider Cambodian nation. However, Phnom Penh started to change from the early 1990s when UNTAC arrived and the transformations have gained speed since the 2000s. The city's transformations have given rise to new urban political and nationalist discourses.

### **3. Phnom Penh transformations: Politics of empowerment and autonomous nationalism**

As the foregoing makes clear, much research on Cambodian nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century focuses on the nationalist ideology driving the elite figures associated with Cambodia's nation-building and revolutionary history. However, during my

observations of urban people's feelings and actions during the Preah Vihear conflict, I noticed two trends worthy of discussion. One was the involvement in political debate and action of a wide range of social actors, including students, market vendors, street vendors, motor-taxi drivers, NGO workers, monks, whose outlooks and life experiences have been shaped by Cambodia's recent decades of globalisation and increasing socio-political precarity. The voices and sentiments of diverse urban citizens such as these have been given only modest attention in accounts of Cambodian political history. Secondly, the attitudes they espoused in many respects appear to be related to the sense of powerlessness and frustration many of them experience as urban people with rising expectations for their country's future but little expectation of holding power in the Cambodian political system.

How do the new urban political and nationalist discourses differ from those of previous decades? Or what are the contexts that have given rise to the emergence of such political and nationalist attitudes? The new urban politics and nationalism are different in that they are widespread and manipulated by diverse urban individuals and groups for their politics of empowerment. Such attitudes are rooted in individual people's disaffection as they have to deal with various types of constraints in their everyday life in Phnom Penh's rapid spatial, social, economic and political transformations. This section examines Phnom Penh's recent transformations and their implications on urban politics and nationalism.

Contemporary Phnom Penh is relatively dynamic and bustling if compared with its evolutions during earlier periods. There are signs of robust economic growth with the boom in construction, consumption, and services, all of which have significantly transformed the cityscape and the urban residents' views. The mushrooming of businesses, industry and a robust service sector has led to the formation of self-awareness, enrichment and empowerment of a range of new social, economic and political identities and interests. Furthermore, the webs of social, political and economic relations of the city's dwellers have become increasingly complex and dynamic due to their increased interactions with regional and global forces over the last two decades.

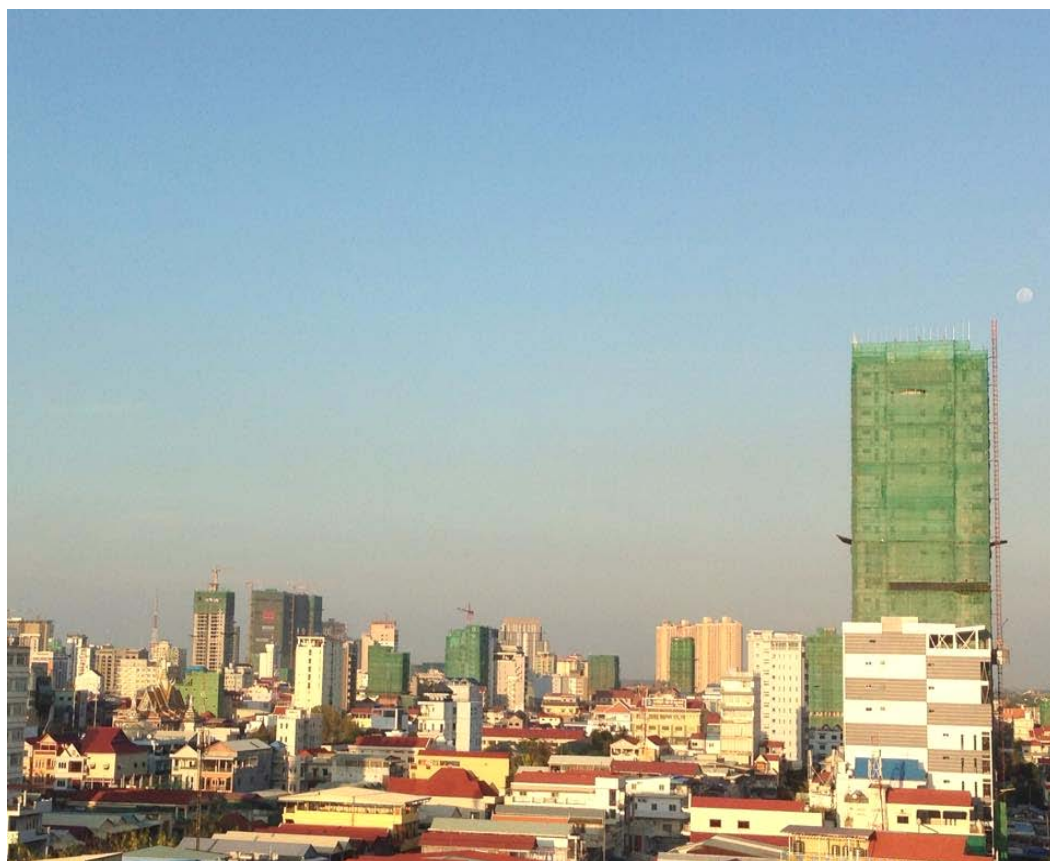


Figure 7. Phnom Penh's landscape. (Photo by the author.)

Phnom Penh's unprecedented transformations kick-started from the period of UNTAC's arrival. The presence of a large number of UN peacekeeping force and personnel in Cambodia in the early 1990s to administer the 1993 general election introduced major changes to Phnom Penh in many respects and initiated the city's links to the region and the world.<sup>103</sup> UNTAC's renting of villas and land to be used as accommodations and office spaces for their personnel led to the increase in the value of land in the urban and suburban areas, which was previously of little value. Private English language schools started to be opened in Phnom Penh to meet the needs of local people who wanted to interact with the English-speaking foreigners. The salary of UNTAC personnel in US dollar introduced a dollarized economy in Cambodia and revived Phnom Penh's urban economy. Restaurants, hotels, guesthouses, bars and other services increased to cater to the needs of UNTAC soldiers and personnel. UNTAC's radio broadcast in Khmer language introduced a wide range of new topics and

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<sup>103</sup>There were more than 10,000 UNTAC soldiers and personnel. The UN spent around two billion US dollars for the peacekeeping operation in Cambodia. At that time, it was the biggest in the history of UN peacekeeping operations.

discourses such as democracy, human rights, accountability, gender equality, election, citizen rights and the rule of law. Those topics were formerly unfamiliar to many local people, yet they have become important themes of urban politics and nationalism in the post-UNTAC period.

The 1990s was a period of enthusiasm among the international community who felt an obligation of rebuilding Cambodia and reengaging with the country. American, Australian, British, and French embassies and embassies of other countries which had a diplomatic presence in Phnom Penh prior to the DK regime were reopened. New embassies and consulates of other countries also continued to be opened in Phnom Penh. Vast amounts of foreign aid have since been pledged annually by foreign donors. The US and the European Union have since given Cambodia tax exemptions for exports to their markets to encourage foreign direct investment in the country. Therefore, foreign investors from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, China, and South Korea rushed in to set up garment and footwear factories in Phnom Penh and its suburban areas. This textile industry now employs hundreds of thousands of young men and women mainly from rural areas.

Other factors have also set the tone of Phnom Penh's transformation. The number of local and international NGOs in the country has increased rapidly; most of these organisations usually have their main offices in Phnom Penh. Young Cambodians are able to pursue their studies abroad thanks to scholarships from foreign governments and international organisations. Many of them, upon their return, seek employment in Phnom Penh due to better job opportunities and salaries. Educational institutions both private and public have increased in number in the city to cater to the increasingly diverse needs of Cambodia's young population. Regional airlines from Southeast and East Asian countries have also started direct flights to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, bringing in millions of tourists to the country every year, thereby generating and diversifying jobs for tens of thousands of local Cambodians. Local and foreign banks have also been established in the country, especially in Phnom Penh, to tap the city's growing affluence from the expanding urban middle class and the increasing foreign investments.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>According to (National Bank of Cambodia 2014, 102–126), there are 46 domestic, subsidiary and foreign banks, and 39 microfinance institutions operating in Cambodia.

Furthermore, diverse forms of media outlets, though many of them are affiliated with the ruling CPP, have been established and broadcast a wide range of programs including international news. The city residents have also had increased access to cable television allowing them to watch various international channels. This access to international news and cable television tends to encourage some city residents to make comparisons between Cambodia and foreign countries. America's *Radio Free Asia* (RFA) and *Voice of America* (VOA) in Khmer language have filled the vacuum, broadcasting local news on topics that the CPP-aligned media do not report, such as corruption, land grabbing, illegal timber trade, human rights abuses, social injustice, etc. Two prominent local English language newspapers, *The Cambodia Daily* and *The Phnom Penh Post*, have also been operating from their offices in Phnom Penh since the 1990s. They target the growing urban educated readership seeking independent and unbiased news reports. Cambodians, especially those in urban areas, own mobile phones and have access to the internet; they are keen to capitalise on this technology to connect with one another, expand their networks, and empower their interests.

Changes in Phnom Penh over the last two decades have been happening at a dizzying rate and have transformed not only the cityscape but also the urban society, culture, politics and economy. Signs of concentration of wealth in the city are clear especially in construction, banking and services, and among the rich and the expanding middle class. Cambodia's economy has grown at an average of 7.7 percent per year for the last two decades, making it the sixth fastest growing country in the world over the same period (World Bank Report 2014). Much of this economic growth concentrates in urban areas, especially in Phnom Penh.

More and more Phnom Penh residents now spend their leisure time with families, friends and colleagues at modern shopping malls and global franchised cafés and fast food outlets. Young men and women from rural areas who work in garment factories in Phnom Penh and its suburban areas are also aspiring to catch up with these symbols of modernity, globalisation, and new lifestyles as reflected through their hairstyle, dress, and a new taste for Korean songs. To sum up, contemporary Phnom Penh has already moved beyond the stage of post-conflict city-building to a stage of increasing integration into the global system. With regard to livelihoods, urban residents have also

generally moved beyond the stage of trying to meet basic survival needs, as seen in the 1980s and 1990s, to an exploration of new lifestyles with new expectations.



Figure 8. AEON shopping center, Phnom Penh. (Photo by the author.)

While these transformations have created opportunities and benefited many Phnom Penh residents, the people of the city now face a wide range of new issues, such as growing inequality, high housing and land prices, slums, traffic congestion, inadequate public sanitation, urban pollution, poor and inadequate public health and education facilities, state mismanagement of urbanisation, evictions, contestations over the use of urban space, and issues of labour rights and wages, among many others. Prime Minister Hun Sen's government has appeared to be ineffective in solving these problems. Therefore, these issues have become discourses of public criticism of the government and the basis for new forms of urban social, political and nationalist activism.

It is common and widespread to hear diverse individuals and groups of ordinary urban people criticising the government in their everyday interactions and

conversations at the city's plethora of venues and public spheres. Motor-taxi and tuk-tuk drivers complain about rising petrol prices. Ordinary public servants such as teachers complain about low salaries and inadequate attention from the government. Garment factory workers complain about the low minimum wage and abuses from employers and state authorities. University students, youth and educated elites complain about the lack of proportional job opportunities and the government's inadequate attention to defending and promoting national interests. Local NGO workers complain about the government's restrictions on freedom and democracy. City road commuters complain about the problems of traffic congestion and poor traffic rules enforcement. Poor slum dwellers complain about forced evictions and abuses from state authorities. Anti-government nationalists complain about illegal Vietnamese immigrants and border encroachments by Cambodia's neighbours. Monks and conservative people complain about declining public morality. Many other ordinary people also complain about flooded roads, the poor urban sewage system, poor and corrupt public health and educational systems, and fruits and vegetables containing high levels of chemical substances that pose health risks to consumers, among other problems.

Many of these city people, therefore, feel frustrated and angry with the government.<sup>105</sup> They feel powerless as individuals and ashamed as citizens. They also regard the social, environmental, cultural and political problems facing the country as a national disgrace and damaging to the Cambodian nation. A motor taxi driver said:

The government has brought us shame. Those *neak thom* [big people] are good at showing off their wealth and power and threatening us *neak toch tach* [small people], but when it came to dealing with Vietnam and Thailand, they are silent. Vietnam can take our border land as it wants and Thailand can shoot Khmer people who cross the border illegally...Petrol prices keep rising and the government cannot do anything about it. It is becoming more difficult to earn a living.<sup>106</sup>

A car mechanic said, "Tell me if I am wrong! Has there been any time that Cambodian athletes sent to compete abroad won? They choose to send only their relatives. It's shameful for the country."<sup>107</sup> A university student of Khmer literature raised a question, "What has the government achieved for the country that we can really be

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<sup>105</sup>Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling CPP is not popular in the city. Its popularity is in the countryside. Except in 2008, the party has never received a majority of seats for the Phnom Penh constituency since the 1993 general election.

<sup>106</sup>Informant 5.

<sup>107</sup>Informant 12.

proud of? They care only about themselves and their own children...I come to study every day feeling uncertain whether I will get a job after I graduate.”<sup>108</sup> A school teacher said, “My salary cannot support my family...I am worried about my family’s health. Every day we eat vegetables and food containing chemicals. We have no choice. Sooner or later all Khmer will be sick, a country of sick people.”<sup>109</sup>

These are just some of the common examples of widely-shared popular anti-government nationalist views simmering among Phnom Penh residents. Their sense of powerlessness and frustration as individuals and citizens has prompted city people to create their own popular discourses speaking to the nation’s decline and disgrace, and their hollowness as a race and a nation. These ideas about the Cambodian nation are defined, narrated, and materialised by the people. This popular domain of nationalism is autonomous of the government and is believed to be more superior to and sometimes even challenging state elite-created discourses of the nation. A good example is the widely-used popular phrase “*srok romduol*”<sup>110</sup> [the country of romduol flower], which the city people use to mock the government and criticise policies that they disagree with or believe to bring shame upon the nation.

