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Brad Adams: Hello.

George Engels: Hi Brad, it's George.

Brad Adams: Hi. How are you doing?

George Engels: Very well, thanks. Thank you for your time. Brad, before we start, can I ask you, is it alright if I record the conversation so I can after later take notes?

Brad Adams: Yeah, it's fine.

George Engels: Thank you. Let's just jump straight into it. Cambodia has been out of the, if you're somewhere like the [00:00:30] UK, Cambodia has been out of the headlines for years, but I think most people remember the Khmer Rouge, so why should the world care about what's happening in Cambodia at the moment?

Brad Adams: (laughing) You want quotable lines? It's a long story, but one thing I would say is that, just to respond to your first point, [00:01:00] many people think that Cambodia is synonymous with genocide and the Khmer Rouge. And they think if there isn't genocide anymore, things are okay. And [inaudible 00:01:17] understand is that Cambodia is still dealing with the legacy of the genocide that is four decades old. And as former Khmer Rouge members in [00:01:30] power, and always has. So there's never been a complete break with the Khmer Rouge. The current prime minister, interior minister, defence minister, head of the army ... I could go down the list. They're all former Khmer Rouge and we're now seeing them ... because of [00:02:00] the lack of international interest, are reverting to the kind of politics they were taught when they were young men, which is that one party should have all power.

George Engels: And, I mean -

Brad Adams: So to answer your question more directly, why should the world care about Cambodia: because of the Khmer Rouge, because of [00:02:30] Western compliances in getting the Khmer Rouge to power, [inaudible 00:02:36] when they were in power. The international community has been extremely generous and invested more than 10 billion, there are estimates up to \$20 billion dollars, in Cambodia since the Paris Peace Agreements were signed 25 years ago. And they're about to [00:03:00] see that entire investment in taxpayer money flushed down the toilet ... by the illusion to a one party state, where the opposition stands, where opposition politicians are put in prison, where NGOs are [inaudible 00:03:25] where media is closed down [00:03:30] or censored. And we now have statements about the possible censorship of the internet.

And we should also care because this kind of behaviour can't be a contagion. So countries in the region are looking at each other and seeing how much they can get away with.

George Engels: [00:04:00] Sort of a domino effect of authoritarianism.

Brad Adams: I would never use that term because it was misused in the '60s and '70s, but I would say they are all very carefully assessing what donors, what other governments, what the UN, what foreign investors ... they're assessing how they'll all responding to these kind of [inaudible 00:04:30]. So we have [00:04:30] crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing in Burma. We have military junta in Thailand. We have [inaudible 00:04:40] one party state in Vietnam. What's the cost this kind of repressive behaviour gonna be? And if there's no cost, then it will certainly continue.

George Engels: [00:05:00] What I kind of think about when I think about these developments that slide into authoritarianism in a sense is also trying to put it into context in domestic politics and how much of it, in fact, can the government do. So there's a different between what the government says it's going [00:05:30] to do and what it can actually achieve. In that sense, how concerned should Cambodians be when it comes to their government saying, "we're going to clamp down on these internal enemies and opposition and illegal armed factions" and that sort of ... Is it sort of posturing in a sense? Or do they actually have to means to [00:06:00] be able to conduct, if you want, nationwide surveillance and that sort of thing?

Brad Adams: Well, if you're talking about Cambodia specifically -

George Engels: Yes, sorry.

Brad Adams: We have to remember that the state is both extremely brutal, extremely heavy handed and extremely incompetent all at once. [00:06:30] Basically, the game plan for [inaudible 00:06:32] and this was actually stated in our press release from yesterday, about the new law that was passed and constitution ... The purpose is to scare the public. And it's not [inaudible 00:06:48] it's a lot of people who are still traumatised by the dictatorship and war. And it's not so easy to get younger people in the country.

George Engels: [00:07:00] I'm sorry could you repeat that? I just missed that.

Brad Adams: Yeah. It's simultaneously not hard to do with older people who are traumatised by war and dictatorship, but not that easy with younger people who are much more plugged in to the rest of the world. So the competence of the state, of the government, [00:07:30] they can't really collectively enforce anything systematically. The CPP is an incompetent administration. But they can scare a lot of people. Like picking up people like [inaudible 00:07:48] woman who had just come back from Thailand for trying to shoot a picture of [inaudible 00:07:56] on Facebook, or by arresting people occasionally [00:08:00] for their Facebook posting. Those things [inaudible 00:08:02] but they don't have a regulatory capacity because they're a police state. ... a police state not to be a competent state.

George Engels: But does that incompetence, would you say that incompetence leads to an even harsher or more brutal clamp down for those it does decide to go after?

