



TRUST THE PROCESS: Challenges and Goals of the New Cambodian Government

Country Report

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In August 2023, Hun Manet ascended to the role of Prime Minister of Cambodia, succeeding his father who had been the architect of the nation's political landscape for nearly four decades. Despite allegations of favoritism and nepotism, the newly appointed cabinet comprises a cadre of young, well-educated technocrats whose credentials are undeniably well suited for their respective roles as Cambodia's new political decision makers. However, this may not be an advantage in itself. A pressing question emerges in the context of this leadership transition: How will Prime Minister Hun Manet navigate the systemic obstacles within Cambodia's political landscape to effectively execute his policy agenda and enhance the nation's global reputation? This article seeks to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities as well as the policy choices that Hun Manet is expected to encounter in both international and domestic governance.

Foreign affairs: Sticking to the script

Concerning Cambodia's foreign policy, the government emphasizes continuity, adhering to independent and rule-based principles while prioritizing regional and multilateral cooperation. Simultaneously, engagement with Western partners and approaches to sectoral multi-engagement are areas that the new government will observe closely.

Economic diplomacy will become a crucial focus, specifically concerning the diversification of Cambodia's trade opportunities, the expansion of its export markets, and attraction of more foreign direct investment. By aiming to elevate Cambodia from a Least Developed Country and graduating to an Upper Middle-Income Country, Hun Manet signifies a historic transition in Cambodia's political leadership and economic development.

This will consequently open up new perspectives for the Kingdom's role in the region and within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China, well aware of this development, continues to expand its already significant cooperation with Cambodia. Thus, balancing China's influence while fostering closer relations with Japan for diversified foreign policy options will be equally important as maintaining ties with economically significant neighbors like Thailand and Vietnam, all of which are crucial for Cambodia's security and regional collaboration. However, Cambodia's role within ASEAN will serve as the cornerstone of its foreign policy strategy.

Cambodia's 2022 ASEAN Chairmanship offered numerous avenues for the country to improve its global standing. It was widely commended for some notable achievements, including the issuance of a 119-paragraph ASEAN Joint Communique at the 55th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM).[1] Additionally, Cambodia facilitated the entry of eight new members, among them Ukraine, into the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). It also provisionally welcomed Timor-Leste as the 11th ASEAN member and took proactive diplomatic measures on the Myanmar issue. More importantly, ASEAN offered effective channels for Cambodia to improve its trade connectivity and engage with various countries beyond its comfort zone, as seen in the increase of Cambodia exports to ASEAN market from 4% of total exports in 2000 to over 20% in 2017.[2]

While Cambodia's commitment to multilateralism extends beyond ASEAN, including plans to broaden its diplomatic outreach in Francophone Africa and continuing proactive diplomacy in Asia-Pacific and the Mekong sub-region, it is expected that the Kingdom will become increasingly vocal about its positions on global politics to strengthen its current role within the association.

[1] Cf. Bong, C. (2022): Cambodia's ASEAN diplomacy in the spotlight; <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/08/cambodias-asean-diplomacy-in-the-spotlight/> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[2] Cf. Chheang, V. (2019): After 20 Years, Cambodia Has Reaped Benefits from ASEAN; <https://www.reportingasean.net/20-years-cambodia-reaped-benefits-asean/#:~:text=ASEAN%20helps%20Cambodia%20to%20diversify,an d%20economic%20risks%20and%20uncertainties> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

This is especially noteworthy in light of recent developments within the BRICS alliance.[3] Cambodia does not view BRICS as a fundamental shift in the global geopolitical landscape, rather, the country sees the alliance as another platform for collaboration, free from Western influence. Consequently, two questions arise from this:

- What will be Hun Manet's strategy for engaging with Western partners?
- How does Cambodia execute the multi-sectoral engagement strategy?

