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Seb Strangio: Hi.

George Engels: Hi, Sebastian. Sorry about that.

Seb Strangio: Yeah, no problem.

George Engels: Just so I have it on record again, could you please confirm that you're okay with me recording the conversation?

Seb Strangio: That's fine, yeah.

George Engels: Okay, thank you. Just to begin and I don't mean to sound callous with this question, but how is ... What is the international [00:00:30] relevance, or the regional relevance, of what's happening in Cambodia at the moment? How is what's happening there at the moment relevant to the world at large, if you want?

Seb Strangio: Well, I mean, it depends. It depends how you define importance. Right? There's a number of ways you can look at it. You know, first thing I think it's important to realise that for [00:01:00] the last three or five years Cambodia has occupied a pretty unique position in the minds of many Western observers. This is a country we swooped in, in the year 1990 right as the Berlin wall fell, Soviet Union collapsed, to rescue from a history of bloody revolution conflicts. Cambodia became a project of the international community. There was a peace treaty [00:01:30] broken by the super powers, that was signed in 1991. It was essentially the US peace commission, which came in and brought peace to Cambodia. That was its aim, though it didn't succeed in getting immediately in that aim, and to bring the gift of democracy to Cambodia.

So for a lot of people, the recent sort of authoritarian freeze that settled over Cambodia is seen in [00:02:00] the light of this project of bringing democracy to the country. It's important for a lot of people because it represents direct repudiation of the idea that we Westerners and our governments kind of came in and rescued Cambodia from a very dark history.

On one hand that's sort of why this is getting a lot of attention, I think. [00:02:30] But yeah whether it's important depends on market zone. How do you define important? I'm saying that what's happening in Cambodia is not on the level of what is happening in Syria. We're not talking about mass bloodshed and ... To keep things in perspective a little bit, what we're seeing in Cambodia is, Cambodia is set to return to the authoritarian need that the country [00:03:00] had enjoyed for most of history, or enjoyed is probably not the right word, but the authoritarian theme that existed during most periods of Cambodian history. And really it's referring also to a regional need. Cambodia today doesn't look ... It's not much worse than most of the other countries in the

region in terms of democracy. The only country in southeast Asia that can claim to be a functional democracy right now is probably Indonesia.

[00:03:30] It's important ... Look, it's up to your own definition really. I find Cambodia a country that I care a lot about, so I always find events there important. But in the international news cycle, these may be lost. It often is.

George Engels: No, I mean but that's why I'm asking. Because [00:04:00] it's not a question that I'm particularly fond of, but it's one that I have to be able to convey more to an international audience that, a lot of the time, might not even particularly be able to place Cambodia on the map unfortunately.

Seb Strangio: Right, right.

George Engels: But what you say is very interesting and very unfortunate as well from the sounds of it. [00:04:30] And you wrote the definitive book on Hun Sen. What aspects of the newly released five-year plan should concern, are of most concern for you?

Seb Strangio: Well this five-year plan represents the government attempt to cement a form of de facto, one party rule in Cambodia.

George Engels: A form of ... It's a way of commencing what? Sorry.

Seb Strangio: A form of [00:05:00] de facto, one party rule. It's an indication that the current crack-down, which is saying the main opposition leader jailed on treason charges and his party resolved among many other things, represents the new, permanent state of Cambodian politics. This is here to stay and I think they seem to be very determined to ensure that [00:05:30] they leave no space for the emergence of a possible opposition force. I can go into all of the backstory about why the CCP viewed the opposition this way and the alleged role that laid back foreign governments like the United States. It's quite a lot of back story.

Going right back to the 1980s during the end of the Cold War. It's often overseen in a lot of commentary [00:06:00] but the bottom line is, the CPP has never accepted the legitimacy of the opposition. In a similar way, the opposition never accepted the legitimacy of the CPP. They don't have any power but they're not the main culprits in this particular instance. The way they perceive their opponents is very similar. [00:06:30] So the CPP has never acknowledged their legitimacy and now finally have the ability to move against them in a decisive way that wasn't possible ten years ago. And the reason they have that stability now is they have the backing from China. And they can take more decisive steps to shape the domestic political landscape to [00:07:00] their liking.

