



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Cambodia: Hun Sen's unrelenting grip on power

Description: Southeast Asia historian Dr Matthew Galway discusses Cambodia's politics, culture and history through the lens of Hun Sen, the nation's strongman prime minister since 1985.

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Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Matt Galway: People have described Hun Sen as a wily operator who destroys his political opponents. And that he's able to oscillate between this way of connecting with people from all sorts of sectors. He's able to kind of oscillate between appeasing these elites who want to keep the status quo and benefit as much from a rapidly changing Cambodia, yet still appeal to the common man and seem like he's just one of them.

Ali Moore: In this episode, we examine the politics, culture, and history of Cambodia and its strong man Prime Minister, Hun Sen.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

It's been four decades since the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge hit the world's headlines. Dotted across the landscape of Cambodia are the mass graves of more than 1.7 million victims of genocide committed by the regime of Pol Pot. At the other end of the spectrum, Cambodia is also home to Angkor Wat, the magnificent temple complex of the 12th century, both a monument to the golden age of the Khmer people and today a source of tourism dollars for the Cambodian government and the country's ruling elite.

At the apex of that elite is Prime Minister Hun Sen. In office since 1985, he's the longest-serving elected leader in Southeast Asia. But who is Hun Sen? How did he rise to power, and how has he managed to stay there in a country renowned for its turbulent politics? And for the ordinary people of Cambodia, one of the world's poorest countries, what does his continuing rule augur for their future?

Dr Matthew Galway, a scholar of Cambodia's history, based at the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne, takes us on a deep dive into Cambodia's politics, culture, and history, through the lens of Hun Sen. Welcome back to Ear to Asia, Matt.



- Matt Galway: Thank you for having me.
- Ali Moore: Say, let's start with that question. Who is Hun Sen? He's the ruler of the Kingdom of Cambodia for more than three decades. Tell us about the man.
- Matt Galway: Hun Sen was born in 1952, shortly before Cambodia no longer was under French colonization, before it got its independence. Born in a town called Kampong Cham, which is in the southeastern part, along the Mekong River. He was born to a peasant family. His father, Hun Neang, was a monk who became an anti-colonial rebel against the French. Hun Sen left home at 13 to become a monk in Phnom Penh, the capital, and he joined the communist movement after the coup in 1970, which was a move that was complicitly backed by the United States and the CIA, to remove Prince Sihanouk, who was the head of state from independence onward. And that led Hun Sen to join the Communist Party of Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge.
- Ali Moore: And as a child, leaving home to become a monk, that was very common and continues to be common in Cambodian families.
- Matt Galway: Yes, absolutely, especially among the rural poor.
- Ali Moore: Before we look back in history, since he's been prime minister in 1985, Cambodia has undergone enormous change. According to the World Bank, it's in the top 10 fastest-growing economies in the world. How has he balanced his own political interests, the interests of his regime, with the economic interests of the country?
- Matt Galway: People have described him as a wily operator who destroys his political opponents, and that he's able to oscillate between this way of connecting with people from all sorts of sectors, whether it's the agricultural sector or the garment workers. He's able to kind of oscillate between appeasing these elites who want to keep the status quo and benefit as much from a rapidly changing Cambodia, yet still appeal to the common man and seem like he's just one of them. I think given the country's political instability for so many decades, people are very comfortable with that stability, and they see in Hun Sen this continuum of not changing regimes and not going into radical politics in the former regimes in the '70s and '80s.
- Ali Moore: So there's a level of populism about the way he rules?
- Matt Galway: Definitely. Definitely. I mean, it's a combination of populism, it combines with patronage to his connected family, and then on top of that he's also ... I think this is natural for all Cambodian politicians ... he appeals to the past history, the present history, and what he envisions for a future of Cambodia



by speaking a particular vocabulary that is like a, I don't want to say, a dog whistle, but it evokes certain sentiments.

Ali Moore: He brooks no opposition, though, does he?

