

AGLOS Special Issue: Workshop and Symposium 2013–2014: 1–20 ISSN 1884-8052	Copyright ©2015 Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University <a href="http://gds-gs-sophia.jp">http://gds-gs-sophia.jp</a>
--	---

## **Understanding the Elections in Cambodia 2013**

**Caroline Hughes**

Professor of Conflict Resolution and Peace,  
Division of Peace Studies,  
University of Bradford

**Abstract** : the surprisingly strong showing of the opposition coalition in the 2013 national election in Cambodia shocked both external observers, the ruling party, and, apparently, Cambodians themselves. The mood in Cambodia since the election has been one of rising excitement at the prospect of political change. In fact, analysis of elections since 1993 shows that the distribution of votes in 2013 among parties was not particularly unusual, if national elections are treated as different from local elections and there are good reasons for doing this. The significance of the 2013 elections may not be so much that they reveal a surprising distribution of political support amongst the electorate than that they reveal cracks in the ruling party's ability to dominate the electoral scene.

**Keywords** : elections, Cambodia, democracy, opposition.

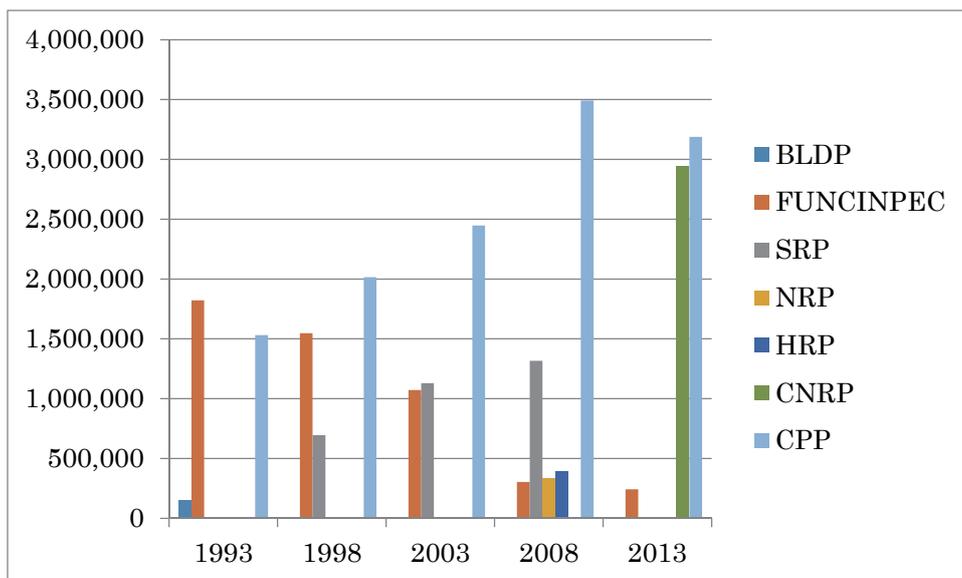
The 2013 elections in Cambodia were the most exciting for fifteen years, showing that the ruling Cambodian People's Party's grip on power is perhaps not as firm as most analysts, including the party's own, had previously thought. Post-election demonstrations attracted tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of opposition party supporters (RFA 2013). The opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), caused a temporary constitutional crisis as the opposition resumed its tactic of boycotting political institutions and the CPP made its customary response of insisting on business as usual, and governing alone (BBC 2013). Cambodia has been here before: these stand-offs characterised the general elections of 1993, 1998 and 2003, and reflect a stubborn split in the Cambodian electorate. Roughly half the country appears to regularly respond to the CPP's authoritarian emphasis on public order, combined with enthusiastic embrace of croney capitalism

and neo-patrimonial development. The other half appear to regularly reject this message in favour of a variety of opposition campaigns centred on anti-Vietnamese nationalism and neo-liberal reformism. In fact, the election result of 2013 is far less surprising than the CPP's apparent unpreparedness for it. However, post-election bargaining and protests unfolded in a context where the stakes were different from previous elections, and Cambodian society was different also. In responding to this challenge to its power, the CPP has a different set of constituencies to please, compared to 1998 or even 2003, significantly limiting the party's room to manoeuvre. Consequently political reforms appear to be on the way, but the scope for realising a more positive form of peace, let alone social justice, in Cambodia is nevertheless limited.

**The elections in 2013: A shock result?**

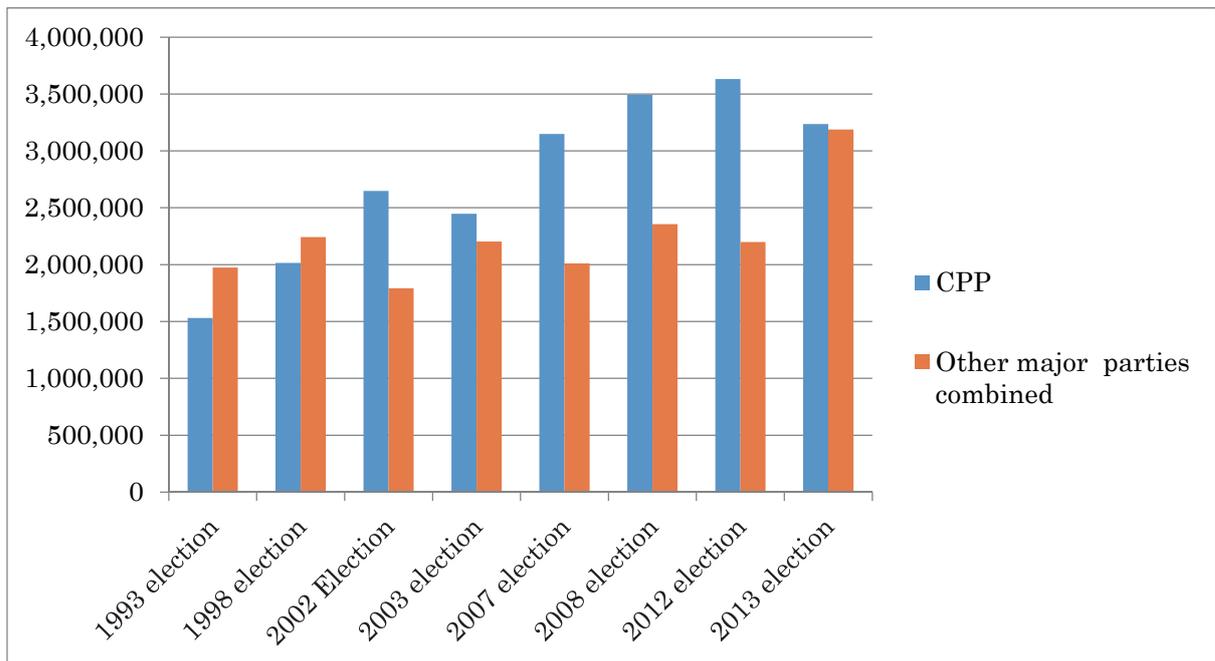
Compared with other elections at national and local level since 2000, the result of the national elections of 2013 certainly appear anomalous at first glance (see Figure 1). Apart from its defeat in the UNTAC election of 1993, the CPP has, until 2013, towered over its adversaries. The trend is even more striking if local government elections, introduced in 2002 on a five-yearly cycle are also added. Figure 2 shows the CPP's share of the vote set against the combined vote of all serious opposition parties, defined for the purposes of this paper as those which gained more than 150,000 votes. These graphs suggest that the CPP was clearly the dominant party from 2002 to 2012, but that in 2013 the CPP saw its apparently inexorable rise suddenly checked by the success of the newly formed Cambodia National Rescue Party.