George Engels: So because they have China's backing basically they can afford, if you want, to kind of turn back on some of the more democratic principles that were heralded or put forward by the Western backers that they have since the 90s?

Seb Strangio: Yeah that's right. Cambodia's never really been a functional democracy. Ever since 1991, the Paris Peace Agreements, the country's had a democratic [00:07:30] political system. But the secrecy is making him incredibly successful in strengthening his hold on that system while also sort of playing along with the language. Playing along with the game of democracy and using the right slogan to back his governance and democratic reform in response to criticisms of Western governor countries.

For two decades, the government [00:08:00] relied very heavily on this money from the West. They never accepted the legitimacy of the system. Basically they've made concessions because it's been politically necessary. So what we tended to see in Cambodia during this time was a fluctuating political climate. You'd have periods of crack-downs in which the CPP would kind of move against its province. And then you would have [00:08:30] periods of relaxation when people would be let out of prison and the climate would appear to warm up and people could speak their minds freely.

This is basically an outgrowth of the fact that the government had [inaudible 00:08:48] from these immediate, the support of Western [inaudible 00:08:50] countries. Now, everything has changed on the scene. It's really dissolved into the Cambodian economy, building bridge ... tourist [00:09:00] development that without ...

George Engels: Sorry Sebastian I can't really hear you. Could you repeat what you just said please?

Seb Strangio: Up until recently, the Cambodian government needed to constantly renew the support of Western governor countries like the United States or the European Union. And they would have [00:09:30] to maintain the pretence that there's democratic reform. But now that China's on the scene, it no longer feels the need to do that. China's poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the Cambodian economy building bridges, roads, tourist developments, and they make ... depends on how Hun Sen runs the country.

Language that the Chinese and Cambodian governments like to use. They respect Cambodian sovereignty and [00:10:00] refrain from foreign interference in Cambodia's affairs, unlike the United States, which is constantly interfering by demanding prudence to the state of democratic systems. It's enabled Hun Sen to do what he's always wanted to do. China hasn't created authoritarianism in Cambodia because it's always been there. But what it has done is enabled Hun Sen to sort of cast off the final pretences [00:10:30] of democratic rule and to rule in a more openly authoritarian way with less window dressing.

This five-year plan represents the entrenchment of that, of the current status quo. They're changing the constitution, they're amending the criminal code, and they're making it clear that for the next five years after this election, which the CPP will almost certainly win, they are [inaudible 00:11:00] [00:11:00] about preventing the emergence of any potential source of opposition.

George Engels: You were talking a bit about the role of foreign aid and foreign investment and Western foreign aid and Western foreign investment in Cambodia since the 90s and since the Paris Accord. In a sense, given you were saying that in a sense Hun Sen has been paying lip service to democratic [00:11:30] reforms all the time. Should the West be taking or be assuming a certain amount of responsibility for what's going on now in Cambodia?

Seb Strangio: Well it depends. If you wanna accuse that there is something they could have done that could have prevented this from happening, then one can assign them a certain amount of responsibility. But I would ask the question, at what point could they have really done here? [00:12:00] The West has been complicit in a sense because they always sort of ... They took the excuses that Hun Sen gave to them about the last democratic reform, and they accepted those excuses. And I think a lot of them knew that the chance of democratic opening in Cambodia under Hun Sen was very sly.

But the problem is the Paris Agreements trapped Western countries in a sort of [00:12:30] bind. Because on the one hand, they have to maintain the pretence that democratic reform was possible and that the government was committed to that. There was nothing much they could really do to advance that. And that they couldn't admit that democratic reform was impossible and you have to engage Cambodia on a more pragmatic basis. Up [00:13:00] until recently, Hun Sen gave them elections, which reached the minimal level of being free and fair. He gave them elections that were good enough that they could tick the boxes on their forms and sign off on elections and maintain that Cambodia was still moving in the direction of foreign democracy.