Matt Galway: No. Cambodia's opposition party, or main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, CNRP, was declared illegal in 2017, and its former leaders, Kem Sokha, he was arrested for collusion and treason, and Sam Rainsy is on a self-imposed exile outside of the country since then.

Ali Moore: The former leader?

Matt Galway: Yes, Sam Rainsy is the former CNRP leader and one of the founders. He has not been back since. There are rumors that he might return. I would understand why he would not want to. But the CNRP is currently not running as an opposition.

Ali Moore: Take us back to that court case in 2017. It was in the courts that the opposition party, the CNRP, was dissolved. How did it come to that point? What were the charges against the party?

Matt Galway: The charge against the CNRP was that it was colluding to overthrow the government with the United States, and that it was trying to undo the democratic will of the people, that it was trying to kind of sublimate and circumvent the rule of law. It was a bogus accusation. It wasn't founded. The other opposition parties, the Cambodian Youth Party and the FUNCINPEC, which is the former party of Prince Ranariddh, who was an opponent of Hun Sen in the '90s, they made formal complaints to the interior ministry. And there are, again, allegations that they were kind of asked to do this, to give a legitimation to the accusation that the CNRP was planning to overthrow the CPP.

Ali Moore: So why were the courts used to neutralize the opposition? Is it because Hun Sen could, or was it because he was truly fearful that his party would lose ground in the elections that were held last year?

Matt Galway: I think it's a bit of both. I mean, the CNRP is much more progressive than the CPP in many ways. They have a lot of the same kind of methods to speak to the people. I mean, there's a lot of effort on elevating the social standing of the poor. The CNRP in particular, their platform is kind of calling for a minimum wage of US\$150 a month, free healthcare for the poor, guaranteed pensions. The CPP runs on many similar aspects.

Ali Moore: Well, not surprising, given 40% of the population lives below the poverty line.



- Matt Galway: Exactly, exactly. These ideas are very popular, and the CPP was certainly losing ground. A lot of that has to do with just the fact that Hun Sen has been in power for so long, and not everyone is benefiting from this rapid economic change, this growing emergent economy in Southeast Asia. So people, of course, the younger generation is getting tired of waiting for their turn to reap the benefits of this change. I think it's definitely part of that. The other part is yes, certainly he can. Hun Sen's rewritten laws so many times since he's come into power, and his party is almost unilaterally responsible for changing the law that outlawed the CNRP and made Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha in their current state.
- Ali Moore: And if you look at how the CNRP went at the previous election in 2013, there was indeed good cause, was there not, for Hun Sen to be concerned at what would happen at the 2018 election? In 2013, they made considerable inroads, didn't they?
- Matt Galway: Yes, definitely, and I have talked with many colleagues, people interested in Cambodian history, Cambodians themselves, who believe that the CNRP was earmarked to win if it had been a fair election. And it was definitely not. I mean, there's several allegations and accusations that the recent elections were completely a hoax or rigged, and the CPP itself had eliminated the opposition, so I mean, there's just really no illusion of democracy anymore. It's a one-party state.
- Ali Moore: Well, indeed, I was going to ask you whether that dissolving of the opposition spelled the end of democracy in Cambodia? Is there any real opposition to speak of?
- Matt Galway: I'll quote the chairman of ASEAN's Parliamentarians for Human Rights, Charles Santiago, who called it the final nail in the coffin for Cambodian democracy. And I'd say until the opposition party, CNRP, is allowed to run without interference, its leaders are allowed to run or at least return to the party, and there isn't interference, that'll happen. But I'm a pessimist. I don't think it's going to happen that way. I think any further elections, as long as Hun Sen has this much control and this much influence on the rule of law and politics in the country, we won't see any change.
- Ali Moore: It doesn't always look like that, does it, though, in terms of it being the end of democracy? Tell us about the firefly opposition parties, which certainly in the last election got a fair running.
- Matt Galway: This has been common since Hun Sen has outlawed the CNRP, and it may stretch back even further than that. But firefly parties are essentially these fabricated opposition parties that fade away after the election. They pop up, they have no regional footprint, no real constituency. They show up and give



the appearance of actual competition, that this is a true democracy, and then after the election, they disappear. So they have the kind of all style but no substance.