Figure 1 Results in general elections 1993 to 2013, number of votes.



Source: National Election Committee and COMFREL.

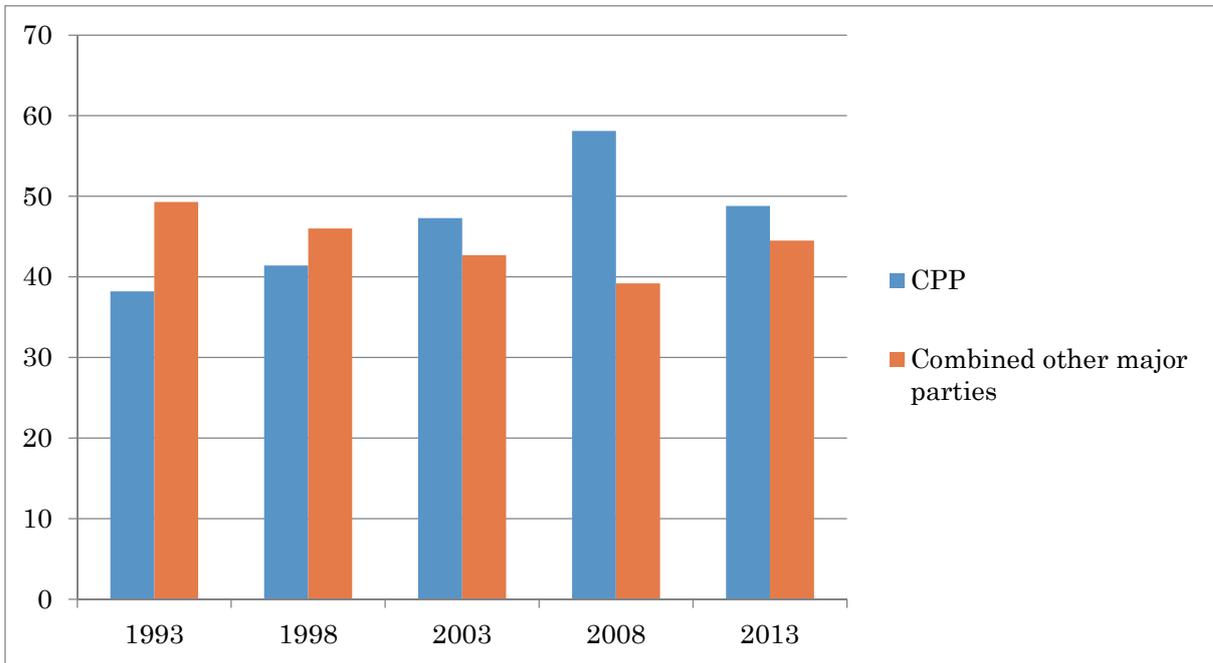
Fig 2: CPP vs. Combined Opposition in All Elections post-1993: number of votes



Source: National Election Committee and COMFREL

However, the situation looks different if the CPP's share of the vote is compared to the combined opposition vote, and if local government elections are excluded. Figure 3 shows the CPP vote as a percentage of the whole, set against the combined opposition vote in national elections only.

Fig 3: CPP vs. Combined Opposition in National Elections post-1993: percentage of the vote.



Source: National Election Committee and COMFREL

My contention is that when the figures are displayed this way, the 2013 result looks less surprising – here, in fact, it is the 2008 vote that appears to be the anomaly. If 2008 is removed from the picture, then the CPP appears as a party that has consistently had to struggle to achieve steady results at national level. Although the 2013 result represents a recovery for the opposition, compared to 2003 and 2008, it has not returned to the position it was in in the 1990s. In fact, compared to 1993, 1998 and 2003, the 2013 result is a reasonably good performance for the CPP. For this argument to be accepted, it is necessary to justify, first, combining the votes of the opposition in this way; and second, treating national elections as separate from local elections.

**The Nature of the Opposition Vote.**

Arguably, there are strong justifications for treating the data exactly like this. With respect to the question of whether opposition votes should be combined, we cannot know how individual voters have migrated over time with respect to this picture, because exit polls are not allowed under Cambodian electoral law, as a measure intended to prevent intimidation. However, some trends are evident. The number of parties in Cambodia has dwindled since a high point of 39 in 1998. The number of voters participating in elections has also declined from 94 per cent of registered voters in the 1998 election to only 68 per cent of registered voters in 2013 (International IDEA 2013).