These popular constructions of the nation’s plight inform a multitude of civic actions that are undertaken by city people which, in their broadest sense, aim to rescue and empower the Cambodian nation. Popular frustrations and desires for individual and national empowerment help explain why individuals and groups of Phnom Penh residents sometimes autonomously take matters of the nation, which should be the state’s responsibility, into their own hands. Ordinary people help direct traffic flow during peak congestion. University students carry out clean-up campaigns to pick up rubbish from public places; some of them even collect second-hand clothes to distribute to poor people. Educated people and their friends organise weekend classes to teach English to children in poor urban communities free of charge. Some alumni networks organise the collection and distribution of books to public schools in rural areas. Various groups of urban people mobilise resources from their networks to give aid to flood victims and donate to the Kantha Bopha Children’s Hospital among others.

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<sup>108</sup>Informant 13.

<sup>109</sup>Informant 7.

<sup>110</sup>Romduol or *Sphaerocoryne affinis* is a species of flower belonging to the soursop family and highly valued for its distinctive fragrance. Prime Minister Hun Sen’s government has promoted it as a flower representing the Cambodian nation.



In this participation in public service by people representing various sectors of urban society can be seen traces of a popular nationalist movement. Through these autonomous actions to secure the common good and wellbeing of others, the nation's health and dignity can be restored and Cambodia can be envisaged as a strong and proud nation.

Many of Cambodia's urban residents believe that they cannot rely on the government to achieve pride and dignity for the country and its people. Their participation and contributions through a wide range of autonomous activities, therefore, can help restore pride, dignity and solve critical issues threatening the Cambodian nation. A university student told me, "I feel bad about the rubbish in our city. It is shameful for our country when foreign tourists see rubbish everywhere. For this reason, I along with a few friends go out once a week to collect rubbish and clean up the parks."<sup>111</sup> A university lecturer also said, "I teach English for free to kids at a slum every Saturday morning. I feel pity for them. The government doesn't care about them. I think my teaching can give them hope for their future."<sup>112</sup> An NGO worker said, "Kantha Bopha's director is a Swiss, but he helps our country a lot. I feel embarrassed if we don't donate to support a hospital that provides treatments to poor Khmer kids."<sup>113</sup>

This autonomous urban popular nationalism serves as an alternative political resource which various urban people can rely on to empower themselves and the Cambodia nation. It marks a major departure from political nationalism in Cambodia in previous decades. Political nationalism that emerged before and after Cambodia's independence had originated mainly from cultural nationalism as a result of the country's experience with the colonial encounter. The nation was almost exclusively the monopoly of some privileged Cambodians: the political elites, the intellectuals and religious elites (Edwards 2007, Hansen 2007). During post-independence Cambodia, political nationalism was also influenced by political ideological struggles in the contexts of local, regional and international Cold War tension. The iconography of Angkor Wat and what constituted Khmerness were manipulated by different factions along the political divides (Kiernan 2001; Barnett 1990; Slocomb 2006).

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<sup>111</sup>Informant 2.

<sup>112</sup>Informant 11.

<sup>113</sup>Informant 17.

However, Cambodia's contemporary urban nationalism originates from diverse sources and is used for a very different reason. Nationalism in these contexts arises out of the frustrations urban people feel with regard to the country's poor standing in diverse domains, be that democracy, accountability, housing accessibility, wages, labour rights, livelihood opportunities, jobs, state welfare services, human rights, environmental protection or social security. It is informed by perceptions of the government's incapacity or indifference towards the common good and is manifested in actions taken by different individuals and groups, both elites and ordinary people, to secure control over their environment and materialise their visions of social, economic and political wellbeing. In these ways, urban nationalism can be seen as a productive political resource on which various individuals and groups in the city rely to communicate their grievances, model conduct, and enact a better society. It is a form of collective action rooted in individual frustration and civic idealism. Nationalism can help people from diverse backgrounds overcome differences and is a material idiom for expressing and experiencing collective agency. Nationalism provides city residents with a degree of empowerment and is a basis for making claims of a more far-reaching kind.

#### **4. Defending Preah Vihear and empowering the nation**

The contexts and examples of autonomous popular urban nationalist actions presented in the preceding section are significant in explaining why diverse individuals and groups of Phnom Penh's residents moved patriotically to defend the Preah Vihear Temple and the border. To these people, the Thai assaults on Preah Vihear were a confronting symbol for the collective humiliation experienced by all Khmers and fed into their own disparate experiences of injustice, frustration and powerlessness. Joining a popular movement to defend this Cambodian temple and its surrounding territory against foreign aggression was a method employed by urban residents to restore their power and dignity. It also built on their experiences of acting collectively as urban citizens to achieve common wellbeing in their proximate urban settings in the face of government incapacity and indifference. By taking part in a movement to rescue the nation they could gain a sense of agency and control over their own circumstances and affirm and enforce standards of conduct which they believed should be observed in all aspects of life. Many people I interviewed or chatted with viewed the defence of Preah

Vihear Temple as important to them and the country. They took pride in the nation and also in themselves for defending the temple and the border.

The movement to defend Preah Vihear among Phnom Penh residents was an interesting example of urban nationalism. Although it did not manifest in the form of protests or demonstrations against Thailand, it took other forms such as widespread discussions about the conflict in public places, donating their resources to border defence funds, and mobilising and distributing of resources to Cambodian soldiers at the contested border areas. In the paragraphs below I present five cases of how individuals and groups of people in the city participated in the defence of the nation.<sup>114</sup> They give us insights into nationalist responses to the Preah Vihear dispute through the participation of other stakeholders besides the Cambodian government and its media.

“Everyone in the whole city should dress in white and go out to the streets at the same time. We don’t have to say anything, but stand in silence. We want to show to the world that we Khmer people love peace and condemn the Thai invasion,” said a woman with serious tone of voice. This was a reaction from a woman, aged around 50, in the first week of the Preah Vihear border military stand-off. She came from educated middle-class background. She did her undergraduate study in Cambodia and received further training in Australia. The woman expressed her unique idea for how to defend the nation during an informal chat about the Preah Vihear border conflict with a group of lecturers on campus.

The lecturers nodded their heads to show their support of her idea. However, it was simply her expression of a desire to find ways to defend Cambodia against Thailand’s encroachment. Neither concrete action nor discussions to draw up a plan to transform her idea into action took place afterwards.<sup>115</sup> The woman’s case was just one of the many examples of how individuals in Phnom Penh participated in the movement to defend the nation’s territorial integrity during the dispute with Thailand.

Some Phnom Penh’s residents went beyond mere suggestions to materialise their nationalist sentiments and ideas through concrete actions. They organised trips, spent their own resources to travel to Preah Vihear Temple, and distributed their donations to

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<sup>114</sup>There were many such cases of individuals and groups who moved autonomously and patriotically to participate in the popular nationalist movement to support Cambodian soldiers at the Preah Vihear Temple region. However, it is not possible to document all of them here.

<sup>115</sup>I stood nearby and witnessed their chatting unfolding, July 2008.

Cambodian soldiers. Their actions were self-organised and self-planned, completely independent of the Cambodian government.

A young woman working for a local NGO in Phnom Penh said to me during an interview:

You know? If we don't defend our nation, who will defend it for us? I, therefore, collected contributions from people in my NGO. We collected 670 dollars. We spent 250 on hiring a van to Preah Vihear and the rest on buying instant noodles, medicines, dried fish, and mosquito nets. My colleagues and I distributed our donations to our poor soldiers there. We were so happy that our donations reached their hands. The soldiers were excited to see us visiting and supporting them.<sup>116</sup>

When I asked her, "Why didn't you contribute your donations through the government-managed border defence fund?" She replied:

No. We wanted to make sure that our donations reached the soldiers. We felt afraid that if we had given our money through the government, it may have gone into the pockets of some other people. I think you have noticed this yourself. When foreign donors and governments donated through the government, some of the donations were sold on markets and some were kept for their own families. Only a small portion of the aid reached the hands of needy people.

The woman, aged 30, had been working for the NGO for seven years at the time I interviewed her. Her NGO worked to promote public awareness of gender rights and equality and received funding for its projects from international aid agencies. The woman had a bachelor degree in law from the Royal University of Law and Economic in Phnom Penh. She came from Battambang province. Her father was a secondary school teacher, and her mother a tailor. The NGO worker was married to a man from Takeo province. They met when they were students in the city. Her husband was a lecturer at one of Phnom Penh's private universities. The young woman said she had no immediate plan to return to live in her home province because she had already established her life in the city. She said jokingly:

You know? I'm married. I'm from Battambang. My husband is from Takeo. If we moved to live in my province, I would upset him. If we moved to his province, it would be unfair for me. So, to be fair, we call Phnom Penh our home and it's easy to travel from here to my province and his anyway.

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<sup>116</sup>Informant 4.

University students in Phnom Penh also organised trips to Preah Vihear Temple during the border dispute.<sup>117</sup> I interviewed a young man, who had organised such a trip to the temple. Although he came from a peasant family from Kampong Chhnang province, this young man held a bachelor degree from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. He pursued his undergraduate study in archaeology at the university after he had finished his secondary education in his home province. The young man said:

I was in my third year at the university in 2008 when the conflict with Thailand took place. My classmates and I were shocked to see Thailand still intent on grabbing more Khmer land although it was already in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when countries were working with each other through institutional frameworks of ASEAN and the United Nations. I knew from history lessons of Thailand's invading and capturing of Khmer land during the Angkor and post-Angkor periods. But they were several centuries ago. I could not imagine that it could still happen at present.<sup>118</sup>

He added:

My classmates and I agreed that we had to do something in response. We were not going to fight against them, but we wanted to show them that we love our Preah Vihear Temple and land. We could not afford to lose more. Thus, we decided to organise a trip to the temple in September 2008. There were 28 students joining our trip, some of whom came from other departments within my university. The road to the temple was very bad. However, soon after we arrived at the temple, we were overwhelmed with excitement and pride. We were really proud of our Khmer ancestors who were able to build such a magnificent temple on a high mountain. We had group photos with our soldiers there with our national flag.

I asked the young man why only 28 students from his university joined him on this trip. He answered:

There were many who wanted to go with us. But some of them were warned by their parents of the potential risk of possible outbreak of fighting between both confronting militaries and we could find ourselves trapped in the middle of it. And we also wanted to limit the number of people going with us because we did not want to spend a lot of money on transportation. We wanted to save some money so that we could buy dried food and pure drinking water for the soldiers. Those who did not go also contributed money to us. Some gave us 1000 Riels; some 2000 Riels; some one dollar.

Not only the young urban educated elites, but certain groups of ordinary city dwellers also demonstrated actions for ideas of nation and national heritage. This was the case with Phnom Penh's Toul Tom Pong Market vendors. A female vendor, aged

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<sup>117</sup>There were reports of such trips organised by students on local media.

<sup>118</sup>Informant 1.

39, told me that she and seven other vendors from the market went to visit Preah Vihear Temple during the border tension. She said:

When I saw Preah Vihear Temple on TV, it was so beautiful. I only started to know what the temple looked like when the dispute occurred. My friends in the market and I felt pain to see Thailand wanting to snatch it away from us. We arranged a trip to the temple a few months later. We wanted to see the beauty of the temple with our own eyes and we wanted to tell Thai soldiers that ordinary Cambodian people loved peace, not war. One of my friends can speak Thai.<sup>119</sup>

I asked the vendor, “Where did you watch TV?” “At my store. I have one TV at home and one small one at the market. Other vendors also have radios and televisions at their stores because we spend more time at the market than at our homes,” she answered. The souvenir seller added, “Sometimes we discussed with each other about what we had watched. I know all the vendors in this market. We are like relatives and friends. We earn a living in the market together. When we have parties or ceremonies like weddings, we invite each other as guests.” I asked her, “Had you ever been on trips with your fellow vendors before your trip to Preah Vihear Temple?” The woman replied:

Yes, several times. We went to Kampong Som, Kampot and other places. But our trip to Preah Vihear was special. It was not for pleasure, relaxation and enjoying time together as previous trips. It was for visiting our fine temple and showing our love of peace. You know? If there is war, it will affect all of us.

Although Phnom Penh market vendors are not generally considered part of Cambodia’s urban educated elites, they wield considerable influence on the country’s economy and politics due to their control of part of the country’s economy and their ability to organise collective actions. The space of market creates a sense of shared community. There are networks and relationships between vendors and vendors and between vendors and their clients. Relationships are treated with care and reciprocity is often exchanged. Resources can be pooled together to be used for particular collective purposes. Sometimes market vendors in Phnom Penh organised protests to defend their collective interests against external powerful actors. There have been news reports about protests by vendors, for examples, from O’Russeï and Boeung Keng Kang markets at Phnom Penh City Hall, National Assembly, and Prime Minister Hun Sen’s house. They protested against the city hall and the government on a number of

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<sup>119</sup>Informant 20.

regulations that would affect their community like the increase of electricity fee and higher rent for market stalls.<sup>120</sup>

The concentration of wealth in the urban market space gives market vendors a relatively higher social status in Cambodia's hierarchical social relations than the *neak srae* [farmer] or the *neak junabot* [rural people]. Due to their social and economic influence, Phnom Penh market vendors often attract the attention of politicians. For example, Sam Rainsy, leader of Cambodia's main opposition party was often seen visiting different markets in the city during each election season. Phnom Penh market vendors were believed to have supplied some cash, food and clean drinking water to Rainsy-led demonstrations in the city against the 1998 and 2013 election results.