Ali Moore: If we go back further in time to Cambodia's darkest hours, Hun Sen was actually a commander, wasn't he, in Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge?

Matt Galway: He was, yes. He was a mid-level commander in the Eastern Zone, and that zone was particularly, I guess, infamous for its execution of Muslim Chams. The Chams are an ethnic minority group in the southern part of Cambodia. I mean, they're all over, but the main area is along the Mekong Delta. Their massacre by the Khmer Rouge was ruled a genocide by the External Chambers of the courts of Cambodia.

Ali Moore: We'll talk about the External Chambers in a minute. Just remind us about the Khmer Rouge and just how destructive that relatively recent period of history was for Cambodia.

Matt Galway: From 1975 to 1979, they were the ruling government over Cambodia, which they renamed as Democratic Kampuchea. Originally the Khmer Rouge were a kind of a rule by central committee, but by 1976, 1977, it was starting to become clear that Pol Pot was the leader of that party. They came out in 1977 as a Marxist-Leninist party. Their rhetoric certainly gives the impression that Communist China, especially under the Cultural Revolution in the '60s and '70s, was a major influence for how they designed their policies and how their ideology took shape.

This period was marked by genocide, particularly against the ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese, ethnic Thai, and of course, the aforementioned Muslim Cham. Its policies were mass evacuations of the cities, claiming that the US bombs were coming, so everybody in the cities were forced to get out. And the cities, by the time the Khmer Rouge had taken power, were swollen with population that had migrated from the war zones. Then, of course, de-industrialization followed as well. They claimed to be building factories and claimed to be making a super great leap forward, to borrow from Mao Zedong, yet they never really set those plans in motion.

Everybody lived communally. Parents and children were separated. Children were told to disobey their parents, to not trust them, because they were of old thinking, which is again another homage to Mao in some ways. And during the just under four-year period, the Khmer Rouge were responsible for as many as two million deaths in a country that at the time was only eight million.



- Ali Moore: If you think about that from a time perspective, it is so recent, and it resonates in everything today in Cambodia.
- Matt Galway: Definitely. I mean, the country is trying to move past that era and not just be kind of like the country that had that huge genocide, but it's unavoidable. I mean, the killing fields-
- Ali Moore: Well, it's missing a vast section of its population.
- Matt Galway: Exactly. And the country was essentially autarchical for those four years. It had very few allies, very few diplomatic connections. It believed that it was the purest communist country in the world, and it turned on its allies by claiming that China and North Korea were not communist enough. It purged all of its generals, yet decided hey, let's invade Vietnam and reclaim lost territory. I mean, it really went off the rails. During that time, education was essentially stopped, so from 1979 onward it's almost as if the country was trying to reboot and start again. And that had a lasting legacy on many things. It's one of the reasons why Cambodia today, it's almost as if it's in a perpetual state of trying to play catch-up.
- Ali Moore: And how did the Khmer Rouge's reign come to an end? And indeed, when it did come to an end, was that an end to its influence?
- Matt Galway: The Khmer Rouge were overthrown by the Vietnamese. Border skirmishes had been going on since the Khmer Rouge came to power, and there was an issue involving an island, and Pol Pot famously called for Cambodia to eliminate 30 Vietnamese for every one Cambodian soldier. Some take that as an example of a final solution. But there was a lot of hate going on between the two, and you see that in contemporary politics as well. Vietnam is kind of like the boogeyman, to borrow from historian Philip Short. But Vietnam had said, "No, stop attacking us. Stop skirmishing with us," because by 1978, Pol Pot was actively calling for the invasion of Vietnam to reclaim what they call Kampuchea Krom, which is the southern part of Vietnam. It used to be roughly a part of the Khmer empire.
- So after doing that specifically, an attack on a border town called Ba Chúc, the Vietnamese said, "Well, this is it." And for the first time in the 20th century, two communist countries were at war. And the Vietnamese, who had just defeated the United States in the Vietnam War, had no patience for this emergent troublemaker, so they swept the Khmer Rouge out of power, and they fled to the Thai-Kampuchea border on the western coast of Cambodia and the eastern of Thailand. They remained there for a good 20 years, Pol Pot dying in 1998, but they were still very prominent in politics. In fact, they were part of the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia. They were in negotiations to end the Vietnamese period there,



