

## Shadow of Nepotism over Cambodian politics: To what direction is it headed?

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### Introduction:

The political image of Cambodia is a portrayal of the rule of Hun Sen, the current and the longest-serving prime minister. He has been the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) leader and has served in this position since 1985.<sup>2</sup> He is a prominent and controversial figure in Cambodian politics. Since Cambodia emerged from years of civil war and political instability in the 1990s, the country's complex and changing political environment have seen considerable changes. Since 1979, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has dominated the country's political landscape.<sup>3</sup> Elections and political scheming have combined to keep the CPP in power. Significant obstacles have plagued opposition politics in Cambodia, where opposition parties are subject to legal limitations and official intimidation. The CPP is Cambodia's only significant political party since the Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2017.<sup>4</sup> Hun Sen disclosed that he has been preparing his eldest son, Hun Manet, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Army for the highest political position in the nation, which is a clear indication that he has been preparing for a dynastic transfer of power to one of his sons.<sup>5</sup> This type of standpoint

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Dunst, "What's Next for Cambodia's Princeling?," February 7, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-next-cambodias-princeling>.

<sup>3</sup> "Hun Sen | Prime Minister of Cambodia," Encyclopedia Britannica, February 13, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hun-Sen>.

<sup>4</sup> The Diplomat, "Cambodia's Political Succession Could Get Messy," December 4, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/cambodias-political-succession-could-get-messy/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sutton, "Is Hun Manet Cambodia's next Strongman?," East Asia Forum, October 17, 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/10/17/is-hun-manet-cambodias-next-strongman/>.

brings forth many questions about how this nepotism alters not only the domestic condition but also the regional and international relations of Cambodia.

## The scenario of nepotism in Cambodia through exemplifying Hun dynasty:

Hun Sen is trying to establish a family dynasty in Cambodia. The term "nepotism" describes giving family members, friends, or acquaintances preferential treatment over others who may be more qualified or deserving. It can foster an unfair culture and undercut the merit-based tenets of a just society or organization.<sup>6</sup> Hun Sen's standpoint for promoting his son likely stretches beyond plain nepotism. Hun Manet was backed as the party's future prime ministerial candidate once his father retired. At the same time, Prime Minister Hun Sen, also CPP President has been endorsed to run for the position in this July 2023 national election.<sup>7</sup>

### HUN MANET, FUTURE PRIME MINISTER?

**Date of birth** : 20 October 1977

**Place of birth** : Koh Thmar Village, Memot District, Kampong Cham Province

Military background

- **1995**  
Joined Royal Cambodian Armed Forces
- **1999**  
Lieutenant
- **2008**  
Commander of Cambodia's National Counter-Terrorism Special Forces (Colonel)
- **2010**  
Deputy Commander & Deputy Chief of joint staff
- **2011**  
Major General
- **2013**  
Lieutenant General
- **2018**  
Deputy commander-in-chief (Four-star General)

Education

- **1999**  
Bachelor's degree in Economics - United States Military Academy (first Cambodian graduate)
- **2002**  
Masters of Arts in Economics - New York University
- **2008**  
PhD in Economics - University of Bristol, United Kingdom

Social programmes

Chief of Samdech Techo Hun Sen Scholarship Committee and Samdech Techo Scholarship Association

- Provides scholarship opportunities

Samdech Techo Youth Volunteer Doctor Association (TYDA) chairman

- Mobilises professionals, medical students and volunteers to provide free healthcare

Political stance

- Member of ruling Cambodian People's Party
- Distances himself from father




<sup>6</sup> “Nepotism,” in The Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary, February 18, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nepotism>.

<sup>7</sup> Ry Sochan and Ry Sochan, “CPP Sets out Five Primary Strategic Goals for 2023-28,” Phnom Penh Post, n.d., <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/cpp-sets-out-five-primary-strategic-goals-2023-28>.

**Figure 1:** Short bio of Hun Manet (Source: The ASEAN Post)

Hun Sen used former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as an example to justify the practice of political dynasties and nepotism.<sup>8</sup> Before then, the prime minister had stated that he intended to rule Cambodia until he felt he should step down. Hun Manet praises his father and contrasts him to "extremist politicians".<sup>9</sup> He describes his father as a leader who has demonstrated numerous accomplishments in Cambodia's history.