Other ordinary people in Phnom Penh, although they did not carry out their nationalist sentiments like the Toul Tom Pong Market vendors, still expressed their wish to visit Preah Vihear Temple. During my numerous interviews and informal conversations, many of them said they wanted to go to the temple to see how much of Khmer land there had been invaded by Thai soldiers and whether Cambodian soldiers could defend the border territory.

Buddhist monks from pagodas in Phnom Penh also organised trips and distributed their own resources for ideas of defending the nation. However, they did not donate cash, food, and equipment to Cambodian soldiers like other groups of city people I mentioned above. They distributed something else—sacred yantra, *katha* [a type of sacred amulet], and holy water. During my fieldwork trips to Preah Vihear Temple region in 2012, I interviewed Cambodian soldiers and border patrol police. I asked them whether they possessed any sacred objects. It turned out many of them possessed at least one. Some of them told me that they had also received sacred amulets from Phnom Penh monks. A soldier, who had been deployed to the temple region since the start of the military stand-off, said, “There were monks from Phnom Penh coming here. They came in groups. They gave yantra and *katha* to soldiers. They also poured blessed holy water on us to protect us from Thai bullets.”<sup>121</sup>

The expression of views and actions by individuals and groups of Phnom Penh dwellers during the Preah Vihear dispute give us interesting insights into the city

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<sup>120</sup>See, for example, (*The Cambodia Daily*, May 27, 2000; November 16, 2001; *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 27, 2008; June 1, 2010).

<sup>121</sup>Informant 32 (Appendix B).

people's views of Prime Minister Hun Sen's government. Their suggestions of different options Cambodia should take to respond to Thailand and their own trips to the temple and distributions of their own resources to Cambodian soldiers suggested that the city people had little confidence and trust in the country's political system. That city people wished to visit the temple to see with their own eyes how much of Cambodia's border land had been invaded by Thai troops and whether Cambodian soldiers could defend it was a manifestation of their skepticism of the government's ability to handle the dispute and stand up to its larger and more powerful neighbour.

The urban movement to protect Preah Vihear sheds light on the autonomous dimensions of contemporary urban nationalism. City residents approved of Prime Minister Hun Sen's nationalist rhetoric and actions in deploying troops to the border but many doubted the government's willingness or ability to meaningfully defend the nation.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, when opportunities arose during the Preah Vihear dispute, the city people took the matter of defending the nation into their own hands. They did so out of frustration with their political elites and anxiety about the vulnerability of the Cambodian nation but also armed with the confidence they had gained through their involvement in collective action to secure a better quality of life in the city. Through their autonomous nationalist actions, they were able to give voice to and materialise their care for the Cambodian nation. In other words, their nationalism served as an alternative political resource that gave them a sense of collective empowerment.

The autonomous urban nationalism that was manifested during the Preah Vihear conflict has become a widespread movement that has continued until the present. It was on display again during the 2013 election when many people participating in CNRP-led mass election campaigns along Phnom Penh's streets reportedly used their own motor bikes and spent their own money on petrol. As they drove through the city, they proudly chanted, "My motor bike, my money, my petrol for my nation!"

Another spectacular display of the autonomous nationalism of empowering the nation by Phnom Penh residents took place again in 2016 after Kem Ley, a famous public intellectual and a political analyst, had been assassinated in broad daylight at a Caltex petrol station in Phnom Penh. Kem Ley was admired for his courageous analysis and comments on a wide range of issues facing contemporary Cambodia such

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<sup>122</sup>Informants 1, 3, 4, 6, 10, 18, 23, 24.



as deforestation, corruption, illegal immigration, labour rights, forced evictions, and state violence and impunity. He explained those topics in ways that ordinary people could understand. His immense popularity stemmed from his use of media such as the radio to which many ordinary people had access. In key respects, Kem Ley embodied new ideas of the nation and the public sphere. By using the public sphere as free space for rationally debating ideas and ideals, he represented the nation in a new light as a conversation between citizens.

Tens of thousands of people mourned Kem Ley's death. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in the mass funeral procession from Phnom Penh to his final resting place in his home province of Takeo. It was a historic and unprecedented funeral procession in modern Cambodian history for a person not from a royal background. The participants used their own vehicles, which were of different types, vans, cars, pickups, motorbikes, tuk-tuks, and even bicycles to transport their families, friends and relatives to participate in the event. They organised their own trip and spent their own money on petrol and food. Some of them even handed out bottles of pure drinking water and baguettes to other participants, who were also making the historic journey that put into practice their ideas of the Cambodian nation.



Figure 9. Kem Ley's funeral procession, Phnom Penh. (Photo by the author.)



Figure 10. A participant riding bicycle in Kem Ley's funeral procession, Phnom Penh. (Photo by the author.)



Figure 11. A pickup truck loading with bottles of pure drinking water for handing out free to funeral procession participants. (Photo by the author.)

## 5. Conclusion

Phnom Penh's primacy as the country's political centre has been shaped by its interactions with various local, national, and global events, ideas and forces for at least the last two hundred years. The city recently has been transforming at an unprecedented speed and scale with rapid growth and diversification in construction, services, businesses, and in the formal and informal economy. There are also signs of significant concentrations of wealth in the city. These transformations have led urban residents to adopt a culture of consumption, new lifestyles and identities characteristic of what some scholars call the "new rich" in Asia (Robison and Goodman 1996; Beng-Huat, 2000). This period is also typified by the rise of urban nationalism.

The city's transformations have given rise to new opportunities and constraints which have defined city people's urban politics and nationalism. Some groups of people have been able to seize the opportunities and advance themselves relatively fast, while others feel frustrated and marginalised. Their livelihoods are threatened. The Cambodian state has been limited in its capacity to provide social welfare and has proved less effective in managing rapid socioeconomic changes in the city. Phnom Penh's increased integration into the global economic system and its interactions with global forces mean that some challenges are too complex and powerful for the state to deal with effectively. Thus, the state appears to surrender its authority over national sovereignty in the face of the advancement of the global economy. Although the state has found a new source of power and wealth by collaborating with, capturing or co-opting global economic forces, paradoxically it also appears impotent or incapable of providing its citizens with a sense of security or power in their lives.

Whether city individuals and groups have benefited or have been marginalised in the course of recent socio-economic changes, most seek greater power to achieve their different interests and desires. Numerous dissatisfactions and frustrations with the state of governance in Cambodia come together in a widespread sense that the country itself is in peril. Through nationalism, urban people have found a vehicle to voice their anxieties and experience a sense of collective control. By acting collectively in defense of the nation, urban people have vocalised and materialised their ideals of the common good and gained a sense of empowerment. This variety of nationalism has originated from diverse sources and appeals to a range of urban constituents. Being demotic and

arising out of everyday experiences of powerlessness, it reflects broad changes in Cambodian nationalism.

The popular urban movement to defend Preah Vihear illustrates the autonomous qualities of urban nationalism. The residents of Phnom Penh grasped the opportunity presented by this conflict to push the boundaries for citizen participation in the national project. When city residents organised their own networks and distributed their own resources to Cambodian soldiers during the Preah Vihear border conflict, they gave voice to their autonomous aspirations for national strength and wellbeing. Through their actions, they materialised their care for the nation. At a later date, many again used their own resources to participate in CNRP-led mass election campaigns through the city. Urban residents also used their own means of transportation and spent their own resources to participate in Kem Ley's funeral procession. In each of these contexts, nationalism was a productive political resource upon which Phnom Penh residents relied to express critiques, overcome individual constraints and gain a sense of collective empowerment.

## Chapter 6

### Border People and the Periphery Politics of Pragmatism\*

#### 1. Introduction

On 23 April 2012, I went on my first extended field trip to the border province of Preah Vihear in northern Cambodia. Expecting to see very few people travelling to an undeveloped border province, I was quite surprised to see the bus completely full when it departed Phnom Penh station. The driver made regular stops to pick up more passengers, who squeezed into the aisle. The driver said, “My company started a daily bus service to Preah Vihear just a few years ago after the government built good roads.”<sup>123</sup> A long-time Preah Vihear resident sitting next to me on the bus commented, “Many of the houses that you will see along the road are new settlements. Previously it was all forest.”<sup>124</sup> After spending approximately seven hours on the bus, I arrived in Preah Vihear city. The city also looked different from what I had imagined. I had pictured a dilapidated rural backwater, but there were concrete houses, guesthouses, hotels, banks and other signs of modernity. A resident seemed to have read my thoughts when he said, “The city has changed so rapidly over the last few years.”<sup>125</sup>

After spending five days interviewing people in the city, I went to Preah Vihear Temple by taxi. It took us two hours to travel a distance of approximately 100 km on the new asphalt road. Along the way, I saw patches of cleared forest, cash crop plantations and new settlements. About 30 km from the temple, there was a new border town called Sra Em. A tailor in the town, a migrant from Kampong Cham province, told me, “I came here two years ago. It is easier to earn a living here than in my home province.”<sup>126</sup>

These first impressions of life in the province made me realise the disjuncture between the Cambodian state elites’ nationalist narrative and Preah Vihear residents’ everyday views of the situation. The ruling elites, through the state-affiliated media, had constructed

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<sup>123</sup>Informant 1.

<sup>124</sup>Informant 2.

<sup>125</sup>Informant 6.

<sup>126</sup>Informant 23.

a discourse of a conflict that threatened the nation, describing their responses to this threat as a defence of Preah Vihear Temple and the border territories. However, my research found that the provincial residents' everyday discourses on the conflict differed dramatically from this nationalist narrative. There were many different local ideas of nation, nationalism, and heritage site.

This does not mean, however, that people in the province were indifferent to nationalism, or that they did not support the government's nation-building projects. It is just that their views of Preah Vihear Temple and development projects have localised and nuanced meanings, unlike the state's nationalist discourse. Despite the state's massive propaganda campaigns, it has not convinced Preah Vihear residents to adopt its nationalist narrative wholesale.

This chapter examines the conflict through the rhetoric of the Cambodian state elites and the views of the residents of Preah Vihear province. Inspired by Eric Hobsbawm's suggestion that the study of nation and nationalism should incorporate both top-down and bottom-up approaches (Hobsbawm 1990, 10), my research includes analysis from below. My bottom-up approach examines popular views in Preah Vihear province of the Thai–Cambodian border conflict and of the Cambodian state's nation-building projects. Many ordinary people view the state-built roads and other public infrastructure as practical improvements benefitting them and enhancing local potential, not grand symbols associated with national meaning, border defence and Khmer pride.<sup>127</sup>

This chapter begins with an overview of the changing relations between the Preah Vihear border region and the Cambodian state, followed by an examination of the government's nationalist discourse on these borderlands. I will then go on to present popular views from Preah Vihear province. Throughout this chapter, I use 'popular views' or 'popular discourses' in contrast to 'elite nationalist discourse'. I also use the terms 'border', 'borderlands' and 'frontier' interchangeably to refer to the Preah Vihear temple border region.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Informants 3, 4, 5, 7–9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 22, 24, 25, 26, 39, 41, 49, 69.

<sup>128</sup>In border studies, the terms 'border', 'borderlands' and 'frontier' are sometimes differentiated (see Anderson 1996, 9–10; Baud and van Schendel 1997, 213–14).

## 2. Borderlands and the state: From resistance towards engagement

Borders between nation-states are a political construct as a result of the spatial rearrangement of the world into modern states. The idea of fixed boundaries was intended to give states a well-defined sovereignty over their territories (Baud and van Schendel 1997, 216–17). In Southeast Asia, the concept of boundaries as strictly defined lines is the result of the colonial encounter. The idea stemmed from the competition among the European colonial powers for control over territories, people, and resources in the region (Horstmann and Wadley 2006, 8–9). The establishment of modern borders in the region shifted indigenous spatial knowledge, in which frontiers were perceived as fluid, unbounded, and sometimes waxing and waning depending on the power of the competing centres,<sup>129</sup> to fixed lines on modern geographical maps. These maps created ‘the geo-body of a nation’, significant for the national imagination of the modern nation-state (Thongchai 1994).

Post-colonial Southeast Asian ruling elites took great pride in gaining independence for their countries, and they were eager to implement homogenised nation-building projects. However, the lack of state institutional capacity and revenue often constrained such political objectives (Slater 2010, 3; Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 11–14). Furthermore, the departure of colonial rulers created a power vacuum in the newly independent nation-states, which had not had “an indigenous strong state tradition” (Myrdal 1968 cited in Reid 2010, 26), making them vulnerable to political fragmentation (Battersby 1998, 474). These constraints prevented post-colonial states in the region from exercising effective control over their outlying borderlands. Thus, central governments viewed borderlands as zones of lawlessness, smuggling and secret activities (Grundy-Warr 1993, 45–56; Tagliacozzo 2005, 16). Some border regions even became sites for separatist movements or armed insurgencies against central governments (see, for example, Smith 1991).

Upon independence from France in 1953, Cambodia began nation-building projects in the country’s remote mountainous border provinces in the north and northeast. Provincial administrations were set up, introducing the culture of the Khmer majority. Since the government viewed the uplands minorities as uncivilised and their regions as unruly and

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<sup>129</sup> The traditional precolonial indigenous knowledge of political space between states followed the concept of a *mandala*, which consists of a centre and its surrounding satellites. The farthest domains from the centre were often overlapping zones also claimed by other competing centres. Stanley Tambiah coined the term ‘galactic polity’ to refer to this spatial *mandala* arrangement of traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms (see Tambiah 1973, 3–31).

prone to rebellion,<sup>130</sup> Khmer soldiers and their families were resettled in these areas to help persuade the various indigenous groups to adopt Khmer civilisation and order (St John 2001, 99; van den Berg and Palith 2000, 4; Baid 2010, 199–201).