Over the same time period the nature of the opposition has changed dramatically. In 1993, the election essentially offered a choice between the party of the Phnom Penh regime, the CPP, which had controlled Cambodia with Vietnamese backing since Vietnam's overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979; or the forces of the resistance, who had controlled small enclaves on the border during those years. The royalist movement was the major actor in the resistance, represented by the *Front Uni National Pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutre, Pacifique et Cooperatif* (FUNCINPEC) led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, son of Cambodia's erratic but charismatic king, Norodom Sihanouk. The victory of FUNCINPEC in the UN-organised election of 1993 has been regarded as representing a rejection by voters of the socialist economic policy promoted by the CPP in the 1980s, and the corruption and dislocation associated with the sudden shift to the free market at the end of the decade (Frieson 1996). It has also been regarded as a vote for national unity and a return to the monarchical order of the 1950s and early 1960s, often regarded as Cambodia's golden era by virtue of the fact that it was the only time in living memory that Cambodia has known both independence and peace.

After 1993, however, the royalist movement declined significantly, as Prince Ranariddh alienated key followers and failed to make inroads into CPP control of the state apparatus (Hughes 2003). Meanwhile, a secular nationalist opposition emerged from alienated former royalists, such as Sam Rainsy, and from the remnants of the republican movement within the resistance, such as Kem Sokha. Sam Rainsy's Sam Rainsy Party was formed in 1996 after Sam Rainsy was expelled from FUNCINPEC by Prince Ranariddh. Kem Sokha formed the Human Rights Party in 2007, a year after his release from a brief spell in prison after criticising a controversial border deal between the Cambodian government and the government of Vietnam. From 2007 to 2012, the SRP and HRP coexisted uneasily with one another and with the remnants of the royalist movement, which split into two separate parties in 2006 and subsequently saw its fortunes decline dramatically. In 2012, however, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha combined forces to fight the election under a single party banner – that of the Cambodia National Rescue Party.

We cannot know for certain whether former royalists have migrated to the CNRP or whether they shifted instead to the CPP while CPP members at the same time shifted to the CNRP. Nor can we know if the support of the HRP and the SRP migrated to the CNRP. However, we do know that a longstanding feature of electoral politics, and a key plank of the CPP strategy for maintaining and strengthening its vote base, is a fraught politics of loyalty, obligation, reward and exclusion. The CPP's strategy for reclaiming its role as Cambodia's dominant party from 1993 was organised around strategies of inclusion and exclusion, in which insiders are well rewarded and outsiders are marginalised and, often, punished (Craig and Pak 2011; Hughes 2003, 2006). Supporting these strategies is a system of surveillance and co-optation which in previous elections has worked well in getting out the vote.

Clearly, the CPP's vote is not static. In some elections, it has won fewer votes than it had members, suggesting that some marginal voters had complied with its heavy handed strategies of co-optation but made independent decisions in the polling booth. In 1998, for example, the party claimed to have 3 million members, but won only 2 million votes (Smith 1998). Equally, in the mid-2000s in particular, the party appeared to have achieved an inexorable momentum, while many of the key opposition leaders were in exile or suffering significant harassment at home. This may have encouraged some former opposition supporters to shift their allegiance to the CPP: indeed, this is the only explanation for the CPP landslide in 2008.

At the same time, the rigidity of the system of inclusion and exclusion that the CPP has, largely single-handedly, imposed on Cambodian politics suggests that the core of support for each party is fairly stubborn. Similarly, opinion polls conducted annually by the International Republican Institute suggest that issues most commonly raised by those respondents dissatisfied with the country's progress reflect key opposition electoral issues: corruption, nepotism, illegal immigration, damage to the environment and land-grabbing. In particular, the persistence of concerns about Vietnamese immigration, which has been the top concern annually of 15-17 percent of dissatisfied poll respondents since 2010, reflects a key issue dividing the CPP from the various sections of the opposition, all of which are associated with a strongly anti-Vietnamese form of nationalism (IRI 2010, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that opposition members are more likely to shift between opposition parties than join the CPP, and that the stultifying loyalty demanded of CPP members is to some extent effective. Given this assumption, it seems reasonable to lump the opposition together as a protest vote and assume that the core of the CPP vote has grown only quite slowly, except for 2008 when it increased quite markedly.

Explaining 2008 as an anomaly is quite easy. The 2008 election took place at the crest of the boom: the impact of the global financial crisis had not yet hit Cambodia, farm gate prices were high and the property boom was giving the middle classes in Phnom Penh an unprecedented feeling of wealth. Furthermore, in 2008 a crisis on the border with Thailand had a significant effect on electoral politics. During the pre-election period, a row developed within Thailand between the rural-based government of Samak Sundaravej and the nationalist urban People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) over Thailand's support for Cambodia's bid for World Heritage Status for the border temple of Preah Vihear. Ownership of the temple has long been disputed between Cambodia and Thailand and Samak was accused by his political opponents of selling the Thai national interest through his implicit recognition of Cambodian sovereignty. The row escalated with PAD supporters occupying the temple and the Thai army mobilizing to support them. The Royal Cambodian Armed Forces responded leading to a tense standoff between Thai and Cambodian troops in the border area, which at times broke into armed conflict. As the crisis developed, Cambodian nationalist sentiments ran

high as voters rallied to collect money for soldiers at the Front (Hughes 2011).

We can speculate, then, that in the context of this international crisis, discontent with CPP corruption and development policies was subsumed. Voters are strongly aware that it is the CPP that controls the Cambodian armed forces and therefore perhaps regard the party as better placed than its opponents to respond to a foreign invasion. The opposition is associated with anti-Vietnamese nationalism, but their long sojourn on the Thai border with Thai support during the resistance years perhaps weakens their standing in the context of a Cambodia-Thai confrontation in the eyes of Cambodian voters. Certainly Hun Sen earlier associated himself with a strongly anti-Thai position in 2003, in response to comments by a Thai celebrity about the ownership of Cambodian temples. Given these factors, it is arguable that the 2008 election was virtually unlosable for the CPP. In 2013, however, with both the height of the boom and the border crisis over, voters who are unhappy with CPP policies on economic development and rule of law have returned to the opposition – now more or less united under one banner as the CNRP – to register their protest vote.

