

LEERY / Power-sharing is unlikely when the parties view both each other and democratic institutions with a jaundiced eye

Why Cambodia's peace plan won't work

BY SORPONG PEOU and PIERRE LIZEE

SO, the Communist government of Cambodia has agreed to set up a 24-member "joint council" to run the country with the three insurgent groups that have been fighting it for 11 years. This sounds like good news but don't be tempted to celebrate quite yet — this is a very fragile peace.

On the surface, the settlement drafted by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and endorsed Monday by the Cambodians in Jakarta appears to make sense. As well as working together on the new council, the rival factions will defer most of their authority to the UN until a new government can be elected. But isn't this just what the international community has spent the past decade trying to do? If all its earlier attempts have failed, what are the prospects for this one?

Previous attempts at a solution failed primarily because no one in the West seems to understand the true nature of the Cambodian conflict. The dynamics of the country's fragmented political scene make a peaceful settlement impossible.

To start, Cambodians don't trust each other. Culturally, they have been instilled with the fear of deception; folk stories teach them that to win a contest they must be clever enough to deceive their rivals.

They also tend to believe that circum-

stances can change quickly. Rather than compromise, they prefer to wait for more favorable conditions. As Cambodians are fond of saying, "When the water rises, the fish eat the ants. But when the water recedes, the ants eat the fish."

Another problem is the polarization of Cambodian society. Throughout their history, Cambodians have been fragmented into rival groups. Even under the Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot, the country was not truly united, as different "zones" would compete and fight.

The clear-cut delineations between Cambodian factions do not permit the establishment of links at the national level, links that would stop factional hostility from getting worse. This hostility has been exacerbated by the China-Vietnam rivalry. Beijing and Hanoi have internationalized the divisions in Cambodia by continuing to support rival groups.

Cambodian society is polarized in another way. Leaders dominate the people under their authority but they don't effectively command them. Cambodians are not by nature highly political and can only be mobilized with the use of force.

Given all this, Cambodia is the realm of personal politics, rather than stable political institutions. In fact, the validity of such institutions are often questioned, or at best seen by various factions merely as

vehicles for promoting particular interests rather than the common good.

Yet, the peace proposals put forward over the past few years have relied heavily on the establishment of specific political institutions, such as the proposed national council. But it is very hard to imagine the Cambodian factions surrendering their power to such a council. A writer in a recent issue of *The Indochina Chronology* put it this way: "The Khmer have little faith in the notion that the proper way to divide up political power is to have everyone in the country go into a room to put a little piece of paper in a box."

OBVIOUSLY, the prospects for true power-sharing do not look promising. The government of Hun Sen has made it clear it is determined to exclude the Khmer Rouge — one of the three insurgent groups opposed to it — from any official role in governing the country. However, the recent peace proposals do have some useful elements, including the use of international pressure on the four Cambodian factions to reduce the level of violence. Reduced arms supplies would have a direct impact on the level of fighting.

Unfortunately, it's unlikely that China will co-operate in this. In fact, it seems to have increased its support to the Khmer Rouge since the United States and Cana-

da withdrew their diplomatic recognition of the government. As a result, the fighting intensified, which demonstrated a fundamental flaw in the assumption that the four factions really are willing to share power.

So, if this peace plan won't work, what will? To start with, the method of negotiating should change. The West should encourage the various factions to meet more frequently and less formally. Given the nature of Cambodian politics, a true consensus couldn't be expected overnight, but continuous low-level contact would keep political leaders from getting together just to perform for their followers.

This approach takes time, but it is more appropriate to Cambodian culture (in which consensus rarely results from formal, public debate but evolves more gradually from casual discussions between the parties involved). And it could go a long way to building confidence among the rival groups — a prerequisite to any lasting agreement.

So, while the Jakarta talks have produced an agreement on paper, the real impact on the Cambodian conflict will be minimal if the peace process stops there.

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