Brad Adams: Sometimes it does, yeah, because they don't [00:08:30] have any other systematical way of dealing with problems. So sometimes ... This is not a Cambodian, but the Burmese officials explanation for the killing of the ten people in custody that led to the two [inaudible 00:08:54] being arrested is that after they captured them they didn't know what to do with them, so they killed them. [00:09:00] I think this is ... also applies in Cambodia. Sometime they just don't know how, for instance, to bring a proper criminal case against someone for an actually recognised crime, because there's some conflict. They don't know how to do fact finding or gather evidence. But then I don't want to overstate that because that's kind of, not the real problem. The real problem is that they're [00:09:30] trying to arrest and intimidate people for things that are perfectly lawful.

George Engels: So concerning the newly revealed five year plan, what are the things about it that concern you the most?

Brad Adams: I mean the plan is to intensify the current efforts [00:10:00] to create a one party state with a [inaudible 00:10:05]

George Engels: To what? Sorry.

Brad Adams: That they get something back in [inaudible 00:10:12] into the National Assembly because they want to pretend that there is pluralism when the goal is simply to have a one part state where nobody can challenge the [00:10:30] CPP electorally or in the public square.

Let's be clear, [Hun Sen 00:10:45] never ever accepted the idea of other parties being legitimate. He made that clear in public comments throughout the last 25 years. They had to do it, they are compelled [00:11:00] to do it by circumstances, but they never ever accepted the these other parties are legitimate.

George Engels: And this is why ... in a sense why, this idea that we would never ever accept the other party's legitimacy, is this because he believes in the idea of one part rule as dogma or because ... [00:11:30] what? Why?

Brad Adams: He was a young man who was in the Khmer Rouge, and then he was installed by the Vietnamese as foreign minister in 1979 at 27 years old. After a couple years getting political education in Vietnam, and then he spent 10 years directly under [00:12:00] Vietnamese tutelage, because the Vietnamese were running the country during that time as an occupying force. The Vietnamese believed very strongly in the one party system. So I don't think it's such a conspiracy theory, that's just what he was exposed to. That was just his political indoctrination and that's true of the CPP as a whole. [00:12:30] They were created by the

Vietnamese. And so, it's not surprising, given that Vietnam is still a one party state, now they're friends with China ... China is a one party state ... think there's nothing wrong with a one party state.

George Engels: So actually, I'm quite interesting in that last thing you just said because I was speaking with someone else who was making ... When I asked them [00:13:00] the question of why ... how does this impact the wider region ... he pointedly spoke about the role of China ... and it's spread and influence throughout Southeast Asia. And I was wondering if you could say a bit more about how you see China coming into ... what's going on in Cambodia at the moment.

Brad Adams: China's foreign policy, since the founding of the [00:13:30] PNC, has been non interference in the internal affairs of other countries. And that is because they don't want anyone in their internal affairs. When they complain about groups like ours talking about human rights, they say it's none of our business. But now China has changed its foreign policy and they're actively interfering in the foreign affairs of other countries and because [00:14:00] they want to have control of as much of the nation as possible, and they want to play what they believe [inaudible 00:14:09] their historic role. They feel like they have been marginalised, treated badly, for centuries. That may be true, actually, but the consequences of them knowingly ... in a very negative way, in [00:14:30] Cambodia and other countries in the region, [inaudible 00:14:38] financial are just.

And the way they're doing that is largely through loans. Unlike Western governments who provide assistance ... and we can critique that, but it's assistance that's [inaudible 00:14:53]. China largely, is doing this through loans, and basically, getting the [00:15:00] leadership in countries addicted to their loans, which these countries are going to have to pay back on not very favourable terms. China doesn't give good loan terms. And a country like Cambodia who ... there are very many possibilities for draught ... They're not transparent. So if China says [00:15:30] they're giving a dollar, you can be sure some part of that dollar is going into the pockets of Cambodian leadership before it goes to a different project it's prescribed.

George Engels: So in a sense, these economic loans ... it's a bit obvious, but they are a form of hard power. In a sense, there's the Chinese buying off the Cambodian or [00:16:00] the acquiescence of the Cambodian regime ... Cambodia government ...

Brad Adams: Yeah, that's right. And you can see it in the famous decision by Hun Sen to block [ASEAN's communique 00:16:14] when Cambodia was the chair. But, the only time ASEAN has not had a final communique from the ASEAN Summit because China told him to block it because there was going to be thing about the South China Sea that China didn't like.

George Engels: And [00:16:30] so you said economic loans is one way China is interfering in domestic affairs in Cambodia. Are there any other ways?

