

# Cambodia's hegemonic-party system: How and why the CPP became dominant

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## Abstract

This article seeks to shed light on how and why the Cambodian People's Party (the CPP) emerged and became dominant in the multi-party system formally introduced to Cambodia when the United Nations intervened in the early 1990s. Historical factors, relative power, leadership, and tactics matter a great deal. Hun Sen has been in power for more than 30 years and his effectiveness can be attributed to three tactics: coercion, co-option, and control. The post-Cold War environment also made it possible for the CPP government to use these tactics successfully, as major powers preferred to work with Hun Sen or did little to undermine him.

## Keywords

Cambodia, hegemonic-party system, political leadership, political tactics

## Introduction

This article seeks to shed light on how and why the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) emerged and then became dominant in the multi-party system formally introduced to Cambodia when the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) intervened early in the 1990s. The party began as a 'liberation' movement (backed by Vietnamese troops aiming to overthrow the murderous Pol Pot leadership) and succeeded quickly in that. After its victory in 1979, the movement established a new government known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which subsequently waged war against a Cambodian government-in-exile known as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) – made up of three armed factions, the royalists (known as FUNCINPEC), the Khmer National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the Khmer Rouge. In 1989, the PRK was renamed the State of Cambodia (SOC). On October 23, 1991, the SOC signed a peace agreement with the other three armed factions and the four signatories agreed to

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turn their battlefield into a ballot-box (Doyle, 1995; Heder and Ledgerwood, 1996; Peou, 1997). But the CPP's power, not democracy, has been consolidated. Hun Sen became prime minister in 1985 and has in the last two decades consolidated his dominant position in Cambodian politics.

The CPP's political success requires a systematic explanation. Much has been written about Cambodian political culture as the broad variable explaining political authoritarianism, defined in terms of traditionalism, patronage, competing nationalisms, and national imaginings (Norén-Nilsson, 2016; Roberts, 2001), but little analytical attention has been paid to the question of how and why the CPP led by Hun Sen succeeded in turning itself into a hegemonic party. While they help shed some light on Cambodian politics (such as authoritarianism or anti-democratic behavior), cultural, religious, and other nonmaterial factors are analytically imprecise. No scholars would describe Hun Sen of the CPP as a democrat at heart, but the persistence of his authoritarian behavior cannot be fully explained by Cambodian culture or his nationalist imaginings. His effectiveness must be studied systematically and an empirical analysis shows that it can be attributed to his strategy based on at least three identifiable tactics for political domination: control, coercion, and co-option. Although these tactics were not employed separately from each other, a clear pattern can be discerned: the CPP leaders relied on force to topple the Pol Pot regime, immediately built a state structure based on one party, and then work to control state institutions throughout the 1980s and after. Hun Sen's attempts at tightening political control over state institutions has proved to be more successful than other leaders within and outside his party, largely because he did not hesitate to rely on both 'sticks' (violent means to crush any potential threat to his power) and 'carrots' (to co-opt anyone anywhere willing to jump on his political bandwagon) as a way to tighten his grip on power and enhance his own security. This article contends that institutional factors, power relations, security dynamics, leadership, and political tactics matter significantly.

## **The CPP within the political party system**

Although Cambodia formally adopted a multiparty system, as evident in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, the CPP has now emerged as the dominant party. After 1997, the multiparty system was transformed into what may be characterized as a hegemonic-party system, in which the CPP is the center of power whereas the opposition struggles for survival.

Hegemonic-party and dominant-party systems are similar and the terms can be used interchangeably, although they are classified as varieties of the single-party system (Johari, 1982: 332). The hegemonic-party system is defined as one "in which a relatively institutionalized ruling party monopolizes the political arena, using coercion, patronage, media control, and other means to deny formally legal opposition parties any real chance of competing for power" (Diamond, 2002: 25). "Other parties are permitted to exist, but as second class, licensed parties . . . not permitted to compete with the hegemonic power in antagonistic terms or on an equal basis" (Johari, 1982: 332). Thus, the hegemonic-party system is not one characterized as a one-party system in dictatorships or communist states where only one party is allowed to exist. In this sense, the hegemonic-party system is one somewhat similar to what others call the dominant-party system. Matlosa and Karume define the dominant party system as a system:

in which despite the multi-party situation, only one party is so dominant that it directs the political system and is firmly in control of state power over a fairly long duration of time that even opposition parties make little if any dent on the political hegemony of a dominant ruling party. (Matlosa and Karume, cited in Brooks, 2004: 2)

In other words, the dominant party is one that holds hegemonic power, making it impossible for opposition parties to compete for power successfully to the point where they are able to win and form new governments.