#### **National and Local Elections in Cambodia**

Analysing national elections separately from local elections is perhaps a more controversial approach to the data. However, there are arguably good reasons for doing so. Studies of local level politics in Cambodia are relatively few, but those that exist have long suggested that at the local level, politics is intensely personal, characterised by high levels of dependence and strong if unequal relationships of reciprocity. Research suggests that the commune and village levels of government are the levels with which villagers most frequently interact and which they know most about. For most Cambodian households, being on good terms with the commune and village authorities is important. It ensures that they will be considered, even consulted, in commune level decision making about local development issues. They will be invited to participatory planning meetings and included in distributions of resources and gifts from commune patrons. Most importantly, if they have a problem – a reverse of fortune or a serious dispute – they will be able to get a degree of support (Hughes 2003, 74; Thon et al 2009). For commune chiefs, mediating in disputes and managing local development planning comprises a significant portion of their time (Rusten et al 2004; Kim 2012, 75).

Although there is considerable evidence to show that households associated with the opposition no longer need fear direct violence from commune or village level authorities (Ojendal and Kim 2006), nevertheless villagers are likely to invest significantly in good relations with commune or village level chiefs, through attending meetings when invited, maintaining appropriate attitudes and behaviour, fulfilling expected duties, paying required fees and offering appropriate gifts. For villagers, showing loyal support to commune authorities is a serious matter. Furthermore, from a

pragmatic point of view, if a household has built up good relations with a commune chief, it is highly unlikely to vote that chief out, since doing so will require new investment in a new relationship (Thon et al 2011). There are consequently good local reasons why commune chiefs are re-elected; and indeed, electoral spills ousting CPP chiefs are rare except in places where the relationship between the chief and his or her constituents has broken down irretrievably. For example, COMFREL reported in 2012 the Sam Rainsy Party's claim that areas where the SRP had won commune chief positions were invariably areas where ongoing land disputes had severely affected villages and had not been resolved by commune chiefs (COMFREL 2012, 58/9). The converse does not appear to be true however: SRP chiefs elected in 2007 were vulnerable to ousting in 2012. COMFREL explains this as a result of the inability of SRP chiefs to exert their authority in the context of a CPP-dominated administrative structure (Ibid.) . Qualitative studies, for example, CDRI's study of leadership in Cambodian communes conducted in 2007 and 2008, supports this view. It also may be the case that SRP chiefs were elected in 2007 to areas where there were long-running land disputes and were ousted in 2012 because they, like their CPP counterparts, failed to resolve them (Thon et al 2011).

National level politics is different. There is a sharp distinction in Cambodia between local level policy issues and national level ones. Whereas local politics is about building relationships, showing support and participating, national politics is the direction from which bad news tends to come. As the above discussion suggests, struggles over forestry, land, wages and access to natural resources – the key struggles in Cambodia's past two decades – have all pitted local actors against national or international ones. These are long-standing concerns in Cambodian elections – my fieldwork conducted during the election campaign period in 1998, for example, found that privatization of water and forest resources was the main issue raised by villagers at political party rallies across the country (Hughes 2003). Although the CPP has poured large amounts of money into providing development gifts in the form of irrigation schemes, wells, roads and so on, and although villagers tend to insist upon their gratitude for such projects, there is nevertheless evidence that villagers are acutely aware of the politicisation of such projects and that this is therefore not regarded as compensating entirely for the loss of customary rights (Hughes 2005).

Commune chiefs find themselves in the invidious position of attempting to mediate between the national and local level in such disputes. Thus far, it has been rare to find commune chiefs openly challenging national level decision making. However, surveys of commune chiefs have found that this is a weighty problem for them (Thon et al 2011). As suggested above, there appears to be an expectation among villagers that commune chiefs will represent their interests in these struggles. Yet this is impossible in a context where concessions are handed out by national level actors who are unchallengeable within the Party hierarchy. This creates a tension within the CPP structure. Political

strategy for the CPP has long focused on how to weld together national level development strategies that have been overwhelmingly based upon expropriation, privatization and exclusion of citizens from previously accessible resources; and local level vote-winning strategies that rely upon vote-buying and small scale development initiatives.

### **Fraud in Cambodian Elections**

The election in 2013 was run in very similar ways to previous elections. CPP strategy for 'getting the vote out' has changed very little in 15 years. Its main campaign message has been consistent. It describes itself as a party that is above all effective: effective at removing genocidal regimes; effective at achieving and consolidating peace, conceptualised as social order; and effective at promoting economic development both at national and local level. However, the CPP has never relied upon this popular appeal to win elections. The CPP has in every election also relied upon vote-buying, surveillance of the population, and administrative exclusion of potential opposition voters to ensure a victory. It has also frequently resorted to violence or the threat of violence, although this aspect appears to be less evident in the pre-election period for 2013.

Allegations of fraud have also cropped up in every election since 1998. In 1998, a litany of complaints were documented, from intimidation at polling stations, to forced enrolment in the party. In 1998 also, the mechanism for converting votes into seats was changed at the very last minute, from the system used by the UN in 1993 to a different system which favoured parties with a large and widespread base of support. Post-election demonstrations focused on this issue as a blatant example of manipulation of the electoral framework in order to enhance the performance of the CPP (Hughes and Real 1999). In 2003, there were further allegations of irregularities, focusing for the first time on administrative practices designed to bar certain groups of voters from registering and/or voting. The COMFREL report of that year claimed that 250,000 ghost voters appeared on the electoral rolls and that 400,000 voters were barred from registering or voting due to administrative irregularities. This potentially amounts to vote-rigging to the tune of 650,000 votes, in a context where the combined opposition were votes amounted to only 250,000 fewer than those of the CPP (COMFREL 2003). In 2003, the refusal of the opposition to cooperate in forming a government prompted a year-long stand-off before parliament was finally convened. During that time, there were reports of in-fighting within the CPP, in which Hun Sen came out decisively on top. An incident in which tanks appeared and surrounded the Phnom Penh home of Chea Sim, who immediately left the country, was indicative of dissension at the highest levels of the party.

However, ultimately the political impact of allegations of fraud in 2003 was limited because the opposition was divided. It may be assumed that, to the extent voters were intentionally excluded from voting, this was because they were considered likely to vote for an opposition party. However,

with two opposition parties to choose from, it was unclear which of the two would have benefited. Sour relations and intense distrust between FUNCINPEC's leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy of the SRP therefore presented a problem in challenging the result.