Weak institutions, a lack of revenue and political instability hindered nation-building, as elsewhere in post-colonial Southeast Asia. Unlike the cases of Aceh, Southern Thailand, and Myanmar's borderlands, however, where armed groups have fought for separation or autonomy from central control, various Khmer resistance groups in Cambodia's remote northern borderlands vied to take over the whole country. Their ultimate goal was to return from their frontier bases and seize the machinery of state in Phnom Penh.

The forested highlands of the north and northeast, combined with the relative ambiguity of the borderlands, provided attractive sanctuaries and bases for opposition leaders. For about half a century, these borderlands hosted various Khmer rebel groups. In the 1940s and 1950s, its border with Thailand was a refuge and a resistance base for Son Ngoc Thanh, an ethnic Khmer from Kampuchea Krom in southern Vietnam's Mekong delta, who along with his supporters was attempting to sabotage Prince Norodom Sihanouk's government (Leifer 1961–1962, 362–365). In the 1960s, Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot and other senior communists escaped Sihanouk's political harassment and took refuge in the northeast, where they established their bases (Chandler 1992b, 82–83; see also Kiernan 2004). Highland minorities were sympathetic to these movements (Chandler 1992b, 84; Ovesen and Trankell 2003, 198). After Vietnamese troops overthrew the Democratic Kampuchea regime in 1979, Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders along with their soldiers retreated from Phnom Penh to the Cambodian–Thai border, where they set up their bases and fought against the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government. The last of the Khmer Rouge only surrendered to the government at the end of the 1990s. The border region of Preah Vihear Temple was thus one of the Khmer Rouge's last strongholds. Notably, Thailand supported the Cambodian resistance forces during the Cold War, allowing them to use the borderlands for resistance bases (Leifer 1961–1962; Charnvit 2003; Osborne 2008a).

The end of the Cold War, the shift in Thai foreign policy towards Indochina in the late 1980s,<sup>131</sup> and the re-engagement of the international community with Phnom Penh after the

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<sup>130</sup>The highland minorities had a history of resistance even under the French (see Slocomb 2015, 231–233).

<sup>131</sup>When Chatichai Choonhawan became prime minister of Thailand (1988–91), he announced Thailand's new foreign policy on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. His government wanted to forge new relations with the three Indochinese countries by transforming them from 'a battlefield into a marketplace'. Unlike his predecessors, Chatichai viewed



1993 general election have had a profound impact on the state's interactions with its borderlands. These shifts transformed the centre–borderlands relationship from hostility towards more productive engagement. For example, Cambodia's most important border crossing with Thailand — at Poipet in Banteay Meanchey province, next to Thailand's Sa Kaeo province — was opened in the early 1990s, allowing for the first time in decades large volumes of trade between the two countries. In addition, the surrender of the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia's accession to ASEAN in the late 1990s further enhanced the government's engagement with its own frontier regions through state building and cross-border economic development projects.

Damaged by more than two decades of civil war, Cambodia had only limited revenues and relied heavily on foreign aid and loans to reconstruct its public infrastructure. Consequently, the government prioritised Phnom Penh and other more populous provinces, while remote and sparsely populated Preah Vihear remained neglected until 2008. Prime Minister Hun Sen admitted as much in his launching of the construction of National Road 62 from Tbeng Meanchey to Preah Vihear Temple:

I would like to ask for understanding from the people in Preah Vihear Province ... since the Royal Government has not restored these national roads in a timely manner, resulting in limited infrastructure development in this region and distant Preah Vihear Temple ... away from Cambodian people. ... On the other hand, because Preah Vihear Temple can only be accessed via Thailand, Cambodia has lost ownership in development of this cultural and natural tourism site. Originating from these issues, I made a serious commitment to build this road at whatever cost. (*Cambodia New Vision*, April 5, 2008)

It had long been the government's plan to propose the inscription of the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site (see Kingdom of Cambodia 2010, 9–13). However, it was the military dispute with Thailand near the temple that spurred the acceleration of nation-building projects, infrastructure development and connectivity in Preah Vihear province, especially during the years of border tension (2008-2011).<sup>132</sup> New infrastructure built included the section of National Road 62 from Kampong Thom to Tbeng Meanchey; National Road 67 from Siem Reap; National Road 56 from Banteay Meanchey running through Oddar Meanchey and Anlong Veng to Sra Em; and National Road 214 from Stoeng Treng. These roads allow the province to be accessible from four different directions. Besides these roads, the government has built a two-lane concrete mountain road

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Thailand's borders with Indochinese countries as zones of trade and economic activity. For details, see (Battersby 1998; French 2002, 444–449).

<sup>132</sup>Informants 17, 19, 21, 44, 76.

to Preah Vihear Temple, so it is no longer true that people can easily access the ancient temple only from the Thai side.



In addition to new infrastructure, many new buildings were constructed in the provincial capital and near the temple including the Preah Vihear Provincial Municipality, Department of Culture and Fine Art, Department of Posts and Telecommunications, Department of Information, Provincial Red Cross, 16 Makara Provincial Referral Hospital, Provincial Training Centre, Provincial Police Department, and Tourism Office.<sup>133</sup> A large new barracks for the Royal Cambodian Army Intervention Division 3 was built, about 60 km from the temple, in addition to several battalions stationed in other parts of the border region. A new museum called the Samdech Techo Hun Sen Eco-Global Museum of Preah Vihear was set up about 20 km from the temple. Sra Em hosts a Bayon TV and Radio Broadcast Relay Station.



Figure 12. Preah Vihear Provincial Municipality building. (Photo by the author.)

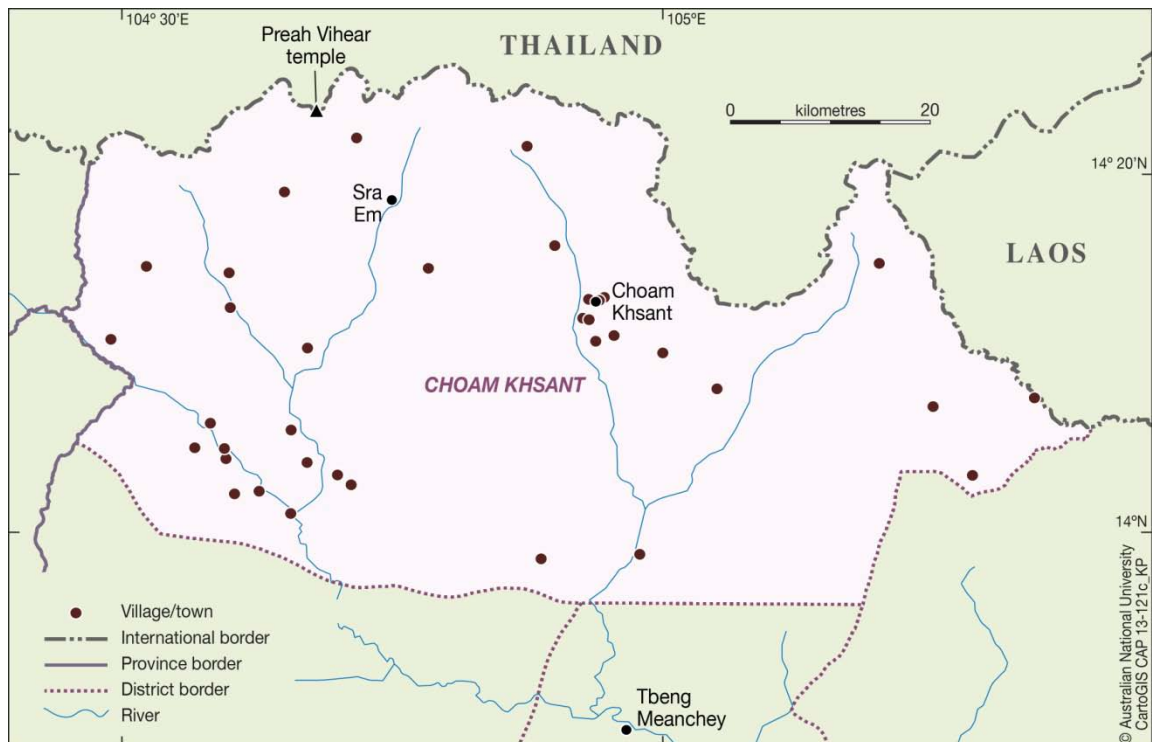
What is more remarkable than the flurry of development is the reconfiguring and institutionalising of the frontier's human and spatial geography in the hierarchy of the state administration. The Cambodian government began introducing a migration scheme to the Preah Vihear border region. Between 2008 and 2012, the government established two new

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<sup>133</sup>Informants 19, 21, 43, 44, 45, 74.

communes and twenty-one new villages, along with new schools and Buddhist pagodas. All the new villages, except one, are in Choam Khsant, the district which includes the temple itself (Preah Vihear Municipality, September 28, 2012). In 2009, Hun Sen affirmed the government's wish to populate the country's isolated border region to protect it from Thailand's encroachment (*The Phnom Penh Post*, March 11, 2009).

In 2012, the prime minister also revealed that permission for casinos to operate at border crossings with Thailand and Vietnam were part of a strategy to defend Cambodian territory from its two larger neighbours' incursions. All licensed casinos in the country, except the NagaWorld Casino in Phnom Penh, are located at international border crossings with Thailand and Vietnam. He said that Vietnam and Thailand could not move their respective border posts into Cambodian territory when there were multi-storey casino buildings in their way.<sup>134</sup> Hun Sen's statements reveal not only the persistence of Cambodian elites' traditional views of Thailand and Vietnam as threats, but also the continuing potency of the image of the national 'geo-body' in contemporary politics.



Map 4. Locations of villages in Choam Khsant district, Preah Vihear province. (Map by Cartography Unit, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.)

<sup>134</sup>Prime Minister Hun Sen's address to the National Assembly on 9 August 2012. The speech was later compiled and published as a handbook, but without Hun Sen's comment on border casinos (see Royal Government of Cambodia 2012).

### 3. Developing, connecting, and populating the borderlands

As described above, the Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand triggered unprecedented public infrastructure development in the province. The prime minister mobilised state resources and funding from his patronage networks and obtained loans from the Chinese government. Hun Sen visited the border province four times during the dispute while his senior government and military officials made countless trips. The state-affiliated media also reported daily on the border situation and high-ranking officials' visits.

Through its nationalist rhetoric conveyed via the state's media, the government tried to construct a narrative of the prime minister and his government as guardians of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty and the Preah Vihear Temple. Its new infrastructure and nation-building projects were promoted as a means of restoring Khmer national pride and defending the border. Hun Sen himself said good road networks would attract settlers to the remote region and that a more populated frontier would safeguard Cambodia's border territory against Thailand's encroachment (*The Phnom Penh Post*, March 11, 2009). Underlying the construction of this nationalist discourse are three important factors: the potency of Preah Vihear Temple in Cambodian nationalism; fear of territorial losses and national decline; and the political opportunity the border temple dispute offered Hun Sen to counter domestic critics.

First, to the Cambodian elite, Preah Vihear Temple has come to represent the nation and Khmer pride. The border temple emerged from obscurity to symbolise Cambodia's cultural and national identity during Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum government (1955–1970). In the context of the discourse of historical humiliation and decline since the age of Angkor, Cambodian nationalists interpreted the 1962 judgment by the International Court of Justice granting ownership of the temple to Cambodia as a proud victory in the battle with Thailand. Professor Sorn Samnang, a former president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia and a former adviser to Hun Sen, said:

If we talk about Khmer's victories after the Angkor era, over the last 500 years we have had very few. We have been mostly defeated. Preah Vihear temple victory at the ICJ is Khmer's most impressive victory. It is the one I am really proud of.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>Interview with Professor Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 7 Sept. 2012.

Nearly half a century later, the Cambodian government reinvigorated the discourse of the temple representing Khmer pride when UNESCO inscribed Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage site in 2008. This episode was a replay of the 1962 judgment: there were strong protests in Thailand and joyous national celebrations in Cambodia. Sihanouk's government had raised the Cambodian flag at the temple following the ICJ judgment. Following the World Heritage inscription, the Hun Sen government erected a billboard at Preah Vihear: 'I am proud to be born Khmer.' Similar sentiments were also expressed by senior government officials on state-affiliated television upon the construction of a road to the temple.

Second, despite significant post-Cold War changes in the meanings and functions of state borders,<sup>136</sup> the aura of the border in nationalist thought has not faded away. Globally, the promotion of nationalism in the defence of borders remains a powerful resource for mobilising popular support, as demonstrated by the ability of Thailand's People's Alliance for Democracy to mobilise tens of thousands of people in Bangkok to protest against Cambodia during the Preah Vihear border conflict. The border's appeal for nationalists derives from its potent representation of a modern idea of state sovereignty. The state must demonstrate it can defend its borders and reinforce its statehood at the borderlands through displaying flags, posts, stones, fences, border guards, checkpoints, and other landmarks (Baud and van Schendel 1997, 226). State frontiers were also favoured by nationalists as markers of national identity. Anderson (1996, 2) writes, "Frontiers, in this sense, are part of political beliefs and myths about the unity of the people, and sometimes myths about the 'natural' unity of a territory." In mainland Southeast Asia, Thongchai Winichakul shows how modern state boundaries played a role in the construction of the modern Thai nation-state. The 'geo-body' of Thai nationhood created a sense of 'Thainess' as being different from the non-Thai 'others', who live on the other side of the borders (Thongchai 1994, 164–172).

The notion of national borders is sensitive in Cambodia's long-standing nationalist tradition. It represents both the survival of the Cambodian nation and the vulnerability of the Khmer race. This reverence of national borders derives from both geography and history. Being sandwiched between Thailand and Vietnam has long created a perception of

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<sup>136</sup>State borders have started to lose their traditional meaning as a result of the increasing multidimensional flows of people, goods, trade, and information across the globe (see, for example, Newman and Paasi 1998, 191–193; Kolossov 2005, 622–624).

threat for many Cambodian nationalists who fear that their larger and more powerful neighbours will ‘swallow’ more territories if Cambodia does not pay adequate attention to border defence.