### **Analyzing the US- Cambodia relation:**

The relationship between the US and Cambodia is complicated and has developed through time. The communist Khmer Rouge was fighting a civil war against the Lon Nol government of Cambodia at the time, which the US supported. However, the United States and other nations cut diplomatic ties with Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. When the Paris Peace Accords were signed, diplomatic ties between the United States and Cambodia were again established in 1991. However, there have been moments when ties between the two nations have been strained. Due to worries about political unrest and breaches of human rights, the United States imposed trade sanctions on Cambodia in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

The Cambodian government's persecution of political opposition and civil society organizations and its close relations with China have drawn criticism from the United States in recent times. Despite these obstacles, various economic, political, and cultural connections have occurred between the United States and Cambodia. The US continues to be one of Cambodia's major commercial partners and aid providers. Very recently, Lieutenant General Hun Manet attended the Pacific Area Special Operations Conference to strengthen relations with the US Army.<sup>11</sup> Even if

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<sup>8</sup> Arpan Rai, "Cambodian leader Hun Sen names eldest son as successor and insists nothing wrong with establishing dynasty", The Independent, December 2, 2021, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/cambodian-leader-hun-sen-names-130248285.html>

<sup>9</sup> Sarath Sorn, "Like Father like Son, Hun Manet Appears to Model Hun Sen's Political Rhetoric," CamboJA News, July 15, 2022, <https://cambojanews.com/like-father-like-son-hun-manet-appears-to-model-hun-sen-political-rhetoric/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Project MUSE - Timeline: US-Cambodia Relations," n.d., <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/412815>.

<sup>11</sup> "Hun Manet in Hawaii to Boost Ties with US - Khmer Times," Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia, April 9, 2019, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50594760/hun-manet-in-hawaii-to-boost-ties-with-us-2/>.

Cambodia strengthens relations with China, they still consider the USA one of its most significant partners and expect to enhance trade relations with them.

### **Analyzing Chinese expansionism through supporting Hun Manet:**

During an official visit to Beijing on Friday, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen attended the signing ceremonies for 12 agreements with China and introduced two of his sons. The agreements cover various topics, such as constructing schools in the province of Kratie, fostering trade, providing a US \$44 million grant for the disposal of explosive ordnance, and developing a reservoir in the province of Kampong Thom.<sup>12</sup> The agreements strengthened China's backing for Cambodia when the country came under fire worldwide regarding the issue of general elections in July. Hun Manet, a potential contender for prime minister of Cambodia, has received the ardent support of China, which sees him as equally as mature and forward thinking as current leader Hun Sen. Beyond their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, China and Cambodia are building a community with a shared destiny.

The tie between these two countries had significant historic importance from the early period. Infrastructure development is one of China and Cambodia's main areas of cooperation. Significant loans and aid have been given to Cambodia by China. Joint military exercises between China and Cambodia have taken place, and Beijing has helped the Cambodian military by giving them equipment and training. A defense cooperation pact between the two nations also calls for enhanced military exchanges and collaboration. China has protected the Cambodian government against criticism from other nations about human rights and democracy in global forums like the United Nations. Through the recent support towards the current decision of Hun Sen, China is trying to embrace its bilateral relationship with Cambodia. Since the Association of Southeast Asian States comprises of 10 countries, China's close connections to Cambodia guarantee that Beijing has an ally. China is trying to enhance its expansionism in the Southeast Asian region by fostering the relationship in this crucial time in Cambodia. It is also opening up the door for China to counter Japan or the USA on the map of this region.

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<sup>12</sup> Rfa Khmer, "Cambodia and China Shore up Ties with New Agreements," Radio Free Asia, February 10, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/bilateral-relations-02102023172640.html>.

## **Analyzing India’s diplomatic position:**

A long-standing historical and cultural connection exists between India and Cambodia. The political, economic, and cultural arenas are only a few areas where the two nations have enjoyed cordial and beneficial relations. India is one of the major investors in Cambodia, with investments in areas such as agriculture, infrastructure and textiles.

Recently a meeting took place between the Minister of Defense of India, Rajnath Singh, and Lieutenant General Hun Manet on the occasion of the 9th ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM Plus) in Siem Reap City. There India shows an interest that they want the two nations’ military ties and defense cooperation to continue and endorses Lieutenant General Hun Manet as the future prime ministerial candidate of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).<sup>13</sup> India significantly mentioned the common benefits of both countries. India is standing in a position where they are more likely to show support to the ruling party rather than support to a democratic Cambodia.

## **Analyzing the approaches of Japan in maintaining balance:**

Since 1952, Japan and Cambodia have had diplomatic ties. Their relationship has evolved through time to include a range of economic, political, and cultural exchanges. Nevertheless, Japan and Cambodia have maintained a favorable and productive relationship, despite the occasional difficulties, such as concerns about Cambodia’s record on human rights abuse and territorial disputes with neighboring nations.<sup>14</sup>

Currently, Japan is becoming more conscious of maintaining relations with Cambodia as Cambodia’s economy and society are increasingly under China’s influence, which is undermining regional stability. China is building military installations in Cambodia, and evidence of Chinese involvement in the country’s casinos and human trafficking networks has frightened neighboring nations. However, Japan is highly concerned about countering Chinese influence on Cambodia.

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<sup>13</sup> “Hun Manet Gets India’s Support - Khmer Times,” Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia, November 24, 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501190188/hun-manet-gets-indias-support/>.