Two and a half opportunities

With regard to the first question, Hun Manet's role on the international stage — and by extension, Cambodia's focus on foreign policy — will be prominently displayed at two major summits: the ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia[4], and the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, USA.[5] These events feature sideline meetings where Hun Manet can demonstrate Cambodia's commitment to crucial policy matters and bilateral relations. The Prime Minister will also seize these opportunities to enhance Cambodia's international reputation and contribute to discussions on regional and global issues. During the recent ASEAN Summit in Jakarta and other related events in Indonesia, Hun Manet participated in 13 meetings where he delivered 12 speeches. He engaged in bilateral meetings with several state leaders[6] and in an informal talk with US-Vice President as well as the Prime Ministers of Australia and India.[7]

[3] Cf. Acharya, B / du Plessis, C. / Miridzhanian, A. (2023): BRICS invites six countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran to be new members; <https://www.reuters.com/world/brics-invites-six-countries-including-saudi-arabia-iran-be-new-members-2023-08-24/> (accessed on 11 September 2023)

[4] Cf. Rov, H. (2023): ASEAN Summit to See Youngest Cambodian PM in 20 Years; <https://kiripost.com/stories/asean-summit-to-see-youngest-cambodian-pm-in-20-years> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[5] Cf. NHK World Japan (2023): Cambodia's new prime minister to attend UN General Assembly; https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20230830_32/#:~:text=Cambodia%27s%20new%20prime%20minister%20Hun,he%20strengthens%20ties%20with%20China. (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[6] President of Indonesia, Prime Minister of Vietnam, Prime Minister of Laos PDR, Prime Minister of Singapore, King Sultan of Brunei, Prime Minister of People's Republic of China, President of the Philippines, President of Republic of Korea, Prime Minister of Cook Islands, and Prime Minister of Japan.

[7] Please find the original source in Khmer below;

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid026XkP5pi7t3aCevYZU6PV9Mc2v7EHjkEWssnoRiZrTQHhmVm1qxMsR6oc8Us1pNtl&id=100067683142709&mibextid=2JQ9oc (accessed 11 September 2023).

Furthermore, Cambodia's new Prime Minister met the Secretary-General of ASEAN and the co-founder of the World Economic Forum, in addition, he already engaged in the traditional trilateral meeting with the Prime Ministers of Vietnam and Laos PDR. While meetings during large international events may not provide sufficient time for in-depth dialogues, they offer excellent opportunities for self-presentation. It seems that Cambodia has seized this opportunity.

There may be another chance for Cambodia's new leader, Hun Manet, to bring attention to his country. Among the congratulatory messages he received upon his official inauguration was one from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which included an invitation to visit Ukraine. At first glance, this might not seem surprising in light of Cambodia's aid to Ukraine in the war.[8] However, the Cambodian government has yet to respond to the invitation. Given Phnom Penh's friendly relations with Moscow, it seems unlikely that the Prime Minister would accept the invitation. Nonetheless, the invitation itself is a significant gesture for the new government, and the option to act on it presents an appealing opportunity.

With regard to the second question, it is crucial to recognize that Cambodia must navigate cautiously amid the ongoing tensions between the United States and China. The complexities surrounding the Ream Naval facility in Sihanoukville serve as a case in point. The issue has increasingly become a point of competition between the United States and China.[9] During the sideline meeting at the ASEAN Summit in November 2022, President Joe Biden has raised the issue with Cambodia's former Prime Minister Hun Sen.[10]

[8] Cf. Cheang, S. (2023): Cambodian experts begin training Ukrainian deminers; <https://apnews.com/article/politics-ukraine-government-cambodia-land-mines-3a2f95a038e5d9ceb3a3d54e5b383bf5> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[9] Cf. Yaacob, A. R. (2022): Cambodia's Ream naval base attracts competing patrons; <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/05/cambodias-ream-naval-base-attracts-competing-patrons/> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[10] Cf. Meyn, C. (2022): Biden Pushes Hun Sen on Naval Base, Jailed Activists, Political Repression; <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/biden-pushes-hun-sen-on-naval-base-jailed-activists-political-repression/6835039.html#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20readout%20of.open%20political%20space%20ahead%20of> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

If Cambodia does not properly manage its growing reliance on China, it could face future difficulties. The 2012 Phnom Penh fiasco acts as a warning as to how indecisiveness can tarnish a nation's reputation. This incident occurred during Cambodia's Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012, when the member states were not able to issue a joint statement due to disagreements regarding the disputed territories in the South China Sea.[11] As such, diversifying relationships through multi-sectoral engagement with various countries will be vital for Cambodia to safeguard its national interests. This is particularly evident when considering its border issues.

Cambodia's relationships with Thailand and Vietnam are crucial for both its security and the broader stability of the sub-region. Given the unresolved border demarcation[12] and a history of antagonism[13], including armed conflicts with Thailand in 2008 and 2011, it is imperative for Cambodia to continue stabilizing its ties with both Bangkok and Hanoi. Additionally, immigration poses another challenge. Over a million Cambodian immigrant workers reside in Thailand, and thousands of immigrants and residents from Vietnam live in Cambodia.[14] These are just some of the complex issues that Cambodia must approach with care.