Cambodia’s national history encompasses warfare with its neighbours in the post-Angkorian era, and of the struggle for survival and independence of the Khmer kingdom from Thai and Vietnamese dominance (Eng 1969). Both neighbours are portrayed as having ill intent towards Cambodia (Ibid). The Khmer empire of Angkor controlled vast territories including parts of present-day Thailand, some parts of Laos, and the entire Mekong delta. The nationalist historical discourse draws a direct causal relationship between Cambodia’s territorial losses to both Thailand and Vietnam and the decline in Khmer cultural, political and ideological power and prestige (see, for example, Tranet 2005).

Third, we need to examine Hun Sen’s domestic political vulnerability to understand why his government has portrayed the development of the Preah Vihear borderlands as a means of defending the border against Thai aggression. Although Hun Sen has consolidated enormous power and prevailed over his rivals during his long rule, civil society and opposition parties have criticised his government for being corrupt, repressive, and supportive of widespread land grabbing and illegal logging (see Heder 2005, 113–130; McCargo 2005b, 98–112; Global Witness Report, June 2007; Human Rights Watch Report, January 2015). Moreover, many critics and nationalists have argued that his government is submissive to the Vietnamese government and has shown little willingness to defend Cambodia’s border territories against Vietnam’s alleged encroachment. Such suspicions date back to the political rise of Hun Sen and many senior members of his government under Vietnam’s patronage in 1979. According to this narrative, Hun Sen is not a nationalist and cannot defend Cambodia’s borders. Allegations that the prime minister is a ‘puppet’ of Vietnam or that he has been ‘ceding’ Cambodia’s border territories to Vietnam have appeared in opposition-affiliated newspapers and on anti-government nationalist blogs such as *KI-Media*, *Khmerisation*, and *Sacravatoons*.

Such nationalist sentiment is embedded in the electoral politics of the opposition parties’ challenge to the ruling CPP (Un 2008). With their weaker financial, institutional and coercive resources, the opposition parties have relied on this anti-Vietnam rhetoric to mobilise support and gain votes.

The most prominent opposition politician who has used anti-Vietnamese nationalist rhetoric against Hun Sen is Sam Rainsy. In 2009, he went to Cambodia's Svay Rieng province to remove border posts allegedly placed inside Cambodia's territory by Vietnamese officials. His actions prompted the Cambodian government to issue a warrant for his arrest for obstructing demarcation work along the Cambodian–Vietnam border. Sam Rainsy was forced to flee the country (see Sam and Whitehouse 2013, 159). A royal pardon allowed him to return to Cambodia shortly before the July 2013 election to lead his Cambodia National Rescue Party.

The Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand thus presented a perfect opportunity for Hun Sen and his government to reduce their political vulnerability, and at the same time, to construct themselves as nationalists and defenders of Cambodia's borders. His government's firm defence of the Preah Vihear border received wide support from different segments of the population. Michael Hayes, former publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Phnom Penh Post*, observes, "In the 20 years I've been in Cambodia the Preah Vihear issue is without question the only one I've seen that has united the entire nation." (*The Phnom Penh Post*, February 17, 2011)

#### **4. Popular views from the border**

My empirical analysis benefits greatly from the theories of everyday politics and popular nationalism. Benedict Kerkvliet categorises everyday forms of peasant politics in their relations with state authorities into four categories: "support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance" (Kerkvliet 2009, 227–243). His work describes the 'modifications and resistance' category. He shows how peasant households' deviation from the Vietnamese state's prescribed collective farming policies pressured the state to change its policy to household farming (Kerkvliet 2005). James Scott's work on everyday forms of peasant resistance shows villagers employing various methods in their daily lives to resist what they perceive as forms of dominance, control and exploitation (Scott 1985; Scott 1990). Yoshinori Nishizaki's study shows that people in Suphanburi province, Thailand, supported prominent politician Banharn Silpa-archa because he tried to secure state funds to develop provincial infrastructure. Suphanburi people are proud of Banharn, the politician from their province, although at the national level Banharn is viewed as bad and corrupt (Nishizaki 2011). Andrew Walker's recent study of the dynamics of state–rural



society relations in a village in Chiang Mai province shows that villagers strive to cultivate productive relations with various sources of power and state authorities near and far in their daily lives (Walker 2012).

All these studies share one thing in common. Whether the villagers resist, avoid, modify, support or engage with state power, they put their individual and local interests first. Given villagers' general tendency to put their everyday, local concerns first, it is not surprising then that the residents of Preah Vihear have an entirely different view of the Hun Sen government's nationalist propaganda about their province and its borderlands.

The fact that villagers' interests are vastly different from those of the state is not the only constraint on state-rural society relations. The state itself has its own limitations for it is neither monolithic nor coherent (see Migdal 1994, 9; Gupta 1995, 375–402). It is contradictory and fragmentary, with multiple hierarchies. Different state institutions often have different and sometimes conflicting views and interests, preventing the state as a whole from forging a coherent policy or articulating a coherent narrative (Gupta 1995, 375–384). This is the situation in Preah Vihear province. People meet senior government or military officials from Phnom Penh less frequently compared to their nearly daily encounters with local officials — police, village chief, commune council members, forest rangers, etc.

A market vendor in Tbeng Meanchey told me, “I saw *neak thom* [big people]<sup>137</sup> from Phnom Penh passing through the city to the temple once or twice a month during the conflict, but I never had a chance to talk to them.”<sup>138</sup> Those she met most often were the market officials who collected fees every day and talked to her mostly about market-related issues, such as the provincial authority's plan to increase fees.<sup>139</sup> These interactions suggest that the market officials, like other local government officials, are more concerned with provincial than national issues. Although Hun Sen and senior government figures often appeared on television, talking about defending the nation and the border, local officials did not echo the national narrative.

Studies of popular nationalism contain two interesting insights. First, national audiences are not homogenous. They comprise diverse groups of people with varied social, economic, political, religious, gender, and ethnic backgrounds (see Billig 1995, 71; Skey 2009, 336–

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<sup>137</sup>A term used by ordinary people to refer to high-ranking officials. Its antonym is *neak toch tarch* (small people).

<sup>138</sup>Informant 25.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

337; Billig 2009, 347). This heterogeneity constrains elites from inculcating a coherent view of the nation. Studies show there are cases in which national elites have failed to influence their countrymen's views (Whitmeyer 2002, 321–341; Brubaker et al. 2006). The elites' nationalist discourse appeals to only some segments of the population (Whitmeyer 2002, 322). Some studies show that certain groups within the population are not enthusiastic about or even hostile to their national identities (see, for example, Fenton 2007, 321–340). Second, ordinary people are not passive consumers of national identities produced by nationalist elites. Instead, in their daily routines they are active producers of popular national discourse (Edensor 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 550). Ordinary people often express or interpret what represent national identities or national interests in ways that relate to their daily lives and interests (Miller-Idriss 2006, 541–570).

The literature on everyday politics and popular nationalism presented above is important for understanding the dynamism and complexity at local levels and the limitations of the state. The local contexts and people's everyday experiences are important factors influencing popular views. Local circumstances and practices are inherent in many of my conversations and interviews with Preah Vihear inhabitants. These conditions have, to a large extent, defined the provincial residents' nuanced views of both the border conflict and nation-building projects.

The state portrays roads to and within the border province as symbols of border defence and Khmer pride. However, many people in the province view them as enhancing mobility, interconnectedness, trade, transportation, livelihoods, and local potential, all of which bring daily benefits.<sup>140</sup> Several residents recounted their direct experiences of using the roads before and after they were asphalted. According to long-time residents, when the roads were in poor condition, travelling between Phnom Penh and Tbeng Meanchey, a distance of approximately 320 km, took more than a day, longer in the rainy season.<sup>141</sup> A phone vendor in the city said, "When I came here in 2000, I left Phnom Penh at 7 a.m. and arrived in the town after 1 a.m."<sup>142</sup> An NGO project manager confirmed, "The road was very bad. In the rainy season it took a few days to get to the province from Phnom Penh. Travellers had to sleep along the way and sometimes we were robbed by bandits."<sup>143</sup> A woman who had

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<sup>140</sup>Informants 3, 4, 5, 7–9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 22, 24, 25, 26, 39, 41, 49, 69.

<sup>141</sup>Informants 6, 7–9, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 74, 75, 77.

<sup>142</sup>Informant 14.

<sup>143</sup>Informant 75.

been a local rice trader in the 1990s, who sat beside me on the bus from Siem Reap to Sra Em, said:

At that time travelling over a distance of only 70 km by a truck loaded with bags of rice along this road [National Road 67] could take a few days because the truck often got stuck in the dirt road. Passengers had to cook rice and spend the night sleeping on the roadside.<sup>144</sup>

The asphalted roads have given people new experiences to compare with the past. Travelling from Phnom Penh to the provincial city now takes only about seven hours, and travelling from Siem Reap to Preah Vihear Temple takes about three. Another woman, a long-time resident of Tbeng Meanchey, told me on the bus about her travels before there were good roads and daily private bus services:

Before, there were no direct bus services to the province. We had to hitch a lift on pickup trucks in Kampong Thom to get to Preah Vihear. Sometimes I sat at the rear part of the vehicle and had to expose myself for hours to the heat from the sun and rain and dust and dirt from the dirt road. Now we are lucky to travel by air-conditioned bus. It's very comfortable.<sup>145</sup>

The taxi driver with whom I travelled from Banteay Meanchey to Sra Em town observed, "Before, it took one whole day to get to the temple from Tbeng Meanchey. Now it takes only two hours. It makes my life much easier."<sup>146</sup> Many residents also said that the improved roads had given them easier mobility, more frequent interaction with other places and, from these experiences, some entrepreneurial thinking.<sup>147</sup> A provincial grocery vendor said, "Previously I rarely travelled far from home. Since we have good roads, I have been to Phnom Penh and other provinces several times."<sup>148</sup> An old villager in Sra Em said, "When the roads were bad, I could not sell my rice for a good price because there were few rice traders coming here. Now there are many coming and they offer competitive prices."<sup>149</sup> Another city resident said, "Before, although it was a provincial town, it was very rural and quiet. Many of the residents were farmers. Now more and more have become market vendors, small traders, motor-taxi drivers, and transporters."<sup>150</sup>

The good roads, daily bus services, and improved telecommunication connectivity and broadcasting services have transformed the province from a once remote and sparsely

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<sup>144</sup>Informant 49.

<sup>145</sup>Informant 2.

<sup>146</sup>Informant 22.

<sup>147</sup>Informants 2, 6, 7–9, 15, 18, 22, 77.

<sup>148</sup>Informant 77.

<sup>149</sup>Informant 30.

<sup>150</sup>Informant 15.

populated border area into an attractive place for migrants from other parts of Cambodia who are looking for land and opportunities to conduct small trade.<sup>151</sup> Far from scaring people away and damaging the local economy, the border dispute and the episodic eruptions of fighting between Cambodian and Thai soldiers around Preah Vihear has spurred state developmental responses that in turn created conditions attractive to new settlers. As noted earlier, the province experienced remarkable population growth during the years of the border military stand-off.

Table 1. Population growth, Preah Vihear province, 1998–2012

<b>Years</b>	<b>Provincial Population</b>
1998	119,261
2008	170,852
2012	211,598

*Sources:* Kingdom of Cambodia 2008. *General population census of Cambodia 1998; General population census of Cambodia 2008*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Planning; Preah Vihear provincial Department of Planning 2012. *Tarang sojanakor tam srok-khan khaet Preah Vihear 2012* [Statistical Report by districts of Preah Vihear Province 2012].

New settlements, markets and towns have emerged and expanded along the newly asphalted roads.<sup>152</sup> The provincial capital and its markets have changed from being quiet and sleepy to bustling and dynamic. One motorcycle-taxi driver said, “Before, the city market was much smaller than now and opened only half day in the morning.”<sup>153</sup> A local NGO director said, “It was completely different [before the border conflict]. Most houses in the city were wooden. There was no electricity. At night it was dark.”<sup>154</sup> Now there are banks, microfinance institutes, and major companies from Phnom Penh opening their offices in the provincial capital. There are hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and private English-language schools. Long-time residents said that these elements of city life were

<sup>151</sup> Informants 11, 12, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 40, 42, 46, 47, 48, 64, 65, 66, 67.

<sup>152</sup> I also travelled on the new asphalted roads linking Preah Vihear province to other border provinces, where local residents told me that their provinces had seen major changes since the roads had been built.

<sup>153</sup> Informant 6.

<sup>154</sup> Informant 76.

recent, and that they have witnessed the rapid transformation of the city since the period of the border tensions.<sup>155</sup>

These spatial and socioeconomic transformations have influenced both older and newer residents to adopt benign views of the Thai–Cambodian border conflict. A public servant in the provincial capital made a sarcastic comment: “I want to thank Thailand for causing the conflict. Otherwise, my province would be left isolated like a frog in the well.”<sup>156</sup> This statement was also echoed by other public servants and local residents.<sup>157</sup> An official working in the municipality told me, “This big municipality building was built recently. Before that we worked in a small building and did not have appropriate workspace.”<sup>158</sup>

Many residents said they had not been very worried about the border tensions.<sup>159</sup> A provincial city market vendor said that during the border skirmishes, “Our market opened as normal and life in the city went on as normal.”<sup>160</sup> A school teacher said, “The soldiers are at the border, but serious fighting took place only a few times, but they were confined to only the temple region. Villages are far from the conflict zone.”<sup>161</sup>

Nowhere else in Preah Vihear province has seen the most visible changes as Sra Em, the town that acts as a gateway to the ancient temple. Its growth is a vivid example of how complex interplays of different forces during the Preah Vihear conflict have transformed a small sleepy village into a bustling border town. A fabric shop owner said, “When I arrived in 2008, it was a quiet village and did not yet have a market.”<sup>162</sup> Sra Em’s changing spatial and socioeconomic landscapes owe a great deal to the government’s road construction, large military presence in the area, new villages, and booming Siamese rosewood logging trade in nearby forests during the conflict. Cambodian tourists to Preah Vihear Temple have also pumped cash into Sra Em’s local economy. Sra Em is a convenient stopover for tourists on their way to and from the temple. Because the conflict with Thailand attracted national interest in Preah Vihear province, there was a five-fold increase in the number of Cambodian tourists to the temple between 2006 and 2012.

