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George Engels: Hello?

James Gomez: [00:00:30] Hello?

George Engels: Hi, is this James Gomez?

James Gomez: Yeah, yeah, Hi, James.

George Engels: Hi, James it's George actually.

James Gomez: Oh George, okay, no worries. Yeah.

George Engels: James, before we start just a quick question. Are you happy with me recording this conversation, so I can take notes afterwards?

James Gomez: Yeah, yeah, no worries, no worries.

George Engels: Okay, thank you very much. Well first of all, thank you for your time. I understand you are quite in a bit of a rush. [00:01:00] Let's get straight down to it if you don't mind.

James Gomez: Yeah, sure.

George Engels: You are Director of Southeast Asia for Amnesty International, right?

James Gomez: Yeah, it's called Southeast Asia and the Pacific and it's all based in Bangkok.

George Engels: How long have you been doing your job?

James Gomez: Yeah, nearly a year.

George Engels: Cambodia has been out of the headlines for years if you're somewhere like the UK, [00:01:30] but everyone remembers the Khmer Rouge. In a sense, why should the world care about what's going on in Cambodia now?

James Gomez: I think as far as the British public is concerned and Southeast Asia in particular...a lot of attention even up to today, rightly has been on the crisis long standing in Myanmar where they were with Aung San Suu Kyi [inaudible 00:01:55] prisoners of conscience. Whichever way the crisis they had to with the Rohingya. [00:02:00] But as that crisis matured but I think the other areas of conflict and concern that have only seen that part, coming to the point, of Southeast Asia. One of them is Cambodia.

Now Cambodia has intermittently has come to the fore, [00:02:30] partly because of political proximity with China. Over the last so many years we've seen the political infrastructure and the regime more and more alarming metamorphised into something that's similar to China. Part of what has come-

George Engels: Sorry, what exactly do you mean by that, [00:03:00] and why is that a cause for concern?

James Gomez: It's evolving, it's evolving. It's a one party state, it has not been technologically savvy, it's been pretty cruel, it's been hard suppression, but what we see in the five year plan is an alarming, almost a grafting of the Chinese political model onto [00:03:30] Cambodia. Making Cambodia almost like a political vassal state of China. It's in this context that I think we should be concerned of the creeping authoritarianism, possibly cascading down from Cambodia to other parts of Southeast Asia.

George Engels: I see. At the same time Cambodia is [00:04:00] a relatively isolated and quite small country so how could it hope to influence...have that sort of influence on countries like Vietnam or Thailand, which are already have quite, if you want, authoritarian government or political systems?

James Gomez: The dictators and the authoritative regimes learn from each other, they get better, they get sharper and I think Cambodia, it is [00:04:30] one of those that is becoming a prime example. In the last, more recent times within the year we have seen the shutdown of media. We have seen the production of loss pertaining to NGOs in civil society that has led to the point down of, for example, monitoring NGOs.

George Engels: Yeah.

James Gomez: [00:05:00] Then the use of the law. The judiciary to first of all go after individual politicians, like in Sokha, and then finally, of course escalate closing down the political parties. The CNRP in particular.

George Engels: For this example, you just referenced the newly revealed five year plan, which according to...well [00:05:30] organisations like your own, pulls quite a fundamental threat if you want to democratic, or what's remaining of democratic, mores in Cambodia. In a sense how concerned should we be, in the sense that, a lot of places ... and I'm thinking of example somewhere like Venezuela, right? Where it's a country that publishes...the government can come through with certain [00:06:00] laws or decrees that sound quite authoritarian in nature but sometimes has a hard time implementing them because the infrastructure isn't there, or the popular support isn't there. In a sense my question is how practically concerned should we be by the things that the Cambodian government says that they want to do with this five year plan?

James Gomez: Yeah, yeah. That's why even before referencing the five year plan I referenced China. I mean the first question, the long time Cambodia observer, the first question that comes [00:06:30] to mind is who supplies the surveillance technology for Cambodia? That concerns [inaudible 00:06:35] speaks about. Also, the need to control information. Again, another feature is that emerging is the whole notion of fake news, right? Traditionally these authoritarian

themselves have the [inaudible 00:06:58] of fake news. [00:07:00] I mean, in the more political transmission of propaganda. But now all those alternative information that has come to the fore and has been a bit of a life line to civil society and opposition parties through the life of the internet in the last 20 years, it's now being countered and rebutted through labelling such as fake news. So, I think that Cambodia's [00:07:30] situation has to be again referenced also to other developments in the region, Singapore, for example, is also looking at legislation, alright it's called a collect committee, to look at fake news. There's fake news ... we spent much in [inaudible 00:07:48] in Malaysia as things crunch up towards the elections in the next few months.

This time around, Cambodia has to [00:08:00] been seen collectively with Thailand and Malaysia because they are in the election cycle.

George Engels: Right, so you-

James Gomez: In the election cycle they are both [inaudible 00:08:12] and are quite important for us observers to always highlight what is being clamped out of the media, to clamp down of civil society, especially those civil society groups that do the election monitoring. And the third one, of course, is the direct attack on [00:08:30] the contenders, the opposition party, the politicians and in Malaysia they classic example is by trial, putting Anwar Ibrahim in jail.

George Engels: So, if I understand correctly, what you are saying is that basically what the Cambodian government is doing at the moment is part of a larger regional pattern of basically trying to manipulate, if you like, elections or pressure the population [00:09:00] into pre-established electoral result through different means?

James Gomez: Yeah. I think it's ... the pressure on population is one but I think what they are doing is ... so they need the population, they can't isolate them, so what they are doing is actually they are mafiaing the contender, and the infrastructure, such as the free press and election monitoring groups that work kind of strengthen the contenders. [00:09:30] But what is different, compared to the other couple that I mentioned, the proximity of Cambodia to China. The only last reason why Hun Sen is doing all the things he's doing is simply because he's being propped up by China, through investment and infrastructure development, real estate development, in China, or even the financial sector, the [00:10:00] banking in Cambodia. Then all this business, lots of [inaudible 00:10:08], they've got technology, you know? China is one of the biggest countries in the world and we are seeing, instead of the traditional rushed [inaudible 00:10:21] approach, which Hun Sen is known for, and we have seen in recent months that behaviour, [00:10:30] I think he is trying to bring a level of sophistication, using China as a model and possibly aspiring to finish off in the same league as Singapore.

George Engels: So, if we can bring this question back to first principles, because I don't think we've answered this well enough yet, why should the world care, or why should

a western observer care about something that's happening [00:11:00] in Cambodia in the sense of ... in terms of what you're saying erosion of democratic principles there, in terms of first principles?

James Gomez: I think the erosion of the democratic principles has always been there but in terms of the unique selling point of why they should be watching Cambodia is the proximity of China. Because we have to connect Cambodia ... [00:11:30] confidently bring down this part and is confident in being more tech savvy simply because of the Chinese influence. And what the observers need to see if the political encroachment in real terms in Southeast Asia. [crosstalk 00:11:52]

George Engels: The political encroachment of China in Southeast Asia you mean?

James Gomez: Yes, yes, yes, and I [00:12:00] think Cambodia stands closest to gain the deep political battle state of China. If you look at its behaviour during ASEAN meetings, it is the one that vetoes things, movements related to South China Sea and then China then endorses and praises Cambodia for its wise decision and action.

George Engels: So, if I understand correctly, what you are saying is that this matters because essentially [00:12:30] China is flipping, if you want, states that once purported to be democratic into a different thing, and so creating this network of more authoritarian regimes, or something like that?

James Gomez: Yes, something like that and I think its one of the first and clear encroachments into Southeast Asia, and I expect more to follow. This is not unusual, historical, several centuries ago, smaller countries in that part of the world were battle states of China. I see this [00:13:00] being a new era of Chinese political imperialism and Cambodia clearly manifests a dangerous example. And that's why we should be concerned.

George Engels: Okay. How much longer do you have? Sorry, because I just want to know [00:13:30] how many questions I can slip in.

James Gomez: Maybe, no I have to go to the gate so maybe another five minutes or so.

George Engels: Okay, great. You said that ... you mentioned fake news and obviously that's something that's been very big in the news lately, so Hun Sen has made it very clear that he listens to Donald Trump and his attacks on the media. What's going on there and what can the US do to counter the recent trend, the recent events [00:14:00] in Cambodia?

James Gomez: Well I'm surprised the Americans didn't say much when NDI was literally pushed off the map.

George Engels: When who, sorry?

James Gomez: NDI, the National Democratic Institute.

George Engels: Oh right, yeah.

James Gomez: That is an NGO from the US. So they were pushed out and I'm surprised ... the American political or [00:14:30] civil society landscape did not react. But I think what is important is the US should be interested because again of China, if the US is still interested in the region and wants to have a better geopolitical counterbalance to China, I think they need to start to think about how Cambodia is panning out. Because if they let [00:15:00] one fall then it's going to be more or less a domino effect just like we feared before [inaudible 00:15:08] with Vietnam. This is why I think, not just Americans, but everybody else should also be equally concerned.

George Engels: I guess the last question would be, Cambodia's ruling party is justifying this increased control, and by this I mean the plan, [00:15:30] on the basis that opposition and, I quote, "illegal armed factions", end quote, risk destroying the achievements and prosperity of the society and the nation. Is this window dressing or do they have a point?

James Gomez: This is quite common, you will find the emergents, who are armed groups, I think the [inaudible 00:15:53] doesn't have enough evidence to call them terrorists, but I think it'll escalate the terms very soon. [00:16:00] Increasingly, with the war on terror since September 11, I think many of these authoritarian states have also begun to use terms like this. Armed groups, terrorism, threat to the state, from China calling the Uighurs terrorists to Myanmar calling the Rohingya [inaudible 00:16:27] terrorists. I think Hun Sen [00:16:30] is also using the similar language, so we see a pattern and I think we need to understand ... you need to know how big they are, who they are, what is their arms and also to unpack what is it actually they stand for? And then we can understand the nub of the problem. Whenever governments use terms like terrorists and armed groups, while [00:17:00] we condemn those actions, specifically those that harm members of the society, but still we need to have a critical analysis to understand who they are. Otherwise we will take the state propaganda at face value.

George Engels: Okay, so one final one, in ... just as quickly as you can. In your experience, how does what's happening now compare to what [00:17:30] has happened since Cambodia's transition back to democracy in '91? How does the situation compare now versus the last 25 years?

James Gomez: I think previously it was patchy-

George Engels: It was what, sorry?

James Gomez: Patchy, it was not fully organised. You know Hun Sen was in town when he rolled in with the tanks and his elite soldiers were next to him, surrounding him,

and you moved [00:18:00] through the country and [inaudible 00:18:02] to Phnom Penh will see this. The groups had space. Cambodia wasn't very developed, wasn't very well connected, people were in the communes, the provinces and so on and so forth. So they did have community radios, independent media used to flourish and all of that. But as the society develops [00:18:30] and the infrastructure develops you find that Hun Sen is using the same infrastructure to kind of more ... to count the opposition more in an organised manner. And the fact that he's now looking at technology as an option of surveillance and also as a pathway to combat and restrict fake news it's become more organised. So we've seen [00:19:00] the growth in the level of sophistication, almost all encompassing, which then makes the control complete.

George Engels: So it becomes harder to resist?

James Gomez: Yeah, I think people who ... of course there's always resistance, but it's a hard challenge if you don't have allies. And this is why I think not [inaudible 00:19:27] the UN but [00:19:30] including different countries who are relevant, or the EU, the UK should be concerned.

George Engels: Okay, well thank you so much for your time. I hope you have a great flight and I hope we can remain in touch.

James Gomez: Yeah, so you've got my email and ... I'm based mostly in Bangkok, I come to the UK sometimes for meetings but we can talk about Cambodia or Southeast Asia in general.

George Engels: [00:20:00] Great, well next to we can do the interview in Spanish as well seeing as I'm from Argentina and maybe we'll have a bit more time next time.

James Gomez: Sure, sure, no problem. I'm happy ... when you sort it out, you have a moment just send a link through and I can share as well.

George Engels: Absolutely, will do.

James Gomez: Alright.

George Engels: Okay, thank you.

James Gomez: Take care.

George Engels: Bye, bye.

James Gomez: Bye. Bye.

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