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Foreign Aid Underwrites Another Chapter in Cambodia's Bloody History

By [Michael Bengé](#)

Recently, I watched Florida's Senator Marco Rubio -- who is allegedly short-listed as a vice-presidential candidate -- on TV, dancing around to avoid answering whether he supports Mitt Romney's position of cutting foreign aid to reduce the budget deficit. While totally ending foreign aid is unnecessary, countries with repressive and corrupt regimes are prime candidates for such a move. First, a diplomatic *démarche* should be issued with a concrete timetable for ending human rights abuses and theft of aid.

Cambodia is high on the list of problem nations in this regard. Free and fair elections were held for the first and last time in 1993, when the Royalist [FUNCINPEC](#) Party (the United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia) won. However, in 1997, Hun Sen, the number-two official in the communist Cambodian People's Party (CPP), backed by 300 Pol Pot Khmer Rouge (KR) fighters commanded by the notorious butcher Keo Pong, led a *coup d'état* against FUNCINPEC. The new regime then committed extrajudicial executions of around 100 top Army officers and party officials. Since then there have been no free and fair elections, but instead only façades -- rigged elections under control of the CPP. Hun Sen is now prime minister of Cambodia.

Hun Sen stands credibly accused of war crimes. In one eyewitness report, "Hun Sen's troops threw hand grenades and later slit the throats of critically ill patients" in two hospitals in Kompong Cham. Relief troops "discovered hundreds of bodies of men, women and children, young and old, including Buddhist monks who had been first tortured and then killed -- some executed by a gunshot to the back of the head, others chopped to death with hoes, still others strangled to death or suffocated by [plastic bags](#) tied over their heads." [*Does Anybody Care?* Taking Exception, Washington Post, 10/30/89]

Hun Sen is also in charge of enforcing the K-5 Plan, referred to as the "Petite Genocide," during the Vietnamese invasion, in which Cambodians were forced into KR mine fields along the Thai border to plant bamboo thickets, create fields of punji stakes, and lay additional mines. They had to choose between the risk of being blown up constructing the "bamboo wall" and being shot if they tried to [escape](#). Tens of thousands of Cambodians were killed. [*Notons aussi que la construction du Mur de bambou, K5, sous le gouvernement de Chan Sy*, 1984, Cf.Esmeralda Luciulli]

Hun Sen has also placed many Khmer Rouge commanders in positions of power in the army and government. His penchant for brutality and use of death threats cow most members of the opposition and intimidate the Cambodian population in general. He routinely uses the CPP's parliamentary majority to strip opposition deputies of their immunity and uses the judicial system to bring defamation proceedings against those who refuse to kowtow to him. These are either imprisoned or driven into exile. The International Genocide Trials of Khmer Rouge leaders have ground to a halt after interference by Hun Sen and his controlled judges resulting in the resignation of three Western judges. Only one war criminal has been tried and convicted, and the remaining [indicted](#) and imprisoned KR leaders are said to enjoy special privileges -- reportedly because they have threatened to "rat out" Hun Sen for his real role in the Khmer Rouge killings.

The CPP controls all media. Freedom of expression and information are curtailed; journalists are arrested and imprisoned, and newspapers, magazines, and radio stations are shut down for publishing anything the Hun Sen regime dislikes. The right to freedom of assembly has been severely violated, as in a case in Bavet, Svay Rieng province, where the Bavet Mayor shot three factory workers on February 20 who were protesting against squalid working conditions. The mayor admitted to shooting them, was charged with a misdemeanor, and released -- thus, the shooting victims live in fear. This is not an isolated incident, for the cases of the murder of several union leaders remain unsolved.

On April 26, Chut Wutty, one of the highest-profile Cambodian environmental activists, was murdered in Koh Kong province for taking a stand against greed and corruption by illegal loggers (Phnom Penh Post, 04/27/12). Cambodia's most powerful logging syndicate is led by relatives of Hun Sen, including his wife (Global Witness' 2007 report, "Cambodia's Family Trees"). Three weeks after Wutty's murder, soldiers hired to protect the economic concession of a company killed a 14-year-old girl. She was part of a group of villagers organized to defend their land against further encroachment. Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng said the murder was justified and necessary to crack down on an association for a democratic movement against illegal land-grabbing.

Hun Sen, in his infamous "cockroach" speech in 2011, when responding to the suggestion by a Cambodian critic that he should be worried about the overthrow of a dictator in Tunisia, replied, "I not only weaken the opposition, I'm going to make them dead ... and if anyone is strong enough to try to hold a demonstration, I will beat all those dogs and put them in a cage" (Brad Adams, Human Rights Watch, NYT commentary 05/31/2012).

Forced evictions have steadily risen in Cambodia. Tens of thousands of people around the country, including indigenous populations and marginalized families and individuals living in poverty, have been forcibly evicted, and some killed, in land-grabs, often in connection with economic land concessions granted to powerful foreign-owned companies. Evictions are carried out by the Cambodian Army and police, who are paid by the companies. Cambodia's Army, commanded by Hun Sen's son, is for hire to private and foreign interests, and yet the U.S. provides military aid to this corrupt and repressive army.

Corruption is rampant in Cambodia, which is ranked 164th out of 183 countries by Transparency International. Billions of dollars of aid funding by Western taxpayers, and now China, has done relatively little to improve the lives of ordinary Cambodians, or to produce needed reforms. Instead, the government is successfully exploiting international aid as a source of political legitimacy (Global Witness, "Country for Sale"). The U.S. Department of State is major enabler, which recognizes Cambodia as "a constitutional monarchy with an elected government." In fact "King" Norodom Sihamoni is nothing

monarchy with an elected government. In fact, King Norodom Sihanouk is nothing more than an emasculated figurehead under the complete control of the CPP, the government is a repressive kleptocracy, and Cambodia's rigged elections are but a façade. However, State was honest enough to state that members of the security forces commit arbitrary killings and act with impunity. In May 2009, U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Carol Rodley proclaimed that approximately U.S. \$500 million a year of foreign aid is lost through corruption. "Cambodia today is a country for sale and the country is rapidly being parceled up and sold off" to foreign interests, including its extractive resources. The proceeds are pocketed by the Cambodian *nouveau riche* billionaire kleptocrats, with little going to the Cambodian citizenry.

"*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*" (the more things change, the more they remain the same). The band plays on -- and all too often, our foreign aid does more harm than good, while America ends up looking like a paper tiger.

Michael Bengé spent 11 years in Vietnam as a foreign service officer and is a student of South East Asian politics. He is very active in advocating for human rights, religious freedom, and democracy for the peoples of the region and has written extensively on these subjects.

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