Until the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia under the PRK regime adopted a single-party system. After it came to power in 1979, following Vietnam's massive military intervention late in 1978, the new regime built and maintained the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK), which was different from the Pol Pot regime's Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and the only party permitted to exist. When the Fourth National Congress of the Front was held in 1981, it was confirmed that the party's "line and policy [was] based on the application of genuine Marxism-Leninism to the specific conditions of Kampuchea" (cited in Annabi et al., 1990: 86). The party leadership was careful in terms of laying its ideological foundation when stressing that socialism was built on the basis of the people's wishes, which included private ownership of property and greater freedom of movement. The pro-Vietnam and anti-China PRPK was not the same communist party that existed under the pro-China and radically Maoist-inclined Pol Pot regime, especially when the SOC began to liberalize the economy in the late 1980s (Slocomb, 2010: 182).

The CPP leadership, however, likes to refer to itself as part of the old communist movement that emerged early in the 1950s. Every year the CPP leadership still celebrates the birth of its party, which it says dates back to the early 1950s when the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) was said to have been founded. The annual celebration is usually marked as an event to maintain the political narrative of the party's long history of struggle against colonial rule and political oppression. The anti-French struggle for independence, the war against US imperialism, and the overthrow of the Pol Pot leadership are among the items highlighted. In other words, the CPP leadership has used history to paint itself as the only enduring party capable of achieving great things for the nation. Hun Sen likes to refer to January 7 as Victory Day – the landmark of his party's historic achievement in ending the "genocide" the Pol Pot regime had committed from 1975 to 1978 (Sokhean, 2017b). Whatever the date of its origin, the fact of the matter is that the CPP is still the party that used to be known as the Communist Party in the 1980s. Its top leaders were still made up of Khmer Rouge leaders who escaped violent purges carried out in 1977 and 1978 by those loyal to the Pol Pot leadership and subsequently led what they called a liberation movement.

The party was then organized at different levels: central, provincial, district, and communal. The commune was designed to be the party's base. The party had a central committee whose 64 members were elected by the Party Congress, which met once every five years. Within the central committee was a Politburo with 16 members. The extent to which the PRPK controlled the state and society was unclear, but what is clear is the fact that the party was treated as the 'leading force' of the state and society. Article 4 of the PRK/SOC Constitution stated that the party was the "core force of the great national solidarity and unity of all political forces." Structurally or organizationally, the party was (throughout the 1980s) the only force under the PRK regime to which all other national organizations were subjected – although some government members were not party members and there was a formal separation between the party and the government that was supposed to implement the party's ideas and goals. The United Front for the Construction and Defence of the Kampuchean Motherland was also established, with the party as its "nucleus and leader" (cited in Annabi et al., 1990: 88).

Although it was the only party that existed in the 1980s, the PKRP was far from dominant and legitimate. No doubt the new regime enjoyed a degree of legitimacy after the murderous Pol Pot

leadership was driven out of power, but its level of legitimacy should not be exaggerated; the regime was after all one that still claimed to be communist and was pro-Vietnam. Having gone through terrible times during the Khmer Rouge killing fields, Cambodians distrusted communist rule, especially when backed by Vietnam – one of Cambodia's historical enemies. As soon as the PRK regime was established, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fled their homes and many became refugees along the Thai-Cambodian border. A large number of Cambodians lived in refugee camps inside Thailand.

Those who had not been resettled into third countries (such as France, the United States, and Canada) were only repatriated after the Paris Peace Agreements were signed, but they tended to be distrustful of the CPP. Moreover, the CPP was no longer the only party that existed and had to compete with other political parties, particularly FUNCINPEC, KPNLF, and the Khmer Rouge. The birth of a multiparty system based on liberal democracy gave rise to a new electoral politics and the CPP had to make some significant adjustments. CPP leaders made the case that their party was from the people, by the people, and for the people. Attempts at making the party representative of the people's interests have been successful to some extent. Throughout the 1980s, the party had a small number of members. The number ranged from 12,500 to 30,000, representing less than 0.36 percent of the entire population (Annabi et al., 1990: 84). Today the number is much higher. CPP officials claim to have 5.7 million party members, representing one-third of the population (15 million), but the number of those who voted for the CPP was 3,235,969 in 2013, 3,492,374 in 2008, 2,447,259 in 2008, 2,030,790 in 1998, and 1,824,188 in 1993. These numbers suggest that the CPP won the last four national elections, but its victories rested on several factors to be explained later.

Legitimacy aside, the number of voters supporting the CPP does not tell the whole story of Cambodia's hegemonic-party system. The CPP has become increasingly dominant since 1997, when Second Prime Minister Hun Sen toppled the royalist leader, First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, in a violent putsch. FUNCINPEC then began to disintegrate as intra-party factionalism grew intense. The number of votes the party received dropped to only 242,413 (3.66%) in 2013, from 303,764 (5.05%) in 2008, 1,072,313 (20%) in 2003, 1,554,405 (31.7%) in 1998, and 1,824,188 (45.5%) in 1993. Another major party, the Buddhist Liberal Party (BLDP, formerly KPNLF) fell apart and stopped competing in national elections, after having gained 152,764 votes (3.80%) in 1993 and only 45,849 votes (0.9%) in 1998. In the 2013 national election, the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP, formed in 2012 when two opposition parties merged) did far better than expected, having won 2,946,176 votes (44.46%), but has now been banned from electoral competition. The Supreme Court issued a ruling in 2017 that banned the CNRP from competing in the 2018 election.