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<sup>155</sup>Informants 6, 7–9, 10, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 77.

<sup>156</sup>Informant 17.

<sup>157</sup>Informants 6, 18, 19, 20, 45, 77.

<sup>158</sup>Informant 21.

<sup>159</sup>Informants 3, 5, 7–9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 24, 25, 27, 39.

<sup>160</sup>Informant 11.

<sup>161</sup>Informant 20.

<sup>162</sup>Informant 27.

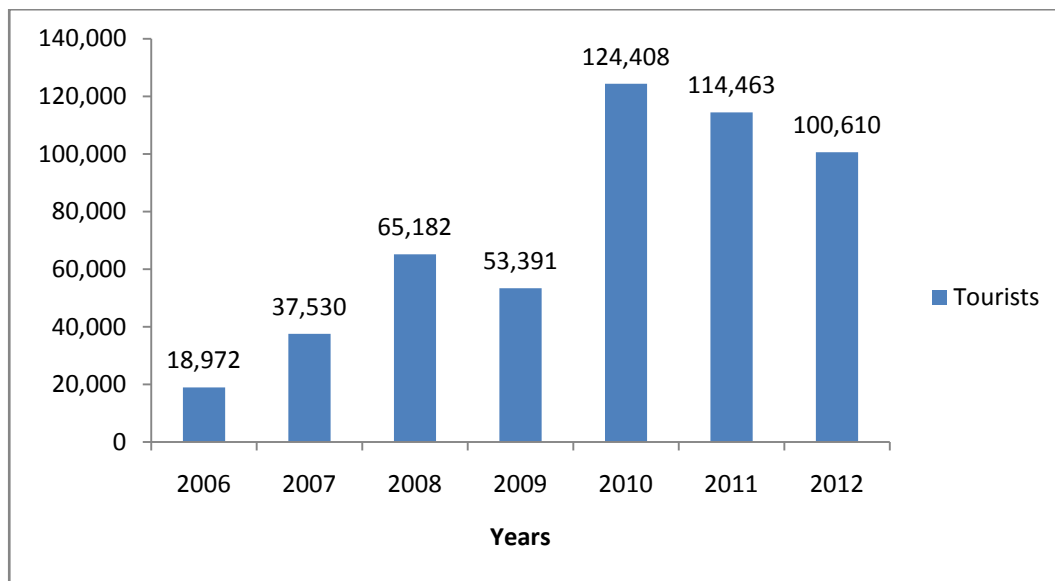


Chart 1. Cambodian tourists visiting Preah Vihear province, 2006–2011. *Source:* Adapted from Preah Vihear provincial Department of Tourism 2012. *Tarang sa thek tek phnev tesachor tusana khaet Preah Vihear 2006–2012* [Statistical Report of tourists to Preah Vihear province, 2006–2012].

When I went there on my first fieldwork trip in April 2012, Sra Em already had one market of about fifty stores, several grocery shops, five guesthouses, souvenir shops, salons, furniture shops, etc. When I visited it again in December 2013, the town was more populated and busier. There were a few more guesthouses, a high-class hotel, three petrol stations and more shops. The town’s market had doubled in size to about a hundred stalls and was busier. Some new settlers in Sra Em earn additional income from growing rice. A motor-taxi driver from Battambang province, said, “My family bought a plot of land to build our house. We also bought two hectares of paddy. The land yielded five tons this year. We kept one ton for consumption, and we sold the rest.”<sup>163</sup> Many new settlers said it was easier to earn a living in Sra Em than in their home provinces.<sup>164</sup> A motor-taxi driver who has lived there since 2008 said, “Some days I could earn more than ten dollars from tourists coming to the temple. Back in my homeland of Kampong Cham, I earned less than five dollars. It’s very hard to earn a living there.”<sup>165</sup>

Many new settlers in Sra Em have prospered. There were signs of affluence. They own motorbikes, mobile phones and cars. According to the Preah Vihear Department of

<sup>163</sup>Informant 40.

<sup>164</sup>Informants 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 40, 42.

<sup>165</sup>Informant 26.

Planning's statistical reports, the number of cars owned by people in the province increased from 268 in 2008 to 762 in 2012. And the number of motorbikes increased from 11,108 to 20,097 over the same period (Preah Vihear Provincial Department of Planning Lists 2008, 2012).<sup>166</sup> An old villager in Sra Em said enviously, "Many of these newcomers were poor when they arrived. They had nothing. Now they have houses, new motorbikes, cars, while we old villagers remain poor."<sup>167</sup> Such memories of the transformation of places and people in the province help explain why local views of the Thai-Cambodian border conflict differ from the state's narrative.



Figure 13. Sra Em market, Preah Vihear province. (Photo by the author.)

As previously mentioned, senior government officials articulated the state-facilitated establishment of many new villages near the temple as symbols of border defence. However, many villagers I interviewed in two of the new villages, Sen Chey and Tham Cheat Samdech Techo Hun Sen, had different impressions. To them, the new communities represented opportunity: owning a house and land for cultivation, and providing hope for

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<sup>166</sup>There are no statistics on how many migrants and new settlers already owned vehicles when they came to the province.

<sup>167</sup>Informant 41.

their families.<sup>168</sup> Residents in both villages were happy with Hun Sen's distribution of land for housing and agriculture.<sup>169</sup> A Sen Chey woman expressed her feelings:

I am full of joy to have received this house and the land from Samdech the prime minister. I would never be able to afford a proper house and land like this in my life if Samdech had not given them.<sup>170</sup>

A woman with four children whose husband was a barber in the village market of Tham Cheat Samdech Techo Hun Sen said,

Our previous house in Kampong Cham had limited land space. I am happy I have large acreage here. I can grow vegetables and fruit trees in the front yard and I still have the backyard to grow rice.<sup>171</sup>

As of December 2013, while many Sen Chey villagers had already received additional land from the government to grow rice, villagers of Tham Cheat Samdech Techo Hun Sen were still waiting for theirs. A male villager said, "We are happy to receive house land. We would be happier if we received land for growing rice. Then, there would be no more worries for us."<sup>172</sup> Some Sen Chey villagers, though they had received rice-growing land, had not yet started cultivating crops because they lacked the manpower and money needed to clear the forested land.<sup>173</sup>

When asked about the significant loss of forested areas in the province as a result of land clearing for new settlements and agriculture, the villagers showed little concern. This attitude contrasted with the environmental views of Cambodian NGOs and the national environmental discourse. A Sen Chey middle-aged male asked rhetorically, "If we don't clear the forest, how can we have land for housing and rice?"<sup>174</sup> An old woman in Tham Cheat Samdech Techo Hun Sen said, "It is good to clear forest around the village to reduce the number of wild animals coming out to prey on my chickens."<sup>175</sup> Their views show that they are more concerned about their everyday needs. They do not see forest clearing as damaging the health of the Cambodian nation as environmental activists would argue.

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<sup>168</sup>Informants 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid.

<sup>170</sup>Informant 61.

<sup>171</sup>Informant 66.

<sup>172</sup>Informant 64.

<sup>173</sup>Informants 60, 62, 63.

<sup>174</sup>Informant 63.

<sup>175</sup>Informant 67.





Figure 14. Sen Chey village, Preah Vihear province. (Photo by the author.)

But not everybody is happy. Many border police and soldiers deployed in the Preah Vihear temple region expressed resentment.<sup>176</sup> Although they said that their duties were to defend Cambodia's border against Thailand's aggression, my interviews showed that their discontent with the government's services outweighed their concerns about protecting the border. A border police officer at Preah Vihear Temple said, "My small unit was assigned to the temple in 2002. We felt we were abandoned in the forest. Life was difficult. We had to find food in the forest and survived on our own."<sup>177</sup> Another police officer in the focus group interview said, "It was only when the border conflict erupted that the government started to pay more attention to us in terms of raising salary and providing daily food rations."<sup>178</sup> According to many soldiers I talked to, the Cambodian government increased their salary from about 100,000 riels (roughly 25 US dollars) per month before the conflict

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<sup>176</sup>Informants 31, 32, 33–35, 36, 37, 50, 51–58, 59.

<sup>177</sup>Informants 33–35.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid.

to more than 200,000 riels during the border tensions.<sup>179</sup> A soldier from Brigade 911 said, “In addition to a salary increase and donations from generous people, the government also provided daily cash incentives. However, since the border has become peaceful, they cut the incentives.”<sup>180</sup> He also said the donations were not distributed equally:

They reached our hands only when generous people from Phnom Penh and from abroad hand-delivered [the donations] to us... From the piles of donations you saw on television, only about 20 per cent of it reached us. Most of them went to the prime minister’s Bodyguard Unit and commanders and their families.<sup>181</sup>

Many soldiers harboured resentment over unequal access to benefits. I sat down with a group of eight Intervention Division 3 soldiers during their lunchtime. One of them told me, “For ordinary soldiers like us, our daily routines are clearing grass and do this and do that according to orders. If we are lucky some tourists pity us and give us money.”<sup>182</sup> Another soldier in the group said, “For those well-connected to the commanders, only their names are deployed to Preah Vihear. They enjoy time making money from logging and other businesses and are promoted quickly. We sleep in the forest defending the temple but gain nothing.”<sup>183</sup> The oldest soldier in the group said, “Many commanders own hectares of land in the province, and they get a lot richer.”<sup>184</sup> My motor-taxi driver to the temple, who was a soldier himself, said, “Many of the drivers at the temple are soldiers and border police.”<sup>185</sup> When I asked him how he managed to slip away and drive a motor taxi, he replied, “I am close to my unit commander. He allows me to drive as long as I do not go far and I can return to the base quickly if he needs me.”<sup>186</sup>

The stories told by police and soldiers are underpinned by their interpretations of the meaning of nation, state and heritage in the context of their everyday encounters. The police and soldiers consider the Preah Vihear border conflict to have empowered them in terms of a government salary raise and donations from the public. However, since the border tensions eased, they note that the state’s attention, incentives and donations have decreased. On the other hand, the Preah Vihear conflict created opportunities for some

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<sup>179</sup>Informants 31, 32, 50, 51–58, 59.

<sup>180</sup>Informant 50.

<sup>181</sup>Ibid.

<sup>182</sup>Informants 51–58.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid.

<sup>185</sup>Informant 38.

<sup>186</sup>Ibid.

military commanders and well-connected soldiers to consolidate their economic interests in terms of land acquisition, and make money from logging and trading.

*A marginalised indigenous minority*

I now present yet another case of local views differing from the state's nation-building narrative. As argued by Walker (1999, 17), state regulation of borderlands results in the unequal distribution of economic and social benefits. The Cambodian government's nation-building projects in Preah Vihear province have affected the indigenous Kuy minority, whose livelihood traditionally depends on forest resources. During my fieldwork, I interviewed the Kuy living in Sra Em about the impact of the government's recent activities and the socioeconomic transformations in the province.<sup>187</sup>

The Kuy minority relies on swidden cultivation of upland rice, hunting wild animals, and collecting forest products, especially resin. Their modes of subsistence and traditional practices are different from those of the lowland ethnic Khmers. The Kuy in Sra Em were able to maintain their traditional lifestyle and practices for many hundreds of years largely due to the limits of the central state, the remoteness of these borderlands from lowland areas, and the area's reputation as dangerous and ridden with malaria and other diseases. In more recent times, civil war and insurgency forces protected them from frequent contact with lowland people and the state.

However, when the civil war ended in the 1990s and lowland migrants moved to the border in unprecedented numbers in search of land and trade opportunities, this sudden influx of newcomers affected the indigenous minorities. Large swathes of forests have disappeared; in their place now are semi-urban, new settlements and cash crop plantations. The Kuy at Sra Em find it increasingly difficult to maintain their traditional modes of subsistence and cultural practices in the face of this rapid encroachment by the state and lowlanders into their realms.<sup>188</sup> Worse still is that land at the border region has now become either privately or state owned: the state has categorised mountains, forests and land as national parks, economic concessions, social concessions, and special border economic zones, etc.

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<sup>187</sup>For studies of the impacts of socioeconomic changes on indigenous minorities in Cambodia's other provinces, see (van den Berg and Palith 2000; McAndrew 2001, 5–8).

<sup>188</sup>Informants 30, 41, 68, 70–73.