In 2008, there were fewer instances of election complaints. However, as indicated earlier, this may be because party intelligence suggested that there was little need to impose such tight controls on voters. In 2012, by contrast, 3.2 million eligible voters did not vote and a Comfrel survey suggested that almost half of those sampled – more than a million voters - did not vote because of problems with registration or because of administrative difficulties at polling stations (COMFREL 2012). Reports of over a million irregularities out of a total of 6.6 million votes in 2013 (Electoral Reform Alliance 2013) is not an unusual state of affairs. What is unusual is that, because the opposition were united for the first time under the banner of one party, these votes could quite conceivably have changed the outcome of the election.

### **Social Control and CPP Strategy**

As mentioned above, a second aspect of CPP electoral practice has always related to the use of local authorities to co-opt voters into supporting the party through various mechanisms of social control. These mechanisms range from vote-buying, sponsoring of development initiatives and mass gift-giving programmes, to the formation of groups of households under a group leader who is responsible for finding out voting intentions of householders, and ensuring those that intend to vote CPP go and vote on the day. These kinds of approaches have been significant in politicising electoral arrangements such that individuals who are identified as opposition supporters are marginalised from village level activities during the election campaign and on polling day itself. These individuals are not assisted with registration, with finding appropriate forms of identity, or in finding their names on polling lists. They are also not invited to come and vote, which for some groups constitutes a considerable barrier to their participation. These voters are therefore far more likely than average to fail to vote.

An interesting aspect of the 2013 election is that the result was apparently not predicted by the CPP. This is significant because it suggests that these sophisticated and well-practiced techniques of social control are not working as well as previously in rendering the electorate legible to the party. One aspect of this is the changing demographic of the Cambodian electorate, which I will return to later. Another is the changing nature of Cambodian households. This trend is not unexpected: indeed, it has been building for years. In interviews conducted for a CDRI study in 2003 (Hughes and Kim 2003), the uncertainty of local level officials as to the political sympathies of the younger population was already evident. One village chief in Kompong Cham commented, for example, “ With respect to each household, we know very well who the father votes for, but the children, we don't know.”

CPP strategies of social control are based upon the kind of local level politics described earlier: a local politics where local leaders who have been in place since 1979 or earlier know the families who live in their village, have regular interactions with them, and are situated in a position of power in relation to them. With regard to older rural Cambodians, this depiction is probably reasonably accurate. Those who own plots of land and engage in farming as their main occupation do by and large have these kinds of relationships with local officials. They are relatively settled in particular locations. The continued uncertain reliance of rice farming on variable rainfall patterns and the continued vulnerability of farmers in relationships with officialdom prompted by widespread corruption, landgrabbing and lack of enforcement of the rule of law means that such individuals do feel the need to stay on good terms with local authorities. Furthermore, this older, settled, rice-growing generation remembers the horrors of the Pol Pot regime and the upheaval and warfare of the 1980s, and is therefore most likely to respond to the CPP's self-portrayal as heroes of Cambodian history.

### **Fear-Mongering as an Electoral Strategy**

This relates to a further aspect of electoral strategy – the promotion of a climate of fear. This has been a staple of CPP strategy although it has varied from individual strategies of intimidation to strategies designed to promote a sense of collective threat. In the 1990s, selective political assassinations combined with wider campaigns of intimidation were widespread. In 1998, the election took place in the aftermath of the military battle of 1997 in which pro-CPP troops ousted the FUNCINPEC leadership from parliament and the country and then looted pro-FUNCINPEC neighbourhoods in Phnom Penh. This was followed by a string of political assassinations of key members of Funcinpec's military network in the provinces (COUNCHR 1997). The election took place in a tense atmosphere, with international observers following FUNCINPEC and SRP members around on the electoral campaign trail to ensure their safety.

In 2003, political assassinations were fewer, although intimidation was still widely alleged. COMFREL noted between 19 and 31 killings of opposition party members that might have been politically connected (COMFREL 2003). Furthermore, anti-Thai riots in January in Phnom Penh, although probably not organised by the CPP, were certainly used by the party to send a political message. The police and security forces failed to intervene in the riots for several hours, allowing the torching of Thai businesses in Phnom Penh and prompting the flight of the Thai community. The riots were, arguably, used to send a message to Phnom Penh residents of the chaos associated with mob rule, and the fact that only armed forces associated with the CPP have the ability to restore order in such situations. While there is no evidence to show how widely this message was received beyond Phnom Penh, nor how it affected the elections, it added to a climate of instability that very

much plays to the CPP's advantage. As already mentioned in 2008, the Thais were again an electoral issue as the prospect of Thai occupation of Preah Vihear prompted clashes between the Thai army and the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. Although a very different form of violence, this once again assisted the CPP with its message of public order and control. The 2013 elections were arguably the most peaceful so far.

Concerns about public order and a climate of political intimidation are arguably most useful with respect to Cambodia's older generations of voters: those who recall the horror of Pol Pot and the conscription campaigns and bloody civil war of the 1980s. Voters who remember the war and witnessed the effects of widespread terror and disorder are likely to be far more susceptible to reminders of these than younger voters whose memories do not stretch back beyond Cambodia's recent era of stability. As political violence loses its effectiveness as an electoral tactic, a key plank of the CPP's dominance in the 1990s and 2000s – its control of the military and use of this to both threaten and reassure the population – is significantly weakened.

### **The CPP's Economic Record**

The final aspect of CPP dominance that needs to be discussed is that of the economy. The CPP has presided over some notable economic successes: with Vietnamese assistance it began rebuilding the foundations of the economy after the disastrous collectivization and famines of the 1970s; it responded to popular demand in restoring household land ownership in the late 1980s; its cooperation with the peace process allowed the restoration of international aid and trade in the 1990s; it began ploughing party money into infrastructure and school building in the 1990s; and it oversaw the remarkable boom of the early 2000s.

Arguably the CPP reaped the benefits of this in 2008. The election took place just after the peak of the economic boom following five years of double digit growth (World Bank 2013). Although economic problems were evident already in 2008, particularly in the shape of high food prices in urban areas, these were not electorally problematic. High prices for urban consumers entailed high earnings for farmers also; and many urban consumers in 2008 were enjoying spectacular increases in the value of their homes, which offset the decline in real incomes as inflation rose.