<sup>14</sup> Nicola Mocchi, “History of Japanese cooperation in Cambodia beyond realist and idealist approaches,” Asia Maior - an Italian Think Tank on Asia, July 7, 2019, <https://www.asiamaior.org/the-journal/history-of-japanese-cooperation-in-cambodia-beyond-realist-and-idealist-approaches.html>.

Still, the violation of democratic norms and misuse of Japanese-financed buses is also a major concern for Japan in the upcoming princeling of Cambodia under Hun Manet.

### **Analyzing the tie with Bangladesh:**

Cambodia and Bangladesh maintain friendly relations, but their bilateral relationship is less strong than those with other countries in the region. Cambodia and Bangladesh established diplomatic relations in 1973. When Bangladesh sent Blue Helmets to assist with UN peacekeeping forces in Cambodia in 1993, formal diplomatic relations were established.<sup>15</sup>

Recently the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Army, Lt. Gen. Hun Manet, and the Director General of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Major General Mohammad Maksudur Rahman have committed to enhancing their military and bilateral cooperation.<sup>16</sup>

The two nations have also upheld strong cooperation in several crucial areas. The recent tie shows that the bilateral military between Cambodia and Bangladesh should be improved, focusing on maintaining strong connections and effective collaboration with the Cambodian army. Although there is now little military collaboration between the two nations, according to Lt. Gen. Hun Manet, this will change as the Defense Ministries of the two nations prepare to sign a memorandum of understanding that will open the door for more interaction. The Bangladeshi Major General responded by expressing his satisfaction in performing his duties as the Cambodian Military Attaché and reiterating his firm commitment to fostering and strengthening bilateral relations.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kamal Uddin Mazumder, "Bangladesh's Involvement in UN Peacekeeping," October 28, 2022, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/10/28/bangladeshs-involvement-in-un-peacekeeping/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ridhisidh, "Cambodia and Bangladesh Vow to Further Boost Bilateral Military Cooperation," EAC News, June 15, 2022, <https://eacnews.asia/home/details/13328>.

<sup>17</sup> "Cambodia and Bangladesh Vow to Further Boost Bilateral Military Cooperation."

**A glimpse of the effect of Cambodia’s new princeling within and beyond the border:**



**Figure 2:** Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen (L) poses with his son Hun Manet (R) (Source: AFP)

The acceptance of Hun Manet as the future leader of Cambodia is still under numerous questions within and beyond the border of Cambodia. The CPP elites who desire power for themselves or their offspring will probably continue to oppose the princeling in some way. The opposition, civil society, media, and rights advocates all have been accused of being intimidated by Hun Sen's regime through several crackdowns.<sup>18</sup> Hun Manet seems to be quite well-liked among the nation's youth. He appears to be well-mannered, highly educated, and accessible. Therefore, there is a lower probability that Hun Sen's transfer to Hun Manet will soon cause a widespread national outcry. Hun Manet's high rank in the military will somehow help to control the internal conflict in Cambodia. It is also assumed that he can promote some reform. Even though the line separating

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<sup>18</sup> The Diplomat, "Cambodia's Political Succession Could Get Messy," December 4, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/cambodias-political-succession-could-get-messy/>.

the military and the party is blurrier than ever, Hun Manet's military experience does not guarantee party support. It remains to be seen if he can control the widespread rivalries and factionalism. Only Prime Minister Hun Sen's charismatic leadership can win support. There is little sign that Hun Manet has enough backing from the country's political establishment to maintain power on his own any time soon; a change in the monarchy's leadership still seems like a long shot.

From the lenses of beyond border, it is assumed that compared to his father, Hun Manet will be friendlier toward the West and its allies. The enhanced relationship with the USA is a prime example of it. In the regional context also, Cambodia is significantly important to the regional powers, China, Japan, India and Bangladesh; all these nations are at a stand where they support the stance of Hun Sen more or less. Still, it is difficult to conceive that Hun Manet will completely reconfigure Cambodia in the direction of democracy or the West would desire, especially if Hun Sen continues to influence in the background. The blurred position of this dynasty is clarified in another point where seems that Manet received his education at the American Military Academy, where he was viewed as a possible ally for the US. Still, since returning home, he has helped China rebuild its military.<sup>19</sup> This dubious position makes him termed as the *'US military-educated, but China's man'*.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

Under Prime Minister Hun Sen's leadership, the problem of nepotism in Cambodian politics has generated domestic and international controversy. Hun Manet's close ties to the government and his kinship with the prime minister have sparked worries about nepotism and the concentration of power. Promoting family members and acquaintances to prominent positions have resulted in the consolidation of power, the absence of transparency, and the silencing of critics. Hun Manet's participation in this process remains to be seen, but it will continue to be a subject of attention and scrutiny for both Cambodians and foreign observers.

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<sup>19</sup> "Cambodia's Leader in Waiting: US Military-Educated, but China's Man?," South China Morning Post, August 15, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097421/hun-manet-cambodias-leader-waiting-us-military-educated-chinas>.

<sup>20</sup> "Cambodia's Leader in Waiting: US Military-Educated, but China's Man?"