Considering these rapid changes, the Kuy at Sra Em have grievances but are uncertain about what course of action they should take.<sup>189</sup> Those affected by the integration of border regions into national policy do not have mechanisms to contest their resulting marginalisation (see Hughes 2011, 181–184). An elderly woman in one focus group said, “We have lost some of our cultivated land. Who can we ask for help?”<sup>190</sup> A middle-aged man said, “I am upset about the new villages. Large forests have gone because of them. I don’t know what to do. I used to collect lots of resin before.”<sup>191</sup> A young man said, “Before, when I walked in the forest, I saw a lot of animals. Now I rarely see them.”<sup>192</sup> When I asked whether they thought of the possibility of migrating to work in cities, another man in the group said, “We are proud of our way of life. We are not in the habit of working for other people for money. We cannot leave our place.”<sup>193</sup>

Some Kuy living in Sra Em are unhappy with the new settlers. They complained that newcomers have stolen their vegetables and fruits.<sup>194</sup> One elderly man said, “This had not happened before the arrivals of the newcomers.”<sup>195</sup> Another old villager complained of the crowdedness and perpetual noise since the new settlers arrived.<sup>196</sup> Some expressed regret that the old villagers did not have the trading skills of the new residents.<sup>197</sup>

Their modes of subsistence and traditional practices have been affected, but they cannot reposition themselves to reap the economic benefits from the transformations in the borderlands. However, they too have benefited from easier mobility through good roads. A female villager, aged 52, said:

Before, I went to Choam Khsant town [about 30 km from Sra Em] once a month. We had to go by foot. It took a day to get there and a day to get back. I rarely went to the provincial town because it was very far. I have been there several times since we have good roads.<sup>198</sup>

The Kuy also benefited from better access to information through broadcasting and telecommunication networks. Many in Sra Em said they had just started to own mobile phones.<sup>199</sup> A male villager told me, “Mobile phones make it easy for us to contact people in

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<sup>189</sup>Ibid.

<sup>190</sup>Informants 70–73.

<sup>191</sup>Ibid.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid.

<sup>193</sup>Ibid.

<sup>194</sup>Informants 30, 41.

<sup>195</sup>Informant 41.

<sup>196</sup>Informant 69.

<sup>197</sup>Informants 68, 70–73.

<sup>198</sup>Informant 69.

<sup>199</sup>Informants 30, 41, 68.

our village when we are away in the forest.”<sup>200</sup> They had access to public and private healthcare services. When I asked a woman, aged 27, “What do you do when your children are sick?” She replied promptly, “I take them to see a doctor.”<sup>201</sup> When asked why she did not use traditional medicines or rituals to cure the sick children, she said, “I have already seen a few in our village die from such treatments.”<sup>202</sup>

It is difficult to say what the future holds for the indigenous Kuy minority. One thing is for sure: their subsistence lifestyle and traditional practices has already been altered.

## 5. Conclusion

The Cambodian government has tried to position itself as the defender of the Preah Vihear Temple and of the nation’s territorial sovereignty. Through its propaganda, the Cambodian state has tried to create a homogenous view of its nation-building projects in Preah Vihear province as expressions of border defence and Khmer national pride.

However, while ordinary people identify themselves as part of the imagined community of Cambodia, their local contexts and everyday experiences give them vastly different notions of the nation. Older and newer urban dwellers, older villagers and new migrants, police officers, soldiers and indigenous Kuy highlanders have different stories, memories and interests which underpin their notion of nationhood. To different people in Preah Vihear province, the state’s nation-building projects cannot be expressed simplistically as ‘to defend or not defend the border’ or ‘hostility towards Thailand or friendship with Thailand’.

Preah Vihear Temple does not have a single meaning as a representation of the Cambodian nation or of Khmer pride. Instead, it has diverse local meanings. In the contexts of the stories told by the border police and soldiers, the temple symbolises unequal access to benefits and the state’s unequal distribution of resources. The stories told by the indigenous Kuy minority in Sra Em reveal that they view the state’s nation-building project as symbols of threats to their traditional modes of life and cultural practices. The stories told by the new settlers and economic migrants show the state’s nation-building activities as representing livelihood improvement opportunities. While both the Cambodian state

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<sup>200</sup>Informant 30.

<sup>201</sup>Informant 68.

<sup>202</sup>Ibid.

elites and the people of Preah Vihear province used the border dispute to narrate the nation, the latter understood and expressed the nation in more complex and nuanced ways depending on their everyday experiences and discursive contexts.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

Preah Vihear Temple became a flashpoint of conflict between Cambodia and Thailand at least twice: once in the 1950s and early 1960s, and most recently between 2008 and 2011. In the first round of the conflict, both countries disputed over the ownership of the border temple. The tension severely affected relations between Phnom Penh and Bangkok resulting in the suspension of diplomatic relations and the closure of the border between the two countries twice. Cambodia and Thailand settled the dispute at the ICJ, whose 1962 Judgment ruled in favour of Cambodia by awarding the country ownership of the temple and its vicinity. The Thai government under Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat initially rejected and protested against the World Court's ruling. Ultimately he announced that his government would honour the Court's decision, however. As a result, Thailand removed the flagpole and withdrew its forces and guards from the temple's compound. Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia led an entourage to Preah Vihear Temple in 1963 to hoist the Cambodian flag to declare his country's sovereignty over the temple area. The temple issue was put to rest for about half a century.

However, the Preah Vihear conflict was reignited in 2008 as Thailand's domestic political polarisation was intensifying and Cambodia's proposal for Preah Vihear Temple to be inscribed as a World Heritage site was pending approval from the UNESCO's World Heritage Committee. Thailand protested against Cambodia's proposal for the temple to be nominated as a World Heritage site under the latter's sole management, and asked for a joint nomination and management of the temple by arguing that some of the territories included in Cambodia's proposal lies within the 4.2 square kilometres overlapping area claimed by both countries. The Cambodian government of Prime Minister Hun Sen rejected Thailand's proposal and argument. By referring to the Annex 1 map, it argued that there was no disputed territory and that the so-called 4.2 square kilometres overlapping area as raised by Thailand was in fact within Cambodia's territorial sovereignty.

On 7 July 2008, the World Heritage Committee meeting in Quebec City listed Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage site. The Cambodian government organised national celebrations and declared the temple's listing as a proud victory for the Cambodian nation, while in Thailand anti-government political and ultranationalist groups protested against the listing and interpreted it as another of Thailand's territorial losses to its neighbour. On 15 July 2008, the Thai military started moving in troops to occupy areas near Preah Vihear Temple in the name of defending Thai territory. In response, the Cambodian government accused Thailand of invasion and illegal occupation of Cambodia's border territories, and dispatched troops to the contested border areas. Cambodia's response resulted in tense military confrontation and about a dozen rounds of armed clashes between both troops from July 2008 through June 2011. Nationalist sentiment in Cambodia was aroused and manipulated in conjunction with these military developments. Throughout the course of the conflict, nationalism featured prominently in the political life of Cambodians at both elite and popular levels and from the capital city to the borderlands periphery.

So far, there have been numerous English language studies on the Preah Vihear temple dispute. However, none of them adequately address or explain the conflict from the Cambodian side, especially the politics of nationalism in relation to the border temple conflict. Many of the existing studies adopted a predominantly top down approach. Moreover, they also tend to adopt only one approach (including historical, legal, or regional dimensions) to analysing the conflict. Although there are scholarly works on nationalism and politics in Thailand relating to the Preah Vihear conflict, their findings cannot be transplanted to explain the Cambodian side. The vast majority of these studies see the conflict as largely about the manipulation of nationalism by Thai right wing political elites to win legitimation in the face of the populist politics of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies.

In Cambodia, we cannot gain a full understanding and deep insights into the complexity and dynamism of the politics of nationalism associated with the Preah Vihear conflict by using only one lens or approach because Cambodian stakes in the dispute were diverse. Therefore, this thesis seeks to examine the complex meanings of the politics of the Preah Vihear conflict and uncover the nuanced uses of the politics of nationalism in Cambodia. For this reason, the thesis proposes four key explanatory



approaches to study the Preah Vihear conflict: the politics of postcolonial nation-building, political legitimation, urban politics of empowerment, and periphery politics of pragmatism.

To explore these four key dimensions, the study adopted a qualitative methodology. In addition to using primary and secondary data, I also made observations, recorded informal conversations, and conducted in-depth and focus groups interviews with a wide range of individuals and groups. The fieldwork was conducted in Phnom Penh and Preah Vihear province of Cambodia between March and October 2012 and again between December 2013 and January 2014.

I employed slightly different methods of data collection to illustrate each of the four approaches. For the chapter about the politics of postcolonial nation-building, I relied on books and journal articles. In addition, I collected archival materials including old newspaper articles, magazines, pamphlets, photos and state propaganda materials from the National Archive of Cambodia and the National Library of Cambodia. I also conducted in-depth interviews with three Cambodian scholars and historians to elucidate state-sponsored nationalist campaigns and uses of the media in Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s.

For the chapter on political legitimation, my analysis integrated data from a wide range of sources including books, journal articles, newspaper and magazine articles, reports from government and international institutions, photos, speeches, news and announcements on Cambodia's radio and television channels, online materials, and other ephemera. It also included data from interviews and informal conversations with Cambodian soldiers in the Preah Vihear temple region. For the chapter on urban politics of empowerment, apart from primary and secondary data, I relied on the numerous informal conversations and in-depth interviews I had with individuals from diverse backgrounds in Phnom Penh. I also relied on my own observations and personal experiences of living in Phnom Penh throughout the duration of the border conflict. What sets the chapter about the periphery politics of pragmatism apart from the other three case study chapters is my use of combined methods to collect the data in Preah Vihear province. They included observations, informal conversations, in-depth and focus groups interviews, drawing sketches of places, and taking photos. The

fieldwork in the province was conducted at different locations at Preah Vihear Temple, the provincial city, Sra Em border town, and two new villages.

The data collected from my fieldwork were then integrated under each of the four proposed explanatory approaches and they were analysed through systematic and interpretive methods based on concepts and theories from anthropology, political science, sociology, and history. The theme of the politics of nationalism unifies and runs through the proposed approaches, allowing us to understand not only the dynamism and nuances of the politics of the Preah Vihear conflict but also the politics of nationalism in contemporary Cambodia.

The thesis argues that Cambodians had strong stakes in the Preah Vihear dispute and the stakes were diverse. Cambodian investments in the temple as a symbolic nationalist rallying point were multi-dimensional, diffused and diverse, reflecting the interests of different stakeholders. Through its four explanatory approaches to the politics of the Preah Vihear conflict, the thesis finds that nationalism can be understood as a productive political resource. By means of this resource a nation was built, political legitimacy was claimed by leaders, power and recognition were earned by Phnom Penh city people, and livelihood benefits and state attention were gained by Preah Vihear borderland residents. In this thesis, nationalism is also conceived as an *alternative* political resource to which various stakeholders have made recourse to empower themselves politically, socially and economically when their access to other political resources was constrained. In the section that follows, I will unpack these four key explanatory approaches in turn.

For the first, I argue that Prince Norodom Sihanouk had strong stakes in the Preah Vihear conflict with Thailand because of its great relevance to his politics of postcolonial nation-building, which relied greatly on the manipulation of nationalism to rally popular support for his government and his political leadership. Like other post-independence leaders, Sihanouk's popularity lay in his ability to convince his countrymen that he was building the nation and achieving progress for the nation. In Phnom Penh, his government introduced many construction projects, which transformed the cityscape and made Phnom Penh at that time one of the most beautiful cities in Asia. In the countryside, his government sponsored the construction of roads, schools, Buddhist pagodas, and irrigation canals. Prince Sihanouk crisscrossed the

country to preside over the inaugurations of those achievements. On the international arena, the prince showed he had achieved many victories for Cambodia. His government portrayed Cambodia's victory over Thailand at the International Court of Justice in the Case of the Preah Vihear Temple conflict as a great victory bringing national pride. In this context, Preah Vihear temple emerged from its obscurity to symbolise the Cambodian nation. Sihanouk's government placed the ancient temple high on the national agenda. This included, among many other things, the creation of a province named after the temple and the printing of a new currency with the iconography of Preah Vihear Temple. Those state-sponsored nationalist campaigns and activities demonstrated clearly how Prince Sihanouk had stakes in the Preah Vihear Temple conflict and how the temple's symbolism was weaved into his politics of postcolonial nation-building.

To illustrate the second approach, the thesis examines Prime Minister Hun Sen's manipulation of the Preah Vihear dispute to bolster his political legitimacy. I argue that the prime minister had a strong stake in the temple conflict because it gave him the opportunity to counter domestic critics and to construct his political legitimacy as a nationalist and defender of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty. In keeping with this explanatory approach, the thesis finds that Hun Sen's identification of himself with the symbolism of Preah Vihear Temple was embedded within his broad multifaceted political legitimisation strategies. Political legitimisation has helped the leader overcome constraints to his rule, which has thus contributed to his political resilience. As shown in Chapter Four, Hun Sen has co-opted or identified himself with potent symbolism - both traditional and modern - of political legitimacy and power. However, he was still politically vulnerable on the nationalist front due to his government's apparent indifference to the defence of the nation's borders. His critics often accused him of not paying enough attention to defending Cambodia's border territories especially the country's eastern border with Vietnam. Therefore, his manipulation of nationalism during the Preah Vihear conflict enabled him to not only counter his domestic critics but also to bolster his political legitimacy as a nationalist and guardian of Cambodia's border territorial sovereignty and national cultural heritage. The incumbent's nationalist actions received wide support from segments of the Cambodian population as was manifested in his party's landslide victory in the July 2008 election. His

government's massive nationalist investment in the defence of the Preah Vihear border should thus be seen through the lens of his quest for political legitimation.

For the third explanatory approach, which examined Phnom Penh city residents' investment in the politics of nationalism during the Preah Vihear conflict, the thesis argues that many city dwellers also had strong stakes in the Preah Vihear conflict because of its great relevance to their politics of empowerment. Phnom Penh's rapid spatial, political and socioeconomic transformations over the last two decades have had a profound impact on urban politics, society and economy. The transformations have lifted many city people out of poverty, generated diverse jobs and businesses, and given them unprecedented experiences of modern urban life. However, they also created a wide range of new issues that Phnom Penh residents had not seen before. The Cambodian government has appeared to be ineffective in solving those issues. Moreover, the country's political system, institutions and culture have been viewed as unreliable. These contexts have left the urban population feeling frustrated and powerless. They have also led city people to think that the Cambodian nation's well-being was deteriorating. In response to these contexts of frustration, disaffection, powerlessness and humiliation, the city people have relied on several autonomous collective actions to rescue the nation, fix the country's problems, and materialise individual and collective desires for honour and well-being. Nationalism has served as an alternative political resource allowing urban people to communicate their shared views of grievances and national decline and inspiring them to take individual and collective actions independently of the Cambodian state to restore the well-being and dignity of the citizen and the nation. Therefore, Phnom Penh residents' nationalist investment in the Preah Vihear conflict should be understood as an autonomous politics of empowerment for individuals and citizen of the Cambodian nation.