which was during 1979 to 1989, which was the occupation. They've been marginalized politically now. I mean, a lot of their leaders are now in prison.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia, from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Cambodia researcher Dr. Matthew Galway. We're talking about Cambodia's strong man Prime Minister Hun Sen's path to absolute power.

Matt, let's look more closely at the role of Hun Sen during the Khmer Rouge. In fact, he didn't stay in Cambodia the whole time, did he?

Matt Galway: No. In 1977, he fled the Khmer Rouge and went to Vietnam.

Ali Moore: And when you say fled, we've already discussed that he was a commander in the Khmer Rouge. What led to that?

Matt Galway: During 1977, there was internal purges of the Khmer Rouge, and this was a period of time where they particularly targeting military generals or military leaders. Kind of counterintuitive when you're plotting to invade Vietnam, but that was how they did it. And Hun Sen, I think, believed that there may have been a target on his back, so he fled to Vietnam and became part of an anti-Khmer Rouge resistance unit and pledged kind of a loyalty to Vietnam. This would be something that would lead to his eventual political rise in the '80s.

Ali Moore: So he first became foreign minister, didn't he, before prime minister?

Matt Galway: Yeah. By sheer dint of involving himself in this anti-Khmer Rouge force, he gained this favor, and he was appointed deputy prime minister and foreign minister of the Vietnamese-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea, or the Heng Samrin regime, in '79. And then by '85 he was the de facto leader of the country, chairman of the council of ministers and prime minister.

Ali Moore: Was he seen as tainted with the Khmer Rouge brush at all?

Matt Galway: I think there were certainly groups that viewed him as an ex-Khmer Rouge. I mean, some people still do. And also the fact that he threw his lot behind the Vietnamese also becomes an issue, because culturally, it's changing a little bit now, but Vietnam and Cambodia have a long history of rivalry and working together, but it's a contentious relationship. This is certainly true of the communist parties - big brother, little brother. So I think there was a lot of issues with that, but again, speaking to the earlier point, I think a lot of Cambodians were just happy for some stability and to see someone who wasn't necessarily a Vietnamese puppet, like Heng Samrin, running the country.



I think he showed a lot of commitment to getting rid of the Khmer Rouge, and I think that in some ways made him a bit of a, you know, trustworthy figure. It's like here's someone who changed his ways, he redeemed himself, and he fought to get rid of the bloodiest regime in Cambodian history.

Ali Moore: Which brings us to what you've mentioned earlier, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, or the ECCC. This is the Khmer Rouge tribunal. It was set up under an agreement with the UN to try the most senior members of the regime. The courts are indeed in Cambodia. That's where they sit. How does Hun Sen manage that, and is there any threat to him from that court process?

Matt Galway: Many people have argued that Hun Sen's government didn't want the trials to continue beyond the senior leadership. These trials have been going on for I believe over a decade now, and the initial impetus was to try the intellectual thrust, the people who are most responsible for framing Democratic Kampuchea from '75 to '79. And the first verdicts of life imprisonment for both Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, who were central leaders of the party, at least under Pol Pot they were part of his kind of cabinet, almost within days of their, I guess, indictment or life imprisonment sentencing, the deputy prime minister, Sar Kheng, declared that there were no more leaders left to try and that the court proceedings would end once the appeals were heard. And they've since, of course, been heard.

The mandate of the ECCC is apparently to try only those senior leaders and not to look at the others who might be implicated. There are currently three major figures who have been charged with crimes against humanity by the courts, but are currently living as free men. Among them is a naval commander named Meas Muth, and by dint of his high-ranking military position one wonders if he is just very, very close to Hun Sen.

