

History wars in Cambodia
By Milton Osborne
23 August 2013

The post-election standoff continues in Phnom Penh. This week's visit to [Cambodia by the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi](#) ('to further the bilateral ties and cooperation between the two countries') underlines the salience of the comment by Youk Chhang, the respected head of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam): 'Cambodia is caught between the tiger, China, and the crocodile, Vietnam, and needs to find its own ground'.

The recent election campaign was notable for the extent to which old wounds were opened, as [Sam Rainsy](#) and his colleagues in the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) sought to portray Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) as tainted by their links to and policies towards Vietnam.

The strength of this observation is given further emphasis by thoughtful commentary from another writer linked to DC-Cam, Dy Khamboly. The author of the first history of the Khmer Rouge period to be allowed into Cambodian schools ([A History of Democratic Kampuchea, 1975-1979](#)), Dy Kamboly has laid out [some of the dangers associated with rewriting the past](#) to focus on the supposed evils of the Vietnamese rather than facing up to the history of the Khmer Rouge.

This is a sensitive issue, bearing as it does both on the readiness of Sam Rainsy and the CNRP to denounce Vietnamese influence in Cambodia under Hun Sen's government, and on the reality of what occurred while the Khmer Rouge was in power.

The most striking instance, one that received international attention, was the claim made in May by leading CNRP politician Ken Sokha [that S-21, the Tuol Sleng extermination centre, was a Vietnamese fabrication](#) put in place to justify its invasion after Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979.

While Kem Sokha has attempted to retreat from this ridiculous allegation, CNRP candidates (and most notably Sam Rainsy as the party's leader) claimed during the election that Hun Sen was responsible for an undocumented flow of Vietnamese immigrants into Cambodia and was ready to accept Vietnam's unjustified claims to Cambodian territory. And Sam Rainsy has not hesitated to refer to the Vietnamese regularly as 'yuon', a deeply pejorative term.

The extent to which these claims played a part in the CNRP's surge in electoral support is difficult to assess, but there is little doubt that a deep-seated ethnic antipathy towards the Vietnamese is part of the outlook of many, indeed probably the majority, of Cambodians, because of resentments going back several centuries. What's more, playing the 'Vietnamese card' does pose real problems for the vision of the past that Hun Sen and his associates wish to present: that Cambodia was rescued from the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese in 1979.

So history is in play in contemporary Cambodia, and in a very complex fashion.

As Dy Khamboly suggests, the CNRP's thrust could lead to a failure to confront the reality of the Khmer Rouge period and the actions Cambodians took against their compatriots.

Yet Hun Sen has consistently argued that Cambodians 'should bury the past' while maintaining a close relationship with Hanoi. At the same time, he has developed with China the closest relationship of any Southeast Asian country. Here, too, history adds a disturbing edge to contemporary debate. For during the Khmer Rouge era Beijing was Democratic Kampuchea's closest ally, maintaining a thousand or more 'advisers' to the Pol Pot regime.

There can be no winners in these history wars. Cambodia today, just as it has been for at least two centuries, is too weak to determine its own destiny without external support.

For all the many reasons Hun Sen's regime has been open to criticism, his attempt to maintain good relations with both Hanoi and Beijing has been surprisingly successful. It is tempting to suggest that Sam Rainsy's confrontational approach to Vietnam, should he find himself in power, would appeal to Beijing, on the basis of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', but that seems too facile a judgment.

What is clear is that for any Cambodian government to cast Vietnam in the role of an enemy is a dangerous policy against a much stronger neighbour. Not only does such a policy risk Vietnamese retaliation, it runs the risk of Cambodia's own sizeable Vietnamese ethnic minority becoming a target of violence, as has happened in the past.

© 2013 The Lowry Institute for International Policy