Subsequently, however, the economy suffered from the impact of the global financial crisis, particularly in 2009. This had a particular effect in the garment industry, with lay-offs and reduced opportunities for overtime payments. Although GDP overall rebounded in 2010, it is significant that pay and conditions in the garment industry have not subsequently recovered, leaving workers worse off and operating in worse conditions than previously (ILO Better Factories Cambodia, 2013). This has produced increased militancy amongst trade unions in the industry with strike days increasing sharply in the lead-up to the 2013 election (Ibid., 2).

A second aspect of the economy that has become a problem for the CPP is the policy of land allocations for economic concessions. This was an unpopular policy from the outset and has prompted some of the most determined protests and worst violence against protestors of any issue in the last decade. Evictions, competition for resources between villagers and private companies, and the exclusion of villagers from access to resources have become much more widespread than previously. Although these issues have been noted since the 1990s, the impact of land concessions in particular has spread rapidly during the last electoral period, partly due to the appetite for plantation resources in the recent commodities boom (Licadho nd.). The encroachment of economic concessions away from peripheral areas of low population into the heartland of the country has produced more conflict between local communities and national politicians, and their business cronies. This presents a significant problem for the CPP's strategy of using resources taken from peripheral areas to spend on development projects to benefit the densely populated centre. The distinction between centre and periphery is no longer so clear-cut and the swings in voting patterns in provinces such as Kratie towards the CNRP in 2013 as opposed to 2008 (COMFREL 2008, 2013) may well be linked to this key faultline of political contestation.

### **Demographic Change**

In these reflections on the nature of CPP control, differences between an older, more settled, population of village-based farmers and a younger, mobile population of urban workers have already been drawn out. The demographics of the Cambodian population mean that ever larger numbers of the population do not fit the mould for which CPP strategy was designed. For young voters living in rural households, lack of opportunities to acquire land of their own alienates them from local authorities and patronage systems focused on small scale development initiatives. It insulates them to some extent even from outright threats or intimidation. For those who move to find work in urban areas, social control mechanisms virtually evaporate, or are replaced by relationships with trade unions of one political orientation or another. The social control strategy that the CPP has developed is inadequate to deal with mobile, landless rural or urban labourers, and these groups are also least likely to respond to the CPP as the saviour of the country from the Pol Pot regime. What is most interesting about this, perhaps, is that it has been predictable for a decade and yet the party itself has apparently not properly recognised or responded to this challenge.

26 per cent of the Cambodian population are young people living in poor households. In the 2013 election, approximately 1.5 million young Cambodians became eligible to vote (CIA World Factbook 2013). These are voters who were born in the UNTAC era and afterwards, who grew up during the boom years, and looked for jobs in the era of the financial crisis. These voters are more likely to be unemployed and landless than older Cambodians; they are much more likely to be

literate and plugged into social media, rather than reliant on local authorities and state radio for information; they have little prospect of establishing their own households or farms; and because they tend to live at home with their parents they are usually represented by their parents at political meetings and participatory decision-making events. These voters are economically and politically marginalised in a context where party strategy has long been focused on co-optation.

### **The Opposition.**

The final aspect of the 2013 elections is the role of the opposition. The opposition in Cambodia has long been harassed and divided, plagued by violent attacks, prosecutions and defections. However, a significant development since the early 2000s has been the virtual demise of the royalist movement, with the abdication and subsequent death of Sihanouk, and the retirement of Ranariddh from politics. This renders the opposition movement much more homogenous, united around principles of liberal economics, populist nationalism and anti-corruption reform. This has allowed a unification of the opposition under the banner of a secular nationalist programme, something that had not previously been achieved since the 1993 UNTAC election. The uniting of the opposition enabled the pooling of candidates and resources, in a manner that had not been possible previously when clashes of ideology and the formalities of royalist hierarchy had significantly inhibited the movement. It is clear that in 2013, significant momentum built up behind the united team of Kem Sokha and Sam Rainsy in a manner that had never occurred before.

Analysis of the provinces in which the opposition did best suggests that the expansion of industry outwards from Phnom Penh has encouraged a more widespread opposition vote. Outright victories in 2013 for the CNRP in Kompong Speu and Prey Veng – both province where the CPP outpolled the combined opposition in 2008 - suggest that expansion of factories into a wider area around Phnom Penh has produced a geographically broader base of support for the opposition (COMFREL 2008, 2013). However, the big story is that for the first time the opposition is united and therefore in a position to cast doubt on the CPP's victory, since in a two party system, electoral fraud operates to the clear detriment of one party and to the advantage of the other.

### **Conclusions: Where Next?**

Although I have argued that this result is not really so different nor so unexpected, it does have quite significant ramifications. For one thing, it suggests that the CPP have been overconfident of their political strategies and perhaps their popularity. They failed to deliver the kind of results their supporters and backers were expecting and that has clearly caused internal dissent within the party, and undermined, to an extent, Hun Sen's position. It seems unlikely that Hun Sen will be removed from power because of this, but it will certainly cause a rethink in the party. Hun Sen may be

tempted to resort to the political thuggery of the past in order to reassert his authority.

However, the external environment is not favourable to this. In the 1990s, the CPP narrowly escaped international sanction for its regular resort to violence because it acted as a bulwark against the Khmer Rouge. In the 2000s, arguably, the War on Terror and concerns about Islamism in South East Asia produced an external environment in which donors and investors tacitly backed increasing authoritarianism in Cambodia. At this time, also, the CPP looked to China for support and used Chinese aid as a way of rejecting any attempts at western support for human rights in Cambodia.

One of the most interesting aspect of the post-election scenario, however, has been China's public rebuke to Hun Sen. As demonstrations and protests continued into a fifth month in Phnom Penh, the Xinhua News Agency – China's official media outlet – issued a critical report on the failure of the Hun Sen government to restore order and institute reform (Willemeys and Mech 2013). China's interests in Cambodia are not ideologically motivated – they are oriented towards protecting the large amount of Chinese investment in the country, and the significant trade in raw materials that has been established. Since the outside world often views the Cambodian People's Party as virtually a client regime of Beijing, the Chinese do not want political instability in Cambodia, or a resort to widespread political violence by the CPP, to embarrass China, at a time when China is engaged in complicated economic reforms at home, and in the midst of a diplomatic offensive with respect to the outside world. While Chinese foreign policy has become increasingly assertive in both Asia and Africa in recent years, China is also attempting to promote itself as a responsible power (Zhao 2013; Huang 2013). Although China is not about to begin promoting human rights and democracy in Cambodia, this does suggest that China has a powerful interest in the situation remaining peaceful, and China clearly conveyed this message to the CPP after the election.