Ali Moore: Is there a sense he's being protected?

Matt Galway: I think it could be. I mean, ANU's Rebecca Gidley has argued that it's pretty much the case that the courts have essentially experienced a pattern whereby international lawyers and judges want suspects prosecuted, but Cambodian counterparts want cases dropped. This Cambodia counterpart could be, you know, a government agent or a major figure within Hun Sen's government. Could be Hun Sen himself. He has demonstrated that he controls the Cambodian judiciary and the outcomes, despite international judges and the UN's prominent role in sponsoring it. So what this does is it entrenches a culture of impunity that Hun Sen is by all means willing to exploit.



Ali Moore: We've talked about the extraordinary survival skills of this man, the fact that he brooks no opposition. We talked about how he dissolved the formal opposition in Cambodia in 2017. In fact, if you go back to 1997, and there was a coup in that year, was that also about consolidating his position?

Matt Galway: Oh, definitely. Hun Sen did not want to share power with the rival parties that formed the coalition government, particularly as one of the rival parties was the FUNCINPEC Party, which was run by Norodom Ranariddh, which is Prince Sihanouk's son. Hun Sen refused to step down from the prime minister post and negotiated a transitional government agreement that allowed him to remain as co-prime minister, but he retained the chairmanship. And then essentially the coup was a move to isolate and neutralize FUNCINPEC, and this led to 40 officials dying and 100 civilians.

Ali Moore: So there was no longer any co-leader?

Matt Galway: No, this essentially was Hun Sen's power move to make the CPP the sole party in power, so it brought an end effectively to the coalition government and would set about his long reign in power unopposed.

Ali Moore: We've talked about how there is a sense of a desire for stability in Cambodia, about how Hun Sen is populist in some ways in the way that he rules. Do we have any real sense of the electoral popularity of Hun Sen?

Matt Galway: Hun Sen is extremely popular among garment workers, and many poor farmers absolutely love him. We've mentioned, of course, populism is key. He's very good at this. He's very good at going to factories and appealing to, "Hey, look. Look at our emerging economy. We're bringing jobs to Cambodia. We're making more clothes than ever. We're getting wages up. This is good."

Ali Moore: And are they getting wages up?

Matt Galway: I think it's a gradual process. I wouldn't say that it's an equitable or livable wage by any stretch of the imagination. This is, of course, a global trend, where jobs are getting outsourced from the garment industry or the manufacturing industry to developing economies. But many garment workers believe that their social standing or socio-economic standing is slowly elevating, and they believe Hun Sen is unilaterally responsible for it. Hun Sen, believe it or not, actually believes that he is loved abroad. This is what he tells his followers anyway. And he believes that he has like a mandate because of it. He believes that despite the opposition by some countries, others are quite fond of him. But the thing is, is that Hun Sen, if he ever feels kind of threatened or if he ever has to make a point, he'll go as



far in saying, "I'm not giving up power. I will launch the country into civil war if it means giving up power."