Without the BLDP, FUNCINPEC, and the CNRP, the CPP has emerged as the only party bound to win by a landslide during the July 2018 national election and, thus, will further expand its domination over the party system. There are only a handful of minor opposition parties left, and they are unable to win enough seats to form a new government. The February 2018 Senate election sheds more light on the upcoming national election: the CPP won all 58 elected seats (a large increase from 46 seats in the 2012 Senate election).

Meanwhile, the CPP has made efforts to strengthen its organizational structure. Top members of the military, police, and judicial elites have been given leading positions within the party's organizational structure. The CPP's Central Committee has expanded to include many of them. In 2015, for instance, 306 new members were added, raising the total number to 545. The committee members include those with powerful positions within state institutions, including at least nine deputy national police commissioners and several generals and military commanders, some of

whom were alleged to have been involved in the crackdowns on protests after the 2013 national election. Other members include General Chhuon Sovann (the Phnom Penh police chief), General Hing Bun Heang (a deputy commander-in-chief and Hun Sen's bodyguard unit chief), and General Rath Sreang (the Phnom Penh military police chief).

Within the Central Committee, there is a powerful permanent Standing Committee (the new Politburo) that manages party affairs and is made up of high-ranking CPP members including top generals in the armed forces (military and police) and judicial officials. In 2009, the Standing Committee expanded from 29 to 35, when the party added six new members, including Finance Minister Keat Chhon, Rural Development Ministry Secretary of State Yim Chhay Ly, National Police Chief Net Saveoun, Senator Tep Ngorn, and the military's deputy commanders-in-chief General Meas Sophea (also commander of the army) and General Kun Kim (also chair of the military's joint general staff). The powerful members include other top military generals, such as General Ke Kimyan (formerly the military's commander-in-chief and has been both deputy prime minister and chair of the National Authority for Combating Drugs) and General Pol Sareoun (the military's commander-in-chief). The CPP's Standing Committee members also include Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Dith Munt, and this inclusion has made the party a political institution that dominates the court system.

By way of comparison, the CPP has now emerged as the dominant player in Cambodian politics as Hun Sen successfully managed to consolidate power within his own party and state institutions, most notably the legislature, the judiciary, and the armed forces, at the expense of the opposition. The party system looks more stable but remains prone to crisis as the power base has become more personalized instead of institutionalized, increasingly held by Hun Sen rather than constrained by an effective system of checks and balances.

### **Institutional control as a political tactic**

Although much has been written about Hun Sen (Mehta and Mehta, 1999; Strangio, 2011), more analysis of his strategy is necessary. The fact that the PRK/SOC/ CPP has been in power since 1979 can be further explained in terms of its leaders' ability to consolidate power by using a strategy based on at least three tactics: control, coercion, and co-option (a 3-Cs strategy). Control is a type of resistance to institutional reform that would weaken the CPP's powerbase. Throughout the 1980s, the CPP had 80 percent of the control and no serious effort has since been made to reform the existing state institutions. The CPP's success in turning itself into the dominant party cannot be explained without looking at how the party dominated state institutions from early on. Comparatively, the CPP as a party is older and stronger than any of the opposition parties and has more than 30 years to develop its organizational structure and weaken intra-party factionalism (Peou, 2014, 2017a).

The use of control as a political tactic was evident after the Paris peace agreements were signed. During the transitional period in which the country was still governed by UNTAC, the CPP was quite successful in maintaining its state structures. UNTAC managed to organize the elections and not only failed to disarm the SOC but also proved unable to control the regime's state apparatus. The SOC/ CPP's political power grew relatively stronger than each of the former CGDK partners, especially after the Paris Peace Agreements. Each CGDK member began to go its separate way, as it formed a political party to compete in the upcoming elections to be organized by UNTAC. The CPP was in a relatively stronger position than each of its former opponents by the time UNTAC arrived in 1992. Because of the Khmer Rouge's refusal to disarm, none of the other three

signatories was under any obligation to disarm, but the failure of disarmament left the CPP in the strongest position among the four factions. Under UNTAC leadership, the CPP's political strength and structure were left intact.