[11] Cf. BBC News (2012): Asean nations fail to reach agreement on South China Sea; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18825148> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[12] Cf. Thun, S. (2022): Cambodia-Vietnam Border Demarcation 90 Percent Complete; <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodia-vietnam-border-demarcation-90-percent-complete> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[13] Cf. Rim, S. (2023): Cambodia and Thailand's Cultural Rivalry Has Serious Implications; <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/cambodia-and-thailands-cultural-rivalry-has-serious-implications/> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[14] Cf. Kim, Y. (2023): Census of migrants in Thailand planned; <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/census-migrants-thailand-planned#:~:text=The%20Ministry%20of%20Labour%20and,construction%2C%20agriculture%20or%20industrial%20sectors> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

Cf. Minority Rights Group International (2017): World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Cambodia : Ethnic Vietnamese; <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49749d4370.html> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

Domestic challenges: The fundamentals first

In his inaugural address to the nation at the National Assembly in August 2023, Prime Minister Hun Manet conveyed strong confidence to steer the Kingdom towards sustainable stability, development, and prosperity. He outlined "Five Guarantees" and "Six Priority Policy Programs", which further elaborate his policy agenda. The launch of Phase 1 of the Pentagon Strategy^[15] was announced during the first cabinet meeting, setting the strategic course for the government for the next 25 years.^[16] This strategy outlines key policy objectives, including the implementation of an inclusive social protection program and the government's dedication to achieving universal health coverage. It aims to keep poverty rates at a minimum, enhance key agricultural sectors, promote sustainable socio-economic development resilient to climate change, and to fortify public administration. The strategy reflects the government's aspirational commitment to build a progressive society, offering a hopeful outlook for the future of Cambodia. It is also expected to serve as a performance indicator for Hun Manet's reign.

On another note, the Cambodian government's sizable bureaucracy has often been criticized for its inefficiency by both opposition parties and the public. It has been highlighted by the press that the current administration has over 1400 secretaries and undersecretaries of state, marking a 120% increase from the previous one.^[17] While the large bureaucracy has traditionally been viewed as a tool for political consolidation and compromise, now questions arise about its effectiveness.

[15] The Pentagon Strategy is a key roadmap for the government to define and implement its strategic directions and policy measures for the first phase of Cambodia's journey to achieve its ambitious goals to become an upper-middle-income economy by 2030 and a high-income economy by 2050.

Royal Government of Cambodia (2023): Pentagon Strategy-Phase I; <https://mfaic.gov.kh/files/uploads/1XK1LW4MCTK9/EN%20PENTAGONAL%20STRATEGY%20-%20PHASE%20I.pdf> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[16] Cf. Orm, B. (2023): Manet unveils first phase of 'Pentagonal Strategy', goals; <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/manet-unveils-first-phase-pentagonal-strategy-goals> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

[17] Cf. Narim, K. (2023): New Gov't More Than Doubles Secretary and Undersecretary of State Positions in Ministries; <https://cambojanews.com/new-govt-more-than-doubles-secretary-and-undersecretary-of-state-positions-in-ministries/> (accessed on 11 September 2023).

Recent activities indicate that Hun Manet seems more likely to preserve the existing state of affairs rather than initiate substantial reforms, at least for the near future. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that public administration reforms in any country require time and patience for a gradual process to succeed; Cambodia is no exception. After all, it has been only 40 years since Cambodia was freed from a genocidal regime and just 24 years since it achieved stability. Given that as recently as the 1990s, many of the capital's roads were still unpaved, it is noteworthy that some government ministries now operate almost fully digitalized, without requiring printed documents.

Continuity needs no fireworks

Those who anticipated a grand inauguration for Hun Manet, complete with a parade in front of the Peace Palace, riverside fireworks, and vibrant banners adorning the party building, may have been disappointed by the absence of such fanfare. Sometimes, words speak louder than actions — or in this case, the absence thereof. In the case of Cambodia, continuity does not require a celebratory display of fireworks, but rather a steadfast commitment to sustainable policies and social progress. As outlined in this article, challenges lie ahead, and none of them will be easily surmounted. This transition at the apex of Cambodia's political structure has been carefully planned and executed seamlessly. The message from both the new and the previous government is unambiguous: Cambodia is in a transitional phase toward something new and, hopefully, better. There is no need for overt affirmations of belief, what the government asks for is simply this: Trust.

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