- Ali Moore: You say that he feels that he's loved outside Cambodia. Of course, he won all 125 seats in the National Assembly in the elections that were held last year. Of course, there is no opposition, so that was not surprising. How did external countries, how did regional neighbors respond to that election victory?
- Matt Galway: When it comes to regional neighbors, China is the big kind of elephant in the room to discuss, because China has voiced virtually no opposition to anything Hun Sen's done, because in terms of contemporary geopolitics, Cambodia is a huge ally for China.
- Ali Moore: And they've poured billions into Cambodia.
- Matt Galway: It's growing every year. I mean, there's huge Chinese investment. Looking at a town like Sihanoukville, which is in kind of the southern part of the country, it's booming with Chinese investment. They're building casinos there. It's becoming a new Macao in a sense. Property values are spiking. It's crazy to see the contrast. When I lived there in 2009 to now, just how many more shopping centers are opening, movie theaters, ironically all on Mao Zedong Boulevard in Phnom Penh, which is kind of a funny little story there.
- But the fact of the matter is, is China is a huge economic partner, as well as a diplomatic ally, because if China needs to make a case for anything in the South China Sea, it can rely on Cambodia voicing support, which is huge. As China is expanding economically, as it's building its own Belt and Road Initiative to connect China to Southeast Asia more openly and freely, and also to invest in these emergent Southeast Asian economies, I think a lot of investors are hoping for a really, really sudden return on that investment.
- Ali Moore: Would you go so far, as many have, call Cambodia a wholly-owned subsidiary of China? Or is that a done deal, the independence is not there?
- Matt Galway: I think former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans said that it's essentially that, and I would agree 100%. And I think the status quo, keeping Hun Sen in power, guarantees that continuity. If Hun Sen is to be removed by the CNRP, there is no guarantee that Hun Sen will go willingly, and there's also no guarantee that the CNRP will say, "Hey, China, let's keep going the way things are." I think over time I would understand if a lot of locals would become very frustrated with this, because as Chinese investment is pouring in, and the tourist industry of course grows accordingly, the cost of living in some areas is going up, and it's a lot harder to ... I mean, this is a problem that happened before the Khmer Rouge took power as well.



There was a lot of dependency on foreign investment, a lot of the creation of consumer goods that were not for the everyday Cambodian, that were specifically targeted towards foreigners. At that time it was the French, now it's more towards Chinese tourists. I would imagine there'd be mounting opposition over time, as the inequality continues to grow from its already current position as a huge gap between rich and poor.

Ali Moore: Historically, are Cambodians very politically active?

Matt Galway: It's not unlike many other Southeast Asian countries. The most prominent religion in Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism, and like Thailand and Laos, it used to have a king, and then the French showed up in Cambodia and Laos and Vietnam. The king kind of still maintained a popularity. So Cambodia and Laos share in that example, as King Sihanouk, who was the first head of state of an independent Cambodia, he actually gave up his throne to his father and ran as a politician. And he had immense support among the people of the country. That still remains true for many respects. There still is a king. He doesn't hold the same power. He's kind of a symbolic ruler. It would be like a constitutional monarchy in some sense. And I think that that, the involvement of a monarch, keeps people interested in politics. I think it's inseparable from Cambodia the nation.

And when it comes to the prime minister, I think yes, absolutely, because of that political instability. People don't want to return to the way things were, where Cambodians were either governed by a foreign rival or by a genocidal regime. And even before that, there was political instability – a CIA-backed coup in 1970, and then Sihanouk, who was immensely popular but controversial overseas, because he was a neutralist to a fault, many would argue. So I think many Cambodians, yeah, I think they can't help but be involved in it, and one would hope that their frustration with the way that things are will mount a serious opposition and a call for the normalization of the democratic process.

Ali Moore: You talk about mounting a serious opposition, but if we go back to Hun Sen and what his longer-term plans are, do you think that we're potentially looking at the beginnings of the Hun Sen dynasty in Cambodia? Do you think that he is positioning to pass power to one of his sons?

Matt Galway: Definitely. I think he's already using the rhetoric that his son evokes this kind of spiritual connection. He'll bring up connections to Hun Manet, who's his son, that he has this charisma to him that's almost like it's imbued by the cosmos. And yeah, he's priming him to be loved by the people. And I mean, Hun Manet is charismatic, he never gives too much away when he's interviewed. I think he comes off as less threatening than his father.