The CPP grew politically stronger after the 1993 election. Although FUNCINPEC won in the national election, the new coalition government found it almost impossible to restructure state institutions. At first, the CPP succeeded in getting FUNCINPEC to share power. At the formal level, the CPP was second to FUNCINPEC within the power-sharing arrangements. In reality, the CPP remained institutionally powerful. The royalists were able to reward themselves with top government positions but were unable to penetrate the existing state structures dominated by the CPP. FUNCINPEC officials found themselves more or less powerless when dealing with CPP officials and bureaucrats. Major government ministries, most notably defense and interior, were led by both CPP and FUNCINPEC officials known as co-ministers, but FUNCINPEC officials bitterly complained about roadblocks their CPP counterparts put in the way. FUNCINPEC's co-defense minister, Tea Chamrat, for instance, must have been aware of his CPP counterpart's negotiations with Khmer Rouge leaders, but failed to do more than participating in a meeting between CPP officials and Ieng Sary. His attempt to include FUNCINPEC's top general and RCAF commander-in-chief, Nhek Bun Chhay, in that meeting was met with his co-defense CPP minister's rejection (Sowath, 2012: 128).

Part of the problem was that the royalists led a resistance movement against the PRK/SOC and thus were never part of the state. FUNCINPEC became a political party led by Prince Ranariddh who preferred to see party officials bow to him instead of making serious efforts to build a party structure (interviews October 21, 2016; December 14, 2016). After the political and military disintegration of FUNCINPEC in 1997, with the KPNLF/BLDP and the Khmer Rouge as political contenders, Hun Sen adopted a different strategy: tightening control over state institutions, most notably the legislature, the judiciary, and the armed forces. The CPP's control over the legislature has proved to be effective in terms of using legislative means to keep any credible opposition party politically at bay. Winning national elections has allowed the CPP to take control of the National Assembly and the Senate. Much has been written about this (Peou, 2011, 2014), but it is important to stress that Cambodia has (since the violent putsch in July 1997) held a number of national assembly, Senate, and commune elections, but all of them have resulted in the CPP's greater control of the legislature. The CPP's political control of the Senate and the communes remains relatively unchanged. Hun Sen has been the sole prime minister. The national assembly elections in 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013 resulted in his party's victory. In 1998, 2003, and 2008, the CPP won more seats: 64, 73, and 90, respectively. The pre-2013 trend shows the CPP's emergence as the dominant party within the National Assembly and this may have led the CPP leadership to assume that the 2013 election would be even more successful. The 2013 election was more competitive and freer than the previous elections, as the CPP received fewer seats (68 out of 123) compared to the 55 seats won by the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). The fact that the number of the CPP's seats dropped from 90 in 2008 to 68 in 2013 meant that its political future faced some uncertainty; however, the opposition has made little positive policy impact in the National Assembly.

The most recent example of control was when the National Assembly voted in the absence of opposition lawmakers to adopt measures aimed at amending the law on political parties. The amendments were basically designed to ensure that the CPP would remain politically dominant, not to eliminate opposition parties. They were intended to further empower two specific CPP-dominated state institutions – the Ministry of Interior and the Supreme Court – to prevent

opposition parties, especially the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), from winning enough seats to form a government. The amended law allowed the Ministry of Interior to suspend indefinitely any political parties that the government considered involved in activities resulting in “incitement that would lead to national disintegration” and subversion of “liberal multi-party democracy” (Sokhean, 2017a). The amended law also allowed the Supreme Court to dissolve any political parties with leaders who have criminal records and to bar such party leaders from political parties for five years.

While politicizing the judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, in terms of election law enforcement, the CPP did not engage in the process of institutional reform that would make the party system less hegemonic or more competitive and inclusive. Definitely, the CPP has shown no political will to reform the judiciary beyond the need for some technical improvements. The courts are the least-trusted state institution in the country. According to one source (interview, October 26, 2016), Supreme Court President Dith Munty even blamed judicial officials for the 2013 election outcomes that reduced the number of CPP seats from 90 to 64. Courts are highly corrupt and politicized. This does not mean there are no good and competent judges and prosecutors, but they were among those who chose to stay silent or marginalized within the judicial system. They were either prevented from promotion or assigned to minor tasks that did not involve politics (interviews October 26, 2016).

The judiciary remains effectively under the CPP’s control. The Supreme Council of Magistracy (SCM), the highest judicial body in the country charged with overseeing the judiciary (and thus with the right to investigate any improprieties brought to its attention), is made up of members who belong to the CPP. Although the monarch is the head of state and serves as Chair of the Supreme Council, they are far from influential. The Council’s power rests with the minister of justice, the president of the Supreme Court, the general prosecutor of the Supreme Court, the chief of the Appeal Court, the general prosecutor of the Appeal Court, and three judges. According to the human rights NGO CCHR, “four members . . . are either part of the executive, or chosen by it, [thus] giving the executive a significant voice in the management of the judiciary.” Moreover, the executive branch has control over the SCM’s budget as part of the Ministry of Justice, thus giving “the executive further opportunity for influence” (CCHR, 2012).

Judicial reform efforts have been made in technical terms but have gone nowhere in practical terms. In 2014, the SCM passed three long-awaited laws designed to reform the judiciary: the Law on the Organization and Functioning of the Courts; the Law on the Organization and Functioning of the SCM; and the Law on the Statute of Judges and Prosecutors. The legislature passed the laws, which were declared constitutional by the Constitutional Council of Cambodia and then submitted to the King for approval. But critics pointed out that the legislation would give the Ministry of Justice too much power to control the already politicized courts, and limit the King’s powers in his capacity as Chair of the Council (Hul and Crothers, 2014; Naren and Crothers, 2014; Narim, 2014).