The elections represented a wake-up call, not only for the party, but possibly also for the Cambodian electorate as well. Opinion polling by the International Republican Institute suggests that over the period from January to October 2013, public dissatisfaction in Cambodia sharply increased. The number of respondents reporting that the country was heading in the right direction dropped from 79% in January to 55% in October, while the number reporting that the country was heading in the wrong direction increased from 21% to 43%. A further poll carried out by the Asia Foundation in May/June 2014 found this number had increased to 59% (Asia Foundation 2014, 18). This is the highest level of dissatisfaction recorded by either the Asia Foundation or IRI since they began conducting opinion poll surveys in 2000. There are few other obvious causes for this slump in satisfaction than the election result itself: there were no particular adverse economic shocks or political scandals in Cambodia in the intervening period. There are three possible ways in which the election result might have affected the mood of the electorate. First, public satisfaction with the direction of the country may have been affected by the post-election instability, awakening fears of a

return to the political crises and violence of the 1990s. Second, the public may have been dissatisfied with the conduct of the elections themselves or the government's response to the opposition parties claims in the post-election period. Protests were violently dispersed in January 2014, and there has been a wave of violence against key constituencies traditionally supportive of the opposition, such as factory workers (Licadho 2014).

Third, the results may reflect a new sense in Cambodia that there is political space once again to criticise the government publicly. The return of Sam Rainsy, the sense that the opposition is once again a political force, the CPP's evident discomfiture at the election results, and the return of public protest and debate following the election may all contribute to this sense among voters of the possibility of change. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the figures on public dissatisfaction reported post-election by IRI and in 2014 by the Asia Foundation coincide much more closely with actual distributions of votes than either the figures IRI reported at the start of 2013 (when only 21% saw the country as "headed in the wrong direction") or before the election in 2008 (when only 20% saw the country as "headed in the wrong direction" but nevertheless 39% voted against the government in the election of that year) (IRI 2013b). The new levels of dissatisfaction reported in opinion polls may not reflect new levels of dissatisfaction so much as a new willingness to reveal dissatisfaction.

These trends have clearly had an impact on the government. First, the CPP has been forced to make concessions to the opposition for the first time. A key issue for the opposition was the composition of the National Election Committee, which organises electoral processes in Cambodia. Previously the committee has been dominated by pro-CPP members, but under the new deal the constitution will be revised to ensure that the CPP and the CNRP will select equal numbers of members. The CNRP has also gained control of some parliamentary committees, including the anti-corruption committee. Although these gains are clearly limited, and tend to relate to the political status of the CNRP rather than any broader reform agenda, the fact that the CPP has been forced to acknowledge and respond to complaints by the CNRP of political exclusion, as a result of an election result delivered against expectations by its own people, is a new political dynamic in Cambodia. We may see political space begin to widen again after more than a decade, and this will offer new opportunities that none of us can predict.

Second, the CPP has instituted its own reform agenda. This has so far included dissolving the Supreme Council on State Reform which under the auspices of the powerful and well-connected Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, had presided over the four most dysfunctional of the government's reform agendas – the military, judicial, financial and public administration reform areas. Although stated as key planks of government policy for more than a decade, these reform areas have made little progress, instead pandering to powerful and politicised networks of corruption and patronage within state, judicial and military institutions. The removal of these areas from Sok An's purview

suggests some new thinking on these issues, although it is not yet clear what this will be. A new Ministry of Public Function was created to take over responsibility for public administration reform, and immediately set in motion a review of civil servants' pay, long regarded as a key sticking point in the battle against corruption. However, human rights groups criticised new laws passed in 2014 which strengthened the Ministry of Justice's control over the judiciary (Human Rights Watch 2015). Other councils and authorities under Sok An's control, such as the Accreditation Committee for Cambodia which accredits higher education providers and the National Petroleum Authority which licenses petroleum imports and oil exploration, were also removed from Sok An's portfolio and returned to the control of relevant ministries. Both have been widely regarded as inept and lacking in transparency, and consequently as potentially key vehicles for large-scale corruption.

The party is clearly considering seriously the scope for either cutting or at least reorganising some of the key back-channels by means of which money flows between institutions and key power-brokers. Whether this will amount to a serious anti-corruption strategy, as opposed to a merely cosmetic one, as in the past, remains to be seen. The CPP's ability to deliver on anti-corruption will test its claim to effectiveness perhaps more than any challenge it has previously faced, and would require a wholesale reorganisation of Cambodian governance. It remains to be seen whether the pressure of democratic politics can produce such an outcome.

## References

- Asia Foundation, "Democracy in Cambodia 2014: a Survey of the Cambodian Electorate," Phnom Penh, 2014.
- BBC, "Cambodia Opposition Boycott Opening of Parliament," 23 September 2013, online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24177265>, accessed 20 May 2014.
- Cambodia Office of the United Nations Centre for Human Rights, "Memorandum to the Royal Government of Cambodia, Evidence of Summary Executions, Torture and Missing Persons since 2-7 July 1997," Phnom Penh, August 1997.
- CIA World Factbook, *Cambodia*, 2013, online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>, accessed 30 May 2014.
- COMFREL, *Assessment Report on the Cambodian 2003 National Assembly Elections*, 2003, online at [http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com\\_mypublications/files/79153401\\_Result\\_Report\\_2003\\_NA\\_Election\\_Report\\_COMFREL\\_2003\\_En\\_Fina.pdf](http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/79153401_Result_Report_2003_NA_Election_Report_COMFREL_2003_En_Fina.pdf), accessed 29 May 2014.
- . *2008 National Assembly Elections, Final Assessment and Report*, 2008, online at [http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com\\_mypublications/files/35964012250728892008\\_NAE\\_Report.pdf](http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/35964012250728892008_NAE_Report.pdf)