George Engels: Yeah.

Seb Strangio: [00:13:30] Basically by abolishing the opposition and arresting the opposition leader on treason charges, Hun Sen has laid his fiction there. Because all of a sudden, Western countries find themselves scrambling for a way to respond to this. But the reality is the political system is authoritarian in practise since 1991. It hasn't really changed. But now there's no longer the window dressing the governor needs to [00:14:00] be able to sign off on the process and at least tell themselves and their constituents that Cambodia is moving in the right direction. Now it's indisputable that it's not and it's difficult. They don't know how to respond.

George Engels: A couple of things though. From the sounds of it you say that the West was trapped by the Paris Treaties but also, kind of almost, it seems really unwilling to, for one reason or another, [00:14:30] to peer into what actually was

happening. Is that out of laziness? Is that because Cambodia did not occupy a geopolitical space that was important enough to fight over? What are some of the reasons behind that very relaxed, if you want, attitude of the West when it was, at the same time, [00:15:00] investing quite a bit of money there?

Seb Strangio: Cambodia faded very quickly after 1993, off the international agenda. There were big problems. In the great, sort of post-Cold War decade of the 1990s when the world was gonna be remade new in a democratic image, Cambodia was a relative success story. It didn't collapse into total chaos and anarchy. If you compare it to what happened in ... [00:15:30] there were several ... genocides. Cambodia ...

George Engels: Sebastian sorry you're cutting off again.

Seb Strangio: I'm basically saying that the international community, international media basically started ignoring Cambodia after the mid-1990s. There are other more important international crises to address [00:16:00] and the country was no longer a high priority. But having Cambodia's success, foreign governments continued along with the charade that the current government was committed to reform. And they clearly weren't, including, they said comments that everything they see is just as they weren't, even if they said the right words. It [00:16:30] was easier for them to go along with that fiction than to challenge it directly.

Maybe they were right to do that. This isn't saying that, this is the point that gets quite interesting, maybe accepting Hun Sen and being pragmatic about democratic change in Cambodia was the right thing to do. The problem was, they couldn't admit that openly. They had to continually maintain ... They were making accommodations at the same time that they were claiming to be working toward democratic reform, [00:17:00] and the two things are contradictory. That's of course what I said about them being in a bind. They really trapped themselves with their own terms of records. It's a ...

George Engels: It's a bit of a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation.

Seb Strangio: Yeah a little bit. I think this is the system of the 1990s though. That was the year of the end of [00:17:30] history and the new world order ... democracy that spread throughout the world. They aim ... the reality in ... they were very ... that historically have been necessary ... the emergence of stable democratic systems.

George Engels: Yeah.

Seb Strangio: Basically ... to do that in Cambodia in the early 90s by any [00:18:00] historical comparison. But the ideology of the time dictates that every country was ready for democracy and the only thing holding democracy back in a place like Cambodia was the evil leadership and the bad guy power. You see this way of thinking very much in the US congress, which has been a very strong source of

criticism toward Hun Sen. They think Hun Sen is essentially the impediment to Cambodian [00:18:30] democracy and if we remove Hun Sen from power or force him to resign, then somehow the country will move toward democracy. But Hun Sen is a product of Cambodia. He's someone who's emerged from the country's social, political, cultural realities. And I think that there's no guarantee that what replaces Hun Sen will be any better. I would hope that it would be but to assume that it would be, I [00:19:00] think is, to advocate the removal of Hun Sen as some congressmen have, I think is foolish policy.

George Engels: In terms of the CPP justifying its increased control on the basis that opposition and the legal armed factions risk destroying the achievements and prosperity of the nation etc. [00:19:30] Is this window dressing, or do they have a point here? I mean is this window dressing of authoritarian tendencies, or do they have a point?