According to some legal scholars and judicial officials (interviews September to December 2016), judges usually make decisions based on these factors: wealth, power, and partisanship. One judge confided with a friend (interview September 14, 2016), saying that:

I regret becoming a judge because what I do every day is different from what I had studied and expected. When I hear cases, I look at the appearances or faces of parties to conflict and make decisions on the basis of wealth and power.

According to an observer (interview, December 8, 2016), the courtroom “looks more or less like a market place, where parties to conflict and representatives of court officials negotiate amounts of money one must pay.” In a survey by NGO Star Kampuchea, the deputy director of the Sihanoukville court, Keo Sakhan, admitted that, “When a judge makes a decision, a high-ranking official puts pressure on the court and tells the judge to change the decision . . . Then the loser becomes the winner” (cited in Chon and Kimsong, 2000). Other legal experts and practitioners observed that judicial rulings were made on the basis of these steps: first, court officials look at who’s who behind each party to a conflict; second, they consult with their superiors to ensure that any decisions will not affect their courts or careers. Thus, decisions must be approved by their superiors who have political affiliations with the ruling party (interview, October 26, 2016).

The court system remains powerless particularly when dealing with top CPP officials and their families who are almost untouchable. Few of them have ever seriously been investigated and prosecuted, despite their alleged rampant corruption and other alleged illegal activities. According to a report:

members of the Hun family, and the companies linked to them, have been able to get away with breaking a range of Cambodian laws including anti-corruption provisions as well as those designed to protect human rights, social justice and the environment. (Global Witness, 2016: 21)

The report further alleges that “the level of impunity enjoyed by the family extends well past corporate wrongdoing to also cover crimes committed by family members as individuals” (Global Witness, 2016: 25).

The CPP has also successfully tightened its control over the armed forces (both military and police). Although the armed forces are far from unified, top RCAF generals have pledged their loyalty to Hun Sen and his family and stay committed to their protection. At a ceremony on September 4, 2016, for instance, Military Commander-in-Chief General Pol Sareourn made it clear that his forces were committed to two goals: “absolutely loyal to, and protects, Samdech [Mr. Hun Sen] and Samdech [Bun Rany] and their family, 100 percent.” The other goal was to “absolutely prevent a color revolution from happening in Cambodia” (Sokhean, 2016).

Other senior military officials also made it public that the institution belonged to Hun Sen. General Chea Dara, one of the deputy commanders of the military and one of Hun Sen’s allies, said that “the army belongs to the CPP, because . . . [Mr. Hun Sen] took care [of the army] and led the army” (Willemyns, 2016). Deputy commander-in-chief General Kun Kim made it clear which side he and his officers were on when saying that military personnel “are neutral only with the parties, but they cannot be neutral with the government and the prime minister, who is the legitimate prime minister voted in by the people” (cited in Willemyns, 2016).

According to one highly-placed source, Hun Sen has built a formidable personal bodyguard unit of up to 6000 troops, who are well-equipped and well-trained. They can be quickly deployed for his protection when he travels in the country (interview October 21, 2016), and their presence can easily be observed in and around the capital. Some of the unit members were involved in controlling political protests or even harassing opposition members. In October 2015, for instance, three of the bodyguards beat up two opposition lawmakers and were sentenced to four years in prison but served one year only.

The party has also sought to control society. Throughout the 1980s, the PRPK subjected major mass organizations to its leadership. Under the United Front for the Construction and Defence of the Kampuchean Motherland’s auspices were at least three main mass organizations: the

Federation of the Trade Unions, the Women's Association of Cambodia, and the Cambodian Youth Association. Freedom of religion was enshrined in the Constitution, but the Fourth Front Congress stated that "Buddhist worship is practiced both in line with the Buddhist scripture and with the Party's policy and state laws" (cited in Annabi et al., 1990: 94). Revived as state religion, Buddhism was still subject to state control. The country's head monk was Tep Vong, who was once Vice-President of the National Assembly and Vice-President of the Central Committee of the Khmer United Front for the Salvation of Cambodia.

Although they have enjoyed more freedom than any time between 1975 and 1990, the Cambodians have seen their political rights and civil liberties restricted. Their religious freedom is evident everywhere, but the CPP-dominated state still keeps a close eye on religious activities. One indicator of this restriction is the ruling party's effort to control Buddhist monks who have a history of political struggle. Although he was appointed Great Supreme Patriarch in 2006 for the Mohanikay Buddhist sect, Tep Vong's role overshadowed the pro-monarch Dhammayuth sect. His religious leadership was no doubt just another attempt to control rivalry between the two sects or between the king and the CPP and a political tactic to ensure that Buddhism as the state religion would not undermine the CPP's political dominance.