- . *Final Assessment and Report on 2012 Commune Council Elections*, October 2012, online at [http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com\\_mypublications/files/620271Final\\_Report\\_Commune\\_Elections\\_2012\\_Final\\_Final\\_06\\_11\\_2012.pdf](http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/620271Final_Report_Commune_Elections_2012_Final_Final_06_11_2012.pdf), accessed 29 May 2014.
- . *2013 National Assembly Elections, Final Assessment and Report*, 2013, online at [http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com\\_mypublications/files/559262Final\\_Report\\_and\\_Assessment\\_National\\_Assembly\\_Elections\\_Final.pdf](http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/559262Final_Report_and_Assessment_National_Assembly_Elections_Final.pdf), accessed 30 May 2014.
- Craig, David and Pak Kimchoeun, 2011, "Party Financing of Local Investment Projects: Elite and Mass Patronage," in Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un, eds, *Cambodia's Economic Transition* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011), pp. 219-244.
- Election Reform Alliance, *Joint Report on the Conduct of the 2013 Cambodian Elections*, November 2013, online at <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports/files/184ERARReport-NationalElection2013Irregularities-English.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- Frieson, Kate, 1996, "The Politics of Getting the Vote in Cambodia," in Steven Heder and Judy Ledgerwood, eds, *Politics, Propaganda and Violence in Cambodia: Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-keeping* (London: M.E. Sharpe), pp. 183-207.
- Huang, Yukon, "China's Road to Becoming a More Responsible World Power," blog post, *Financial Times*, 26 March 2013, online at <http://blogs.ft.com/the-a-list/2013/03/26/chinas-road-to-becoming-a-responsible-world-power/>, accessed 30 May 2014.
- Hughes, Caroline, 2003, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition 1991-2001* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- . "The Politics of Gifts: Generosity and Menace in Contemporary Cambodia," *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, Symposium on "Cambodia: Reassessing Tradition in Times of Political Change," 31.3 (2006), 469-489.
- . 2011, "Soldiers, Monks, Borders: Violence and Contestation along Borderlines in the Greater Mekong Subregion," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 41.2 (2011): 181-205.
- Hughes, Caroline and Kim Sedara, *The Evolution of Conflict Management and Democratic Process in Cambodia: A Comparative Study of Three Cambodian Elections*, CDRI Working Paper no. 30, (Phnom Penh: CDRI, 2004).
- Hughes, Caroline and Real Sopheap, *The Nature and Causes of Conflict in the 1998 National Elections*, Working Paper, (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2000).
- International IDEA, "Voter Turnout Data for Cambodia," web page, 2013, online at <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=KH>, accessed 29 May 2014.

- Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2015: Cambodia*, web page, online at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/cambodia?page=3>, accessed 9 April 2015.
- International Labour Organisation Better Factories Cambodia, *Thirtieth Synthesis Report on Working Conditions in Cambodia's Garment Sector*, (Geneva: ILO, 2013).
- International Republican Institute, 2010, *Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion*, July 12 – August 10 2010, online at <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2011%20January%2020%20Survey%20of%20Cambodian%20Public%20Opinion,%20July%2012-August%2006,%202010%20--%20Khmer%20and%20English%20version.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- . 2011, *Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion*, November 30- December 25 2011, online at <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2012%20May%2010%20Survey%20of%20Cambodian%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20November%2030%20%E2%80%93%20December%2025%2C%202011.pdf>,
- . 2013a, *Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion*, Jan 12-Feb 2 2013, online at <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/Cambodian%20Poll%209%20Final%20PUBLIC.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- . 2013b, *Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion*, Oct 28-Nov 10 2013, online at <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20January%2023%20Survey%20of%20Cambodia%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20October%2028-November%2010%2C%202013.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- Kim Sedara, *Democracy In Action: Decentralisation in Post-Conflict Cambodia*, unpub. PhD diss., University of Goteborg, 2012.
- Licadho, 2014, *When Freedom Meets Oppression: a Timeline of Recent Events*, 31 January 2014, online at <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports/files/192LICADHOTimelineLethalViolence2014-English.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- Licadho nd, *The Great Cambodian Giveaway: Visualising Land Concessions Over Time*, Licadho Media Project, online at [http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/concession\\_timelapse/](http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/concession_timelapse/), accessed 30 May 2014.
- Ojendal, Joakim and Kim Sedara, 2011, “*Korob, Kaud, Klach*: In Search of Agency in Rural Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31.3 (2006), 507-526.
- Radio Free Asia, “In Largest Protest Since Polls, Cambodians Demand Re-Election,” 22 December 2013, online at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/demand-12222013144758.html>, accessed 29 May 2014.

- Rusten, Caroline, Kim Sedara, Eng Netra and Pak Kimchoeun, *The Challenges of Decentralization Design in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: CDRI, 2004).
- Smith, Jeff, “CPP Members Plot Strategy,” *The Cambodia Daily*, 23 June 1998, online at <http://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/cpp-members-plot-strategy-8846/>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- The Asia Foundation, “Democracy in Cambodia – 2003, a Survey of the Cambodian Electorate,” 16 May 2003, online at <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DemocracyinCambodia.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- Thon Vimealea, Ou Sivhuoch, Eng Netra and Ly Tem, 2011, *Leadership in Local Politics of Cambodia: A Study of Leaders in Three Communes of Three Provinces*, CDRI Working Paper no. 82, (Phnom Penh: CDRI, 2011).
- Willemyns, Alex and Mech Dara, “China’s Official State News Agency Slams Hun Sen, CPP,” *The Cambodia Daily*, 6 December 2013, online at <http://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/chinas-official-state-news-agency-slams-hun-sen-cpp-48720/>, accessed 29 May 2014.
- World Bank, “Cambodia: Country at a Glance,” web page, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia>, accessed 30 May 2014.
- Zhao Kejin, “Guiding Principles of China’s New Foreign Policy,” Q&A, Global Think Tank, 9 September 2013, online at <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2013/09/09/guiding-principles-of-china-s-new-foreign-policy/gmmb#1>, accessed 30 May 2014.

### **Biography**

Caroline Hughes is Professor of Conflict Resolution and Peace in the Division of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford.