

## The House of Heng

I interviewed Heng, a retired provincial police chief who had worked in the police and security services for 30 years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. To gently start the conversation, I asked him what he did as a police chief, a position he attained latterly, but he described fighting the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> I asked him what the biggest challenges were when working as police chief, and he went back to when he was a normal policeman fighting the Khmer Rouge “who kept coming”. I asked him why people join the police in Cambodia and he said, “many people volunteered to fight Pol Pot.” Even when I began starting questions with “since the year 2000...”, Heng would drift back to the Khmer Rouge and the 1980s and ‘90s. In Cambodia, it is not that people hold onto the past, it is the past that holds onto people.

The day before Cambodia would decide whether to go to vote or not, and in doing so sealing the fates of Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy, I had lunch at the house of Heng, the retired police chief who is in his late sixties with waning health. When working, he was responsible for 400 to 500 police and prison officials in a province near Phnom Penh, and many of his family also served in the police and military. Now his walk has become a shuffle, his head stoops and words mumble slowly from his mouth.

We sat in his kitchen, him slouched to my right at the top of the table and his daughter facing me, as we ate his wife’s speciality, *samlor machou Yuon*, the Vietnamese sweet and sour fish soup with pineapple, lotus stems and tomatoes which was my first ever meal in Cambodia. Heng and his family were on the CPP’s side in its battle with

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<sup>1</sup> Heng, Author’s interview No. 130

FUNCINPEC in 1997<sup>2</sup> and he is thankful for the stability and security that they brought to Cambodia, but he added: “In reality, now some people do not like the Government.”

“Does that worry you?” I asked.

“Yes, in the future, it might explode.”

“What do you think should happen to prevent any explosion?”

“Government has to find justice for the people, for the people who don't like the Government. For example, in this election, there should be the opposition party, should be included so that people can vote for them if they want to.”

“What caused the division between the people who like the Government and who don't? What happened?”

“The Government favours the rich and there is no justice for poor people. There is too much nepotism. People do not believe our Government. Think the Government collaborates with the Vietnamese government. They do not trust the Government. They gave Koh Tral to Vietnam – this was the start of the division.<sup>3</sup> He (Hun Sen) supports the Vietnamese most of the time. Makes life difficult for *Kampuchea Krom* people.”<sup>4</sup>

“Did you used to have more trust in the Government?”

“Before, I trust Government 100%, but now lose trust. Now, no more trust in Hun Sen. Have lost trust since retired.”

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<sup>2</sup> Heng, Author's interview No. 130

<sup>3</sup> Koh Tral is the Cambodian name for Phu Quoc, an island near Cambodia and Vietnam that the CPP affirmed in treaties with Vietnam in 1982 and 1985 belonged to Vietnam, as it had done since the end of French colonisation.

<sup>4</sup> *Kampuchea Krom* Lower Cambodia and is what Cambodians call the Mekong Delta area, now in Vietnam, but formerly Cambodian.

When listening, Heng's head would hang heavily from its own weight, like the bags under his eyes and the shoulders round his body. He would wearily look up when speaking but his gaze would remain distant.

“Is it difficult to work in the police if you don't trust Government?”

“Most people just work, it's not true that they trust the Government. It's not true at all... In police, you have to listen to Government. If we are told to control opposition party, we have to. We are under their control.”

“How difficult is it to follow an order you do not agree with?”

“Very difficult. People begin to realise bad things about the party. But have to vote for them.”

“Did they pressure police to vote for them?”

“Give money. Tell us what to do. Everywhere they give money – for police, for soldiers, for the people. Police with four stripes get 200,000. Lower down – 100,000. Other people (officers) – 50,000. [All] because Hun Sen wants to remain Prime Minister.”

Finding a flow of words, Heng said that “even the courts are under his control” and how police use “tricks” to put people in jail; “Scapegoats are found. Find innocent people to be blamed for something else – such as a person being killed for political reasons.”

“How does that make police feel?”

“Feeling is just a feeling. We have no choice. If they order us to arrest, we have to arrest. Regret but have to do it.”

Heng saw many families lose their land, including to sugar plantations supplying Tate & Lyle, but said the police couldn't do anything as orders had come down the line. Commune or district

officials merely stood by and most of the time there weren't any charities to advocate for justice. In many rural places, there was no one villagers could turn to.<sup>5</sup>

Heng said that policemen “will feel a lot of regret” about the violent crackdown on Veng Sreng Street “but it's hard for people to move out from under the Government...impossible for them. They would be arrested and put in prison. They know the Government does bad things but cannot do anything.” He feared that Hun Sen would use his Bodyguard Unit against opponents and that “nobody dare to act against Hun Sen.” I asked Heng if he thought the Prime Minister will ever be changed:

“If there is justice and the right way of doing the election, there would be a change.”

“The Prime Minister has previously said that the army and police would not serve under a different Prime Minister and that they wouldn't accept the result. Do you think this is true?”

“This is not true. Why would the police and military not recognise and accept the opposition? He just says this to get power for himself.”

Heng's answers to my questions were generally short, answering only what I asked in contrast to other people who eagerly shared one opinion after another as I sat and listened. Towards the end though, a sombre Heng asked a question of me.

“Can international countries help my country?”

With every interview, I dreaded this question. I inadequately tried to explain why it was difficult for America, Japan or the European Union to influence Hun Sen.

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<sup>5</sup> Sreyleak, Author's interview No. 015

*A Man of the Mountains* – a lost chapter from *A Tiger Rules the Mountain – Cambodia's Pursuit of Democracy*, by Gordon Conochie

“If Hun Sen still controls the country, it will be hard for this country.” Heng was staring forward again, ageing in front of my eyes.

Fumbling for a justification of inaction, I tried to describe the intricacies of global politics and that attention was focussed on other countries, like Syria and Venezuela. UNTAC, I advised, wouldn't be coming back.

Heng sighed.

“That is the end of our country then.”