Control over the media also remains tight. The Joint Media Ownership Monitor (2017), a joint project by Reporters Without Borders and the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media, identified 11 of the 27 media owners as being on the government payroll or political appointees or government officials. According to the Women's Media Centre of Cambodia (2013: 28):

All TV channels are run by the government or by supporters of the ruling party. Among the many radio stations, there is only one with limited coverage, which is or allowed to be independent from the government. The newspapers with big circulations are run by members or supporters of the ruling party. The CPP . . . has used the mainstream media year in year out to publicize all the good things about the party and to disparage the opposition and other critics while all other parties have little access to it, if at all. This mainstream media is more or less biased towards the CPP and against the Opposition.

Even if they are not owned by members of the ruling elites and pro-CPP business tycoons, media outlets exercise self-censorship. Defamation charges laid by the government against its critics are one reason (Reporters without Borders, 2017). Critical journalists have also been killed. According to Freedom House (2015), "Two journalists were killed in 2014, bringing to 12 the total number of journalists killed in Cambodia since 1993. Perpetrators of attacks against reporters generally enjoy impunity." Educated young Cambodians have thus turned to the Internet and social media for alternative news (Oldag, 2015: 7), but the government has sought to control this through cybercrime legislation.

## **Coercion as a political tactic**

The CPP's effective effort at tightening control of state institutions is only part of the broader strategy for political domination. State institutions may not have been effectively controlled if the ruling party had not relied on another political tactic: namely, coercion.

As a political tactic, coercion had been applied successfully even before the PRK leadership came to power in 1979. As part of the PRK/SOC regime, CPP leaders, most notably Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin, used force to deal with their opponents. Together on December 2, 1978, they founded the National Union Front for the Salvation of Kampuchea (which was renamed the

United Front for the Construction and Defence of the Kampuchea Motherland in 1981 and lasted until 2006). The Front leadership was made up of a small group of Khmer Rouge officials who rebelled against Prime Minister Pol Pot's bloody purges (Mehta and Mehta, 1999: 47–50). The Front aimed to overthrow the Pol Pot leadership and put an end to its reign of terror. To this extent, it succeeded by mobilizing support for coercive action against Pol Pot and successfully driving the latter out of power. Hun Sen viewed overthrowing the Pol Pot regime by force as his political achievement for Cambodia, although his rebel forces heavily relied on the Vietnamese armed forces and the Soviet Union.

Without any active Vietnamese and Soviet support, the new socialist regime might not have lasted as long as it did or as strong as it was. Even the some 200,000 Vietnamese troops deployed in Cambodia could not militarily defeat the resistance forces made up of the combined forces include the Khmer Rouge, FUNCINPEC, and the KPNLF (interview October 21, 2016). The war went on throughout the 1980s. Towards the end of the decade, the PRK relied more on diplomatic coercion to split the CGDK by insisting that the Khmer Rouge be excluded from any peace deal. The negotiation process that was carried out during the second half of the decade made little progress until the SOC agreed to sign a peace agreement that included the Khmer Rouge. From the CPP's perspective, the peace deal was a failure because it not only included the Khmer Rouge but also allowed another of his enemies to succeed, when FUNCINPEC won the 1993 national election. Apparently the CPP leadership learned that diplomatic solutions did not work to its favor, despite the fact that it controlled some 80 percent of the country and state institutions. It relied on force to stay in power.

After the 1993 election, the CPP still relied on force to regain and consolidate power. During the UNTAC intervention, the CPP did not disarm on the grounds that the Khmer Rouge forces had also failed to do so. The CPP not only refused to disarm but also relied on violence as a coercive means to repress and intimidate members of the opposition, mostly those of FUNCINPEC and KPNLF/BLDP seen as posing a threat to its power (Heder and Ledgerwood, 1996). According to a report by the US Department of State (1994):

Violence by SOC authorities directed against opposition political party members began almost immediately with the arrival of opposition parties in Phnom Penh in late 1991. In 1992 members of the FUNCINPEC and BLDP parties were the main targets of this violence . . .

The CPP then made another move to coerce FUNCINPEC into sharing power and succeeded in doing so. But its success came after several senior CPP leaders led by Prince Norodom Chakrapong (a half-brother of FUNCINPEC leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh) threatened to divide Cambodia along the Mekong River. The CPP did little to stop the violence and forced FUNCINPEC into sharing power. Ranariddh evidently found the power-sharing arrangements with Hun Sen more acceptable to him than his father, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, had. According to FUNCINPEC sources (interview December 14, 2016), Ranariddh rejected his father's initial plan to form a reconciliation government in which the latter would be the prime minister with four deputy prime ministers: Ranariddh (FUNCINPEC), Son Sann (BLDP), Khieu Samphan (Khmer Rouge), and Hun Sen (CPP).

Soon after the coalition government was established, Ranariddh thought he could work with Hun Sen to rebuild the country. Together they succeeded in punishing CPP officials who were alleged to have staged a coup to overthrow the coalition government. Prince Chakrapong, General Sin Song, and General Sin Sen failed in their coup attempt. Chakrapong ended up going into exile

but was sentenced *in absentia* to a long prison term. Sin Song was put under house arrest but fled to Thailand and was also sentenced to a long prison term. Son Sen was arrested and sentenced to 18 years in prison (Amnesty International, 1997: 3).

Soon after, Ranariddh came to realize that sharing power with Hun Sen did not work to FUNCINPEC's advantage. The prince made a number of tactical mistakes that allowed Hun Sen to consolidate power through coercion. One of them was that the prince thought he had the political legitimacy to run the new government because of the fact that his party had won the election. But by rejecting his father's plan to build a reconciliation government, which would not have been possible because it included the Khmer Rouge, he began to alienate his father, who remained very popular among Cambodians. He thought he could work with Hun Sen and tried to maintain the coalition government by allowing the CPP to weaken other opposition parties, most notably the BLDP. Another mistake he made was his failure to maintain unity within his party. The expulsion of his finance minister from the party left FUNCINPEC in a weaker position vis-a-vis the CPP, as Sam Rainsy moved to form a new party, the Khmer Nation Party (KNP). Still another mistake the prince made was when he cooperated with Hun Sen by supporting Ieng Mouly's faction as the legitimate BLDP after the party was split in mid-1995. Son Sann and five other BLDP members of parliament were then expelled from the party. At this point, both FUNCINPEC and BLDP had already weakened and Hun Sen should be given credit for getting, if not coercing, Ranariddh to help weaken the latter's former allies.

The CPP's use of coercion as a tactic to weaken its opponents went on with impunity, as none of the perpetrators was brought to justice. The remaining BLDP members led by Son Sann made their last attempt to regroup by holding a party congress in October 1995, but failed after a grenade attack left 16 people dead and more than 100 injured. The next grenade attack was directed at the Khmer Nation Party, when Sam Rainsy led a protest to denounce the lack of judicial independence and judicial corruption. On March 30, four grenades were thrown into the crowd of protesters, killing some of them and also bystanders. According to Human Rights Watch (2009), suspects of the attack were promoted instead of prosecuted.

The most glaring use of force to weaken the CPP's opponents took place when Hun Sen used force to remove Ranariddh early in July 1997. There may be various reasons why Hun Sen chose to do this (Peou, 2000), but the driving force behind this action came from the fact that Ranariddh had been accused of a secretive arms shipment aimed to strengthen his royalist forces and the negotiations his generals had conducted with Khmer Rouge officials behind Hun Sen's back. The violent removal of Ranariddh left FUNCINPEC members in disarray. Those who managed to flee, such as the party's top general, Nhek Bunchay, joined forces with the Khmer Rouge to fight the CPP, but did not make any ground. Thus, by the end of 1997, neither the BLDP nor FUNCINPEC was a force for the CPP to reckon with.

With the royalists now stripped off their political and military power, the CPP shifted its strategy toward more reliance on legislative and judicial means for coercing opponents into submission or silence, and it succeeded in doing so largely because of its control over state institutions. After 1998, opposition lawmakers were stripped of their parliamentary immunity. Before the election in 2013, the National Assembly (dominated by 90 CPP lawmakers) got a parliamentary committee to approve a decision to dismiss 29 opposition lawmakers because 26 Sam Rainsy Party and three Human Rights Party members formed a new party, asserting that they no longer belonged to the parties from which they had been elected.

After the 2013 election, the CNRP had 55 members in parliament and this large number made it more difficult for the National Assembly to remove parliamentary immunity from opposition

lawmakers, because doing so would require two-thirds of the votes. This does not mean that the CPP stopped trying to weaken the opposition party. In 2015, Sam Rainsy's parliamentary immunity was lifted again. On June 30, 2016, Justice Minister Ang Vong Vathana (CPP) sent National Assembly President Heng Samrin (CPP) a request that two CNRP lawmakers (Pin Ratana and Tok Vanchan) be stripped of their parliamentary immunity. The attempt failed, though. Concerns about the erosion of constitutional guarantees still mounted.

CPP leaders made some adjustment to their coercive tactic in 2016, however. Instead of reliance on efforts within the legislature to remove immunity from CNRP parliamentarians, the CPP began to make more use of courts to punish members of the opposition. After it lost the ability to remove parliamentary immunity through a two-thirds majority rule, the CPP "has instead drawn on an exception in the Constitution to immunity when lawmakers are caught red-handed committing a crime, already jailing an opposition lawmaker and a senator in this manner" (Sek et al., 2016). The party made this political move based on various trumped-up charges. In spite of his parliamentary immunity, CNRP Senator Hong Sok Hour was arrested in August 2015, based on the charges that he falsely accused the government of selling land to Vietnam and using false border maps. In April 2016, Um Sam An, another CNRP lawmaker, was arrested also despite his parliamentary immunity, charged with a crime related to his role in the CNRP campaign against alleged border encroachments by Vietnam.