To demonstrate the last explanatory approach, which explores Preah Vihear provincial residents' views of the Preah Vihear conflict, the thesis argues that many people in the border province had strong stakes in the dispute because its eruption and the Cambodian government's responses to it have created diverse economic and livelihood opportunities for them. During the years of the border military stand-off, the Cambodian government concentrated nation-building and state-making projects in Preah Vihear province, building roads, schools, Buddhist pagodas, hospitals, and many

other items of public infrastructure. These projects helped connect the border province with other regional centres. The scale and size of the government's activities were unprecedented in the history of its interaction with the province and transformed the formerly remote porous border region into a thriving place for trade, tourism, economic activities, agriculture and settlement.

In examining this approach, I found that there is a disjuncture between the Cambodian state elites' nationalist narrative and Preah Vihear residents' everyday views of the situation. Through the state-affiliated media, ruling elites propagated a nationalist discourse portraying their development activities in the border region as symbols of border defence and Khmer pride. However, the provincial residents' everyday discourses differed dramatically. They viewed the conflict and the government's responses to it pragmatically as a boon that gave them access to long-awaited development resources. For borderland residents, the politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict was closely intertwined with their local and everyday concerns, shedding light on the pragmatism that characterises nationalist politics of the periphery.

#### *Towards the study of nationalism as an alternative political resource*

Scholars have proposed a variety of concepts to define nationalism: for example, as an ideology (Kedourie 1960; Billig 1995; Sutherland 2005; Sutherland 2012), as a movement (Brand 1978; Jwaideh 2006), as an instrument of politics (Brass 1979), as a form of politics (Breuilly 1982), and as rhetoric (Levinger and Lytle 2001). In this thesis, I propose to study nationalism as an 'alternative political resource'. Within this conceptual framework, I situate nationalism between the constraints or limitations and the aspirations of various political and social actors or groups. I argue that elites and non-elites often find constraints to their political ambitions or needs, no matter how politically, economically, or socially advantaged they might be. As discussed in the introduction chapter, such actors employ a variety of political strategies to have access to or gain control of the resources they aspire to have. However, they might find themselves lacking resources for particular strategies. For example, a leader who aspires to achieve wide popular support through developing and modernising the country may lack financial, administrative or technical resources. Members of a

marginalised urban community who want to draw public and national attention to their grievances may lack organisational, institutional or media resources. In these contexts, nationalism emerges as an alternative political resource to which individuals or groups may make recourse when their ambitions to achieve their political objectives by other available political means are thwarted.

I believe that this study of nationalism as an alternative political resource is a useful conceptual framework for analysing the politics of nationalism in contemporary Cambodia, especially the politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict. In Cambodia today, nationalism has become a productive political resource that diverse individuals and groups frequently rely on to empower their voices and actions. Nationalism has been used discursively as a political resource, for example, to mobilise support, legitimate a regime, gain votes, amplify voices, seek higher wages, bargain for power with state authorities, protect land and forests for rural communities against powerful private companies and state authorities, and defend urban slum communities from being evicted, among others. Therefore, the frequent uses of such nationalist slogans as ‘We are Khmer!’, ‘Khmer land is for Khmer people!’, ‘I defend Cambodia’s border!’, ‘I protect the flag!’, and ‘We are the children of Angkor!’ do not necessarily have a monolithic meaning. Instead, they have diverse meanings, which may include a claim for political power, attention, benefits, housing, land, wages, livelihoods, rights, equality, democracy, social justice, and many others. We need to examine the discursive contexts of the users: who are they? What constraints do they face? What do they want? And why do they use nationalism? Why don’t they try to achieve their objectives through other means? When we investigate their contexts thoroughly, then it becomes clear that such nationalist slogans or imagery are alternative political resources that social actors in diverse predicaments rely upon to achieve objectives that otherwise might be unattainable.

In the case of the Preah Vihear conflict, it is especially clear that nationalism is a productive and alternative political resource that various stakeholders, including state elites and the mass, relied upon to consolidate their needs. Prince Norodom Sihanouk manipulated nationalism in the temple conflict with Thailand for his politics of postcolonial nation-building. The dispute and the victory at the ICJ were promoted to the advantage of Sihanouk in various aspects of his politics of postcolonial nation-

building: politics of national unity, politics of pride, politics of despotic paternalism or father-figure politics, just to name some of them. Prime Minister Hun Sen also used the politics of nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict as a productive political resource to consolidate his political power. Unlike Sihanouk, however, his manipulation of nationalism was intended mainly for constructing his political legitimacy as a nationalist and defender of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty. His firm nationalist projections through rhetoric, activities and imagery allowed him to counter his domestic critics and to receive wide support from the Cambodian population.

Not only state elites, but a wide range of Cambodian grassroots actors also relied on nationalism as a political resource to empower themselves. During the Preah Vihear conflict, many Phnom Penh residents expressed strong nationalist views. Some went beyond expressing sentiments to autonomous actions in the form of spending their own resources, organising trips to Preah Vihear Temple and making donations to the border soldiers. A superficial analysis would suggest the city people's strong nationalism derived from their sense of belonging to the imagined community of Cambodia. However, on a closer look, their nationalist fervour and activities were an alternative political resource that urban people relied on to negotiate for more power and recognition from the state, to have a say on how Phnom Penh and Cambodia should be governed, and to envisage a Cambodian nation able to fulfil the needs and safeguard the dignity of its citizens. In Preah Vihear province, diverse individuals and groups also used nationalism as an alternative political resource. Unlike Phnom Penh residents, however, their nationalism in the Preah Vihear conflict was for their everyday local discursive and material needs. They wanted roads, schools, land, houses, higher salaries, gifts, and livelihood opportunities. Their nuanced narratives of the Cambodian nation were an alternative political resource for their periphery politics of pragmatism.

### *Contributions and implications*

This study makes four important contributions. First, it contributes to the scholarly literature on the Preah Vihear conflict. What sets this study apart from existing scholarship about the temple dispute is its focus on the Cambodian side and its scrutiny of the politics of nationalism around this dispute that breaks down Cambodian

perspectives on the Preah Vihear conflict into different stakes and stakeholders. It provides a multifaceted and nuanced account of the conflict from the vantage points of state elites and masses, of urban people and citizens in the periphery, and from past to present.

Second, the thesis speaks to the literature on politics and nationalism in contemporary Cambodia. There have been few English language studies on politics and nationalism in Cambodia. An extensive ground-breaking work was done by Penny Edwards in her book titled, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation: 1860–1945*, which investigated the contexts, processes, discourses, and actors during the French colonial period that gave rise to notions about the Cambodian nation that remain politically influential to this day (see Edwards 2007). Scholarly works on postcolonial Cambodia's politics and nationalism predominantly focus on elite nationalism, ideology or the relationship between Khmer nationalism and the rise of Pol Pot to power and his destructive regime (see, for examples, Barnett 1990; Kiernan 2001; Hinton 1998a). Little has been written about the politics of nationalism in contemporary Cambodia, especially on nationalism from below. Therefore, I hope this thesis will fill a gap in this respect. The study's investigation of the politics of nationalism in contemporary Cambodia discovers that disparate uses and meanings associated with the Cambodian nation and nationalism have emerged from different processes, discursive contexts, interests and stakeholders, across time and space, and across the political and social spectrum in contemporary Cambodia.

Third, the thesis speaks to the broader scholarship on nationalism studies. It suggests a conceptual framework for the study of nationalism as an alternative political resource. In this framework, nationalism is situated between the constraints and the political aspirations of individuals and groups. The powerful and the weak alike can rely on nationalism as a political resource to achieve their various objectives when their accesses to other available means are constrained or lacking. I suggest that it is beneficial to apply this concept to analyse the politics of nationalism in developing countries, for example, the politics of nationalism of the Thai Yellow-Shirts and the Democrat Party against Thaksin's political machine. Leaders of the Yellow-Shirts and the Democrat Party aspired to win power to rule Thailand. However, their objective was constrained by the fact that they could not achieve it through elections. Thus, they



resorted to using nationalism as an alternative political resource to fan Thai nationalist anger against Thaksin's government and its reincarnations. Their nationalist campaigns led to the downfall of all the governments loyal to Thaksin.

Last, the empirical findings of this thesis and its conceptual frameworks of analysis may make useful contributions to broader fields and subfields of studies. They include border studies, urban politics, everyday politics, heritage studies, Southeast Asian Studies, Political Science, and Anthropology.

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## Appendix A: List of Informants in Phnom Penh

*Note: This list does not include the three Cambodian scholars, Professors Khing Hoc Dy, Ang Chulean and Sorn Samnang though my interviews with them were conducted in Phnom Penh. The three scholars gave me consent to use their names in this study. Informants in Phnom Penh with whom I had informal conversations are also excluded from this list because there were too many. Therefore, only 24 informants with whom I conducted in-depth interviews are listed.*

No.	Occupation	Interview date
1	Private company staff	8 May 2012
2	University student	9 May 2012
3	Market vendor	9 May 2012
4	NGO staff	12 May 2012
5	Motor-taxi driver	15 May 2012
6	Taxi driver	18 May 2012
7	School teacher	24 May 2012
8	Builder	2 June 2012
9	Motor-taxi driver	6 June 2012
10	Garment factory worker	11 June 2012
11	University lecturer	22 Aug. 2012
12	Car mechanic	23 Aug. 2012
13	University student	26 Aug. 2012
14	University lecturer	28 Aug. 2012
15	Researcher	30 Aug. 2012
16	Transporter	2 Sept. 2012
17	NGO staff	4 Sept. 2012
18	Truck driver	10 Sept. 2012
19	Security guard	15 Sept. 2012
20	Market vendor	4 Oct. 2012
21	Motor bike repairman	9 Oct. 2012
22	Security guard	23 Oct. 2012
23	Street vendor	24 Oct. 2012
24	Mechanic in a garment factory	28 Oc. 2012

## Appendix B: List of Informants in Preah Vihear Province

No.	Occupation	Places of interviews	Interview date
1	Bus driver	Preah Vihear province	23 Apr. 2012
2	Trader	Preah Vihear province	23 Apr. 2012
3	Motor taxi driver	Tbeng Meanchey	23 Apr. 2012
4	Guest house receptionist	Tbeng Meanchey	23 Apr. 2012
5	Petrol station staff	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Apr. 2012
6	Motor taxi driver	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Apr. 2012
7–9	City residents	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Apr. 2012
10	High school student	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
11	Market vendor	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
12	Market vendor	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
13	Market vendor	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
14	Mobile phone shop owner	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
15	Cold drinks seller	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
16	Motor taxi driver	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
17	Public servant in Department of Tourism	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
18	Food shop owner	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
19	Public servant in Department of Culture	Tbeng Meanchey	27 Apr. 2012
20	High school teacher	Tbeng Meanchey	27 Apr. 2012
21	Deputy head of provincial admin office	Tbeng Meanchey	27 Apr. 2012
22	Taxi driver	Sra Em	28 Apr. 2012
23	Tailor	Sra Em	28 Apr. 2012
24	Market vendor	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
25	Market vendor	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
26	Motor taxi driver	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
27	Shop owner	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
28	Waitress	Sra Em	30 Apr. 2012
29	Guest house staff	Sra Em	30 Apr. 2012
30	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	30 Apr. 2012
31	Soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	15 July 2012
32	Solider	Preah Vihear Temple	15 July 2012
33–35	Border patrol police	Preah Vihear Temple	15 July 2012
36	Border patrol police	Preah Vihear Temple	16 July 2012
37	Solider	Preah Vihear Temple	16 July 2012
38	Motor taxi driver/soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	16 July 2012
39	Bus ticket seller	Sra Em	17 July 2012
40	Motor taxi driver/soldier	Sra Em	17 July 2012
41	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	18 July 2012
42	Hair dresser	Sra Em	18 July 2012
43	Deput director of tourism department	Tbeng Meanchey	19 July 2012

## Appendix B. Continued

44	Deputy director of information department	Tbeng Meanchey	20 July 2012
45	Public servant in Department of Labour	Tbeng Meanchey	20 July 2012
46	Barber	Tbeng Meanchey	21 July 2012
47	Tailor	Tbeng Meanchey	21 July 2012
48	Motor taxi driver	Sra Em	19 Dec. 2013
49	Rice trader	Sra Em	19 Dec. 2013
50	Solider	Preah Vihear Temple	20 Dec. 2013
51–58	Soldiers	Preah Vihear Temple	20 Dec. 2013
59	Soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	20 Dec. 2013
60	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
61	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
62	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
63	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
64	Villager	Tham Cheat Hun Sen village	22 Dec. 2013
65	Villager	Tham Cheat Hun Sen village	22 Dec. 2013
66	Villager	Tham Cheat Hun Sen village	22 Dec. 2013
67	Villager	Tham Cheat Hun Sen village	22 Dec. 2013
68	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	23 Dec. 2013
69	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	23 Dec. 2013
70–73	Farmers, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	23 Dec. 2013
74	Deputy director of planning department	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Dec. 2013
75	NGO project manager	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Dec. 2013
76	NGO director	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Dec. 2013
77	Grocery vender	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Dec. 2013