

HUN SEN'S PRE-EMPTIVE COUP: Causes and Consequences

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FULL TEXT

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On 5-6 July 1997, troops loyal to Second Prime Minister Hun Sen (of the Cambodian People's Party, or CPP) and those of First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh (leader of the royalist party known as FUNCINPEC, or the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Co-operative Cambodia) engaged in a fierce street battle in Phnom Penh. The fighting stunned the Cambodian people and the world. Within two days, the CPP force defeated its enemy, and then pushed the remnants against the northern Thai-Cambodian border into a tiny strategic area called O Smach. At year's end, Hun Sen still held high the trophy of victory.

This article seeks to explore the events of July 1997. At issue is whether or not what took place constitutes a coup; and, if it is a coup, what kind? I argue that the overthrow of Ranariddh was a coup, not a social revolution or *putsch*. Unlike coups in many other countries, however, it was not caused by factors such as ethnic or ideological antagonisms, socio-political turmoil, or military dominance. I take a structural approach, arguing that Hun Sen's actions must be explained in terms of his struggle for hegemonic preservation, as his party and adversaries braced themselves for the next election scheduled for 1998. (In this study, the term "hegemon" means "leader", and struggle for hegemony simply means struggle for political leadership.) Although the Second Prime Minister has now achieved political dominance, preventing bipolarity from emerging, he has also recreated Cambodia's old power structure, prone to coups, violence, and war.

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