Seb Strangio: There's a kernel of truth to the seat of these claims about foreign government supporting opposition. There's a kernel of truth, which they've grown into an oak of misinformation and exaggeration. But the kernel of truth is that ever since the 1980s, the CPP came into power [00:20:00] in 1979. They were placed in power by the Vietnamese government. They are recruited to help their root government, which was maybe one of the worst genocides of the 20th century. The CCP though did have a different name, but it was the same party, the same government, was treated like an international pariah. They were isolated by the international community including the United States and China.

George Engels: Because they had the backing of Vietnam right?

Seb Strangio: Because they had the backing of Vietnam and the Soviet Union. [00:20:30] The current leadership were all, they don't cut their feet during that period. They always seem a sort of hostile coalition of foreign powers working in conjunction with Cambodian opposition leaders, because many of the opposition leaders were part of war-time factions that were fighting the CPP during that period. They see a continual attempt to unseat Cambodia, unseat the CPP from power. And after 1991, [00:21:00] the method was no longer on the battle field. The method turned to manipulating democracy and human rights in order to [inaudible 00:21:09].

Like I said, most of this is exaggeration. If you go back through and you look at some of the resolutions passed in US congress, there were a couple of explicit calls for Hun Sen to be removed from power. This is around the early 2000s when we were talking about getting rid of Saddam Hussein. [00:21:30] It was the same sort of talks that pushing this line on Cambodia as well. It never eventuated, but they were very open in their support for the Cambodian opposition. There was a very strong sense of America must do what it can, use all the powers disposable to bring freedom to the Cambodian people. There was a lot of this rhetoric in the air.

What this has done is given the Cambodian government just enough evidence to substantiate the exaggerated claims that it's making. [00:22:00] And look, Cambodian opposition figures have gone overseas and lobbied for a government. What they tried to do is to kick back on the ... to Cambodian democracy. And to take themselves domain agents of democracy they in turn ... may not be true. Because the West is in terms with Cambodia, these sort of binary terms, the kind of democratic political [00:22:30] forces and then there's the evil authoritarians in power. That's opened up room for the opposition to work the hold of government in Europe and America and to advocate for strong economic sanctions on Hun Sen's government at various times including [inaudible 00:22:51].

There's enough of a section there that there is a kernel of truth to what the government is saying. So of course, [inaudible 00:23:00] [00:23:00] and they place them to observe proportions. They're saying that Cambodia will collect that payoff, give up the seat of power. They're pushing it much too far. It can't just be dismissed totally out of hand. There is a history here and there is a political dynamic, which is produced in view of the CPP. And I think to continue trying to unseat the CPP, or not unseat the CPP, but just continue to impose [00:23:30] very harsh economic sanctions on the government, I just don't see how that leads to a democratic outcome. It doesn't ... It's not clear to me how that will happen.

George Engels: And in the sense of, you've touched on this already so as briefly as you can, but why has the CPP been able to get away with a more sudden erosion of democratic norms over the past few years?

Seb Strangio: Within [00:24:00] Cambodia, you mean?

George Engels: Yeah. Within Cambodia. Sorry.

Seb Strangio: Well, I mean, they rule by fear. They threaten to throw people in prison. They actually do throw people in prison. People have been arrested for criticising the government on Facebook. I've been critical in the opposition of Western governments, but the CCP they make it very clear that people have to accept CCP rules, [00:24:30] or else. And anyone supporting the opposition is part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government, potentially. People are scared. And the Cambodian people, given the history of the country and the violence the country has experienced over the past couple of generations, are understandably weary about going into the streets. Generally, the Cambodian people who go into the streets have to call on a leader. People will ... [00:25:00] And so the government's basically ... point of fear.

George Engels: Sorry. My internet connection is kind of poor [00:25:30] at the moment again. It's really frustrating. I'm really sorry about this.

Seb Strangio: That's alright. No, it's cool.

George Engels: So, sorry. Just to recap. You were saying that basically the government has managed to get away with a sudden, more sudden erosion of democratic values or norms because it has been ruling by fear in a sense. It's made it very clear to people that it is willing not only to back up its threats with actual substance.