Brad Adams: Sure, they put out a statement supporting the decision to arrest [inaudible 00:16:51]. Obviously on trumped up charges but they ... I'm actually quite shocking to me because [00:17:00] usually they're more adept. They don't show their cards quite so clearly. They came out to that statement in favour of the one party state. But then, they do what I consider to be stupid and humorous [inaudible 00:17:20] by the time they're going to draw the election system for Cambodia after [inaudible 00:17:26] election systems. Which is just something [00:17:30] to laugh about because there are no elections in China. The idea they're going to support a general election process is farcical.

George Engels: So I guess we're getting to this already, but why has the country's ruling party ... why has Cambodia's ruling party have been able to get away with more sudden erosion of democratic mores over the past few years?

Brad Adams: [00:18:00] Well to me it's very simple. I've been working in Cambodia for 25 years, watching it. Hun Sen tests the reaction, domestically and internationally. And this, to me, was the big test. He's trying to see what the limits are, what can he get away with? He does have a very rash personality. He often gets angry and does things irrationally. But he also has a long history of walking those things back if there's a very [00:18:30] strong reaction. And right now, we're in the process of getting a strong reaction. Reaction has been very mild so far.

What I've been telling people who are ... we call them diplomatic [inaudible 00:18:45] ... if you want Cambodia to be stable and be safe, and even if you like Hun Sen or his [inaudible 00:18:56], is in control of the situation ... You better [00:19:00] be telling him that, "if you go through with this one party election and this farce in the summer, that Cambodia could lose everything from the West and be isolated."

Because the wheels of state in Western countries are moving slowly but surely on Cambodia and they're not, as we're discussing, they're not bump Cambodia up to the highest priority. So [00:19:30] they're not getting care on [inaudible 00:19:35] responses, but once it's ... the facts settle in, in places like Washington and Paris and London and Berlin, and even Tokyo, that there will no longer be even pretence of democracy in Cambodia, I think they will lose most, if not all, of their foreign assistance. They will be seeing [00:20:00] the shut out of World Bank loans. Then the IMF will be forced to [inaudible 00:20:08]. I think that foreign investment will decrease and Cambodia will see itself isolated in a way that it hasn't been before the Paris Agreements. And that would be a tragedy for average Cambodians.

The problem is that it will [00:20:30] be much harder to pressure change after it happens than it would be right now. But it will happen. There's not question in mind, this will happen. The world doesn't need Cambodia so there's no strategic importance in Cambodia anymore. And that's why the world is slow to respond but also why the will respond.

George Engels: [00:21:00] Sorry.

Brad Adams: Apologies, I have five more minutes.

George Engels: Okay, can I just ask you the last couple of questions?

Hello? Hello?

Brad Adams: Yes. Please, go ahead.

George Engels: Sorry I couldn't hear you. [00:21:30] Sorry, did you just say that you have to go soon?

Brad Adams: Yes.

George Engels: Okay. So are there any actors, institutions, or pressure groups left that are sufficiently powerful to challenge or try to change the course that the ruling party of Cambodia has set upon?

Brad Adams: Are there any plans?

George Engels: [00:22:00] No I mean ... is there any possibility for push back against what the government or ruling party is trying to do? Or is Cambodia consigned to, if you want, the whims of Hun Sen?

Brad Adams: Well right now it's the whims of Hun. The minute the rest of the world get actively engaged [inaudible 00:22:27] that [00:22:30] will happen in the next few months before the election ... the fake election that he planned. And I'm not gonna have an answer for that right now.

George Engels: So I mean, in the sense ... This is the last question. Where do you see Cambodia headed in the next few months or the next couple of year?

Brad Adams: [00:23:00] Continuously downward spiral. Unless the international community can give a united answer. A united response to this.

George Engels: Unless ... Who? Sorry?

Brad Adams: Unless the international community can give a united and strong response to this.

George Engels: Okay, well those are all of my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Brad Adams: [00:23:30] Two things. One, Japan is an important actor here. They have not [inaudible 00:23:36] their elections yet even though it's a joke and they know it's a joke. But they're worried about falling out of favour with Hun Sen and losing competition with China ... which is sad and pathetic for Japan as an established democracy.

And two, look out for February 26th. The [00:24:00] EU will announce what they call the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on Cambodia. We'll see if the EU is able to take a strong position, including on, maybe using the idea of some retaliatory sanctions.

George Engels: And that's on February 26th?

Brad Adams: February 26th, yes. That [00:24:30] will happen but I ... we'll see. It has to go through all the member states.

George Engels: Okay. Well thank you so much for your time and I hope we can keep in touch -

Brad Adams: Yeah.

George Engels: Okay great.

Brad Adams: Okay. Bye.

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