Arresting and jailing opposition lawmakers, despite their parliamentary immunity, took a different turn in 2016. One of the innovative ways to charge opposition parliamentarians with crimes was to find new grounds related to non-border issues: namely, their involvement in prostitution. Pin Ratana and Tok Vanchan, for instance, were charged with making arrangements for their leader, Kem Sokha, to have sex with a Cambodian woman in Thailand. The Phnom Penh Municipal Court stated that prostitution was punishable by a prison sentence of between two and five years and a fine of between US\$1000 and US\$2500 (Chhay and Mech, 2016). Kem Sokha's parliamentary immunity was revoked under a constitutional clause permitting such action if parliamentarians were caught committing a crime, and was ordered to appear in court for his crime related to the charges of prostitution. When he refused to comply with the court order, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court sentenced him to five months in prison and imposed a fine of US\$2000 (*Free Radio Asia*, 2016).

What has been discussed is far from comprehensive, but it shows that coercion was adopted as part of the CPP's overall strategy to weaken its political opponents through repressive violence, as well as through coercive legislative and judicial means. In short, the CPP's emergence and its development into the dominant party is neither a historical accident nor simply a cultural proclivity. The 1991 Peace Agreements and the UN intervention played a major part in empowering the opposition but indirectly contributed to the rise of the CPP as the dominant power, especially after FUNCINPEC, BLDP, and the Khmer Rouge ended their war-time coalition and turned themselves into three separate political parties. One by one these opposition parties fell apart, thanks to the CPP's ability to weaken them.

### **Co-option as another political tactic**

Sensing its political opponents' growing weaknesses, the CPP did not feel the need to rely exclusively on control and force. Hun Sen began to shift toward relying more on another tactic: co-option. While the CPP's coercion is a tactic based on the defeat of its adversaries, its co-option has been carried with the idea of securing their cooperation or compliance. Co-option

through enemy defection was based on the promise of both personal security/safety, such as positions within the government, and material incentives.

While allowing FUNCINPEC to remain in the coalition government by permitting the royalists to replace Ranariddh as First Prime Minister with Ung Hout (FUNCINPEC Minister of Foreign Affairs), Hun Sen encouraged FUNCINPEC members to defect to the CPP. Seeing their party in tatters, some royalists switched sides by leaving their party for the CPP. In 2008, some 20 of them did so (Peou, 2011: 89). The royalist party's days were numbered.

Perhaps the biggest success after the coup that Hun Sen's co-option tactic enjoyed was when he got Khmer Rouge elements to defect to his government, despite the fact that he had used force to remove Ranariddh from power for the same reason. Hun Sen's co-option tactic can be described as part of his 'win-win' strategy "based on the principle of winning without bloodshed and with no losers" (Sowath, 2012: 127). This meant that Khmer Rouge defectors would enjoy "three guarantees," namely security, safety, and material benefits. According to Nem Sowath (2012), who was a CPP official, the two sides started to negotiate early in 1996, at the time when FUNCINPEC officials were also trying to negotiate with other Khmer Rouge leaders in different areas. The CPP proved to be more successful in terms of getting Khmer Rouge commanders to defect to its side, with little involvement from FUNCINPEC officials.

The Khmer Rouge disintegration began after a series of defections to the CPP. The highest-ranking Khmer Rouge official to defect to the CPP in 1996 was Ieng Sary (Pol Pot's brother-in-law and his former Minister of Foreign Affairs). According to Sowath (2012: 222), Ieng received his pardon on August 15, 1996, which "nullified the 1979 judgement of the PRK court [that sentenced] him to death in absentia." After that and before the violent incident in July 1997, the CPP-led effort to encourage Khmer Rouge defection had proved quite successful, especially after 19 Khmer Rouge commanders were integrated into the government armed forces in April of that year (Sowath, 2012: 223). Sowath further makes a strong case that the pardon resulted in both the integration of Khmer Rouge officials led by Ieng and "the internal breakup of the Khmer Rouge forces" (Sowath, 2012: 222). Those Khmer Rouge leaders who refused to defect ended up fighting each other, resulting in the killing of their 'defense minister' Son Sen and his family members, as well as the arrest of Pol Pot by other Khmer Rouge leaders, most notably Ta Mok and Nuon Chea (who was arrested by the CPP government in March 1999). Pol Pot died on April 15, 1998. Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan then defected to the CPP government in December of that year and were welcome at Hun Sen's house.

Co-option as a tactic for power consolidation has been adopted to ensure that challengers to the CPP leadership, especially Hun Sen, were pacified not only through the guarantee of security and safety but also through material benefits (Sowath, 2012: 131). As part of the defection deal, for instance, Ieng Sary not only requested that the CPP guarantee his personal security and the security of other Khmer Rouge defectors but also that "the government . . . provide an official distribution of government positions, as well as other ranks" (Sowath, 2012: 124). As