- Ali Moore: He's a military man, isn't he? He's a general?
- Matt Galway: Yeah, he's got an impressive resume, as many of Hun Sen's extended family do. West Point general, studied at NYU, so I think he's being primed for the position, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if he's just handed it and that we are moving further into a Mafia state, where it's all in the family, so to speak.
- Ali Moore: How would that be justified under an ostensibly democratic system?
- Matt Galway: I could see them allowing these parties to come back, but not really run at their full capacity, win again, and possibly maybe appoint one of his sons as a minister, and then essentially resign or retire. And then he would be next in line. Kind of similar to what you have when there's a next person in line for a political party, like if the president were to resign in the United States, his vice president would take over. So I could see that as an option, or I could just see him waiting until the next election. I mean, Hun Sen wants to run for many more years on.
- Ali Moore: He's only 65.
- Matt Galway: I think his vision is to run for at least a few more elections, but I think by name recognition alone, Hun Manet could potentially promise change and then just keep things as they are.
- Ali Moore: What about other members of the family, and indeed the family's business interests? His daughter is quite the media mogul, isn't she?
- Matt Galway: Hun Mana is linked to Bayon Radio, which is a huge outlet for favorable party media. She's linked to 22 companies just alone. It's impressive. Some of the companies she's linked to is that she's chair of Star Airline and Helistar, so transportation industry. But she's not alone. I mean, Hun Sen's nephew, Hun To, is linked to five companies, LHR Asean Import Export. He's also implicated in a one billion dollar drug smuggling operation. But all in all, there's 25 family members, of increasingly tenuous relation, who hold stakes in 17 trading companies, 10 finance firms, 10 hospitality and entertainment businesses, eight interests in tourism and retail, six companies spanning mining, agriculture, and forestry. The list goes on. And Hun Mana alone, with that 22 firms, that's an impressive amount of wealth concentrated in an extended political family.
- Ali Moore: When you look out maybe another five, 10 years, can you see anything that will represent a challenge for Hun Sen and for his plans to pass power to his family?



Matt Galway: Well, a challenge to the Hun clique, I don't see it. I'm kind of a pessimist in this regard. I think as long as Chinese investment is booming, and as long as that's an ally for him, I don't think there's going to be a change. I mean, the only real challenge would be to have actually un-interfered democratic elections and hope that the popular will would actually be represented. And I don't see that happening under Hun Sen. I think this country is trending quickly towards autocracy. I mean, Hun Sen has done very well in closing down, shuttering media outlets that are critical of him, and I think just the disinformation campaign ... I mean, I guess a certain famous president called it fake news. This is an ongoing thing there too, and Facebook is so censored and dominated.

Ali Moore: He's in fact the fourth most-liked leader in the world on Facebook and has more friends on Facebook than there are Cambodian Facebook users.

Matt Galway: It's fascinating, yeah. I mean, it's bordering on Kim Jong-un fascination where it gets to the point where it's like, you know, tone it down a little, this is getting a little ridiculous. But no, to make a long answer shorter, I don't see any reason for optimism, and with the expansion of the Belt and Road into Cambodia and China's increasing necessity to have a diplomatic ally that will support its South China Sea's initiatives and whatnot, I don't think it's going to change. I'd love for it to, but I don't think there's any reason for optimism.

Ali Moore: That's politically. Economically, though, do you think that the country will continue to grow, and it will continue to expand, and hopefully that will flow through to more Cambodians?

Matt Galway: I mean, one can hope. I don't see that it will, but I'm just critical of any kind of mass investment in properties and these particular business ventures that don't really appeal to everyday citizens. So yes, while Phnom Penh is going to have a nice and pretty skyline, or a more pretty skyline, and while towns like Sihanoukville will have more casinos and more beachfront properties, I think Chinese investors own most of the beachfront there. These aren't going to appeal to the everyday Cambodian.

Like the garment worker might say, "Look how our economy is doing well," but it's the same argument that you see in many other countries that are trending on authoritarianism. They will point to growing GDP, they will point to growing jobs, but they won't look at living wages. They won't look at social programs for the poor. And Cambodia is still a developing world country. It is still one of the poorest in Asia. What I see is a widening gap of rich and poor, and Hun Sen's regime's unwillingness to address it, and simply point to how they're doing all of these great things in some areas, but kind of neglecting others in these other arenas.



Ali Moore: Well, we can only hope that the outlook is not as pessimistic as you have painted it, but thank you so much for your insights, Matt. Thank you very much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Matt Galway: Yeah, thank you again for having me.

Ali Moore: Our guest has been Cambodia researcher Dr Matthew Galway, from the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media.

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