[00:26:00] You had been saying also, that Cambodia never really had a full transition into democracy. So in a sense, how does this compare to other episodes? I was reading some of your publications and you stress that before election periods, the government tends to clamp down on civil society more than when they are not [00:26:30] in an election period. I'm wondering, to what extent is this current repression a factor of that, or a product of that, and to what extent is it its own separate escalation?

Seb Strangio: This is part of the same pattern. Or rather, we've seen traditionally this fluctuating pattern because the government has had to maintain the support of Western donor constituencies. There's always a tension between the government ... [00:27:00] which would secure power and its need for Western support and Western aid money. China has resolved that present within CPP. With Chinese support, they don't really need Western countries. And all the big criticisms about democratic backsliding and human rights, which they always resented, they now have the power to basically extend the middle finger at the West and say, "We don't care anymore. That [00:27:30] world is over. We are now able to rule in the way that we want to rule because Cambodia's got a unique culture." This is their line. Cambodia's different from the West and we should conduct our business in their way.

Basically that fluctuating pattern. It may still continue. We may see a bit of a loosening at some point. But this five-year plan [00:28:00] suggests increasingly that the current phase of repression is the new status quo.

George Engels: And in terms of ... Well now the big question I guess is what does China get out of all of this? Why is [00:28:30] China, which for so long had a non-interventionist foreign policy, all of a sudden becoming, although it doesn't explicitly say so, becoming more involved in the domestic affair of its neighbours? At least, why do you think?

Seb Strangio: For China, what would it get from Cambodia is an ally within the Association of Southeast Asian nations. ASEAN work on a consensus model. [00:29:00] Every country in ASEAN has to agree to a certain policy change or policy management. The only real way that ASEAN works is a very unyielding block in many ways. But what it does is it uses China, a country within ASEAN, that's willing to do its city. And that can be helped. Cambodia can raise a suggestion to resolutions about the South China Sea. It has the [00:29:30] power to block any unified crimes against Chinese territorial claims in southeast Asia, which has created a lot of tension that ASEAN members like Vietnam and the Philippines. It's very useful for China. Probably it's the closest China has to full blown strategic allies in Asia.

George Engels: Cambodia is?

Seb Strangio: Yeah. It's [00:30:00] potentially a Chinese client base now. For the Cambodians, there's no down-side really, at the moment, for this. Maybe the future this could pose some dangers but for now, Cambodia's a small nation. It's always had to choose a patron. It's always needed outside forces to safeguard its independence and all of that sort of thing. What China does is, it doesn't share a border with Cambodia. Cambodian people, generally, [00:30:30] are very well disposed toward the Chinese compared to the ties to Vietnamese, who are seen as much more predatory historically, before Cambodia. Basically it gives them an easy amount of domestic freedom to manoeuvre. It also allows Hun Sen to put some distance between himself and Vietnam, which is his old patron. It help put his government in power in 1979, which has been [00:31:00] a millstone around his neck for the past three decades plus. He is this sort of Vietnamese puppet. Now he's able to put a distance between himself and Vietnam, and that helps him domestically.

It really is the perfect marriage of convenience, the strategic convenience. In the long run it could cause some problems obviously, but for a country like Cambodia that's [00:31:30] always needed a strong protector, China, at least for the CCP, seems to fulfil that role perfectly.

George Engels: So two questions and I think we'll call it. My two last questions basically. The first one is, a lot of proto-authoritarian governments around the world [inaudible 00:32:01] [00:32:00] and say that they're going to do a lot of things because they tend to be either ... A lot of the time they're not actually able to go through with what they're saying. How capable is the Cambodian government of actually putting their money where their mouth is in a sense? And the second question is, [00:32:30] where do you see Cambodia headed?

Seb Strangio: If you read some of the international coverage, it makes Cambodia seem on the break of some miserable authoritarian state. Look, things are pretty bad right now politically. Things are really bad right now, but it's also true that [00:33:00] Cambodia has experienced the longest period of peace in its modern history.

George Engels: Of what? Sorry. The longest periods of what?

Seb Strangio: Of peace and political stability in its history. And this is the government's line of course. But again, it's an element of truth to it. It's not ... The bottom line is, there's a lot of discontent in Cambodia, despite the government's claims to having brought economic growth and the skyscrapers that are rising in Phnom Penh, all the [00:33:30] outward signs of progress. There's a lot of people that have been left behind and are suffering. The government has to work out a way to satisfy these rising demands. The younger population no longer has any real fear, no longer any memory of civil war or the hard past. And these young people have higher expectations than their parents and grandparents did. So the government's going to find out very quickly [00:34:00] that it can abolish the opposition, but it's much harder to abolish the people's desire for better government, more accountable rule, and less corruption. The CCP is gonna have

to work out ways to improve people's lives. And if it doesn't, it's gonna court the possibility of serious social upheaval in the decades to come.

[00:34:30] I think that by comparison with Cambodia's history, it's very miserable and tragic history, the current situation ... There's a lot to be optimistic about. Young populations less shackled by the horrors of the past and more willing to demand better government from their leaders. There's also the question, are the CPP capable of this sort of thing? [00:35:00] Whether its mentally capable, but also whether it can actually reform itself. Whether the system is reformable, even if the will is there. That's a very open question. There's a lot of powerful people with a lot at stake in the current arrangements of Cambodia and those people may not be happy with having to bring in their abrupt activity.

There's [00:35:30] plenty of questions hanging over the current situation. But I think Cambodia's entering a new era of modern history. I think in 25 years of semi-democratic rule that followed the Paris Accords and the UN commission, they'll essentially come to an end. I don't think we'll return to that. You said, questions arise about [00:36:00] the sustainability of the CPP's model and the rapid changes, technological, social, economic, that are sweeping the country and the effect that they might have on this emerging system of one-party rule.

George Engels: Basically, this new post-Paris Accord era, if you want, is one marked by on the one hand, returning to one party [00:36:30] rule, but on the other hand, a push by the younger generations for change, in a sense.

Seb Strangio: Yeah. And look, people want to improve their lives with more opportunity. And it's theoretically possible that could happen without democratisation. Democracy would probably be the best way of delivering these things, the most effective way of doing so, but [00:37:00] people's concerns are mostly economic. People want to be free to ... They want to be able to provide for their families, they want secure jobs, they want good working positions. These are all things that the CPP, given the amount of money it controls, can potentially improve. But whether they have a vision and the ability to do that remains very much an open question.

George Engels: In a sense, what [00:37:30] younger people want might not necessarily be political liberalism but rather economic opportunities.

Seb Strangio: Yeah. It's very hard to generalise. I was just saying that a lot of foreigners will look at any struggle overseas and immediately interpret it through the lens of our own way of looking at politics. Any struggle [00:38:00] is a struggle for democracy. I think that there's a lot of elements in the Cambodian opposition, which grow on much older than Cambodian practise, by charismatic leadership and people placed in a highly personalised symbol of power, bring benefits to their lives. So I think they're much more complicated on the ground.

And to make things even more complicated, [00:38:30] people abuse the language of democracy and human rights because these languages weren't important in the early 90s. These languages became part of the language of Cambodia even though the meaning of these terms in Cambodia can also be quite different from the main, dictionary definition and the meaning that human rights lawyers might have would be sort of ... You see a very complex interplay between the international marriages [00:39:00] and Cambodian political realities.

The bottom line is I don't think people are necessarily all political liberals. There's definitely some people that are. But people want their lives improved and if the government can't do that, they're gonna face serious problems down the road.

George Engels: Thank you so much for your time. I hope we can talk again soon. I might have a few questions in a [00:39:30] few days time but again, thank you so much for your time.

Seb Strangio: No problem. I was happy to chat.

George Engels: Alright. Great. Thanks for everything. Have a great weekend.

Seb Strangio: Yup. You too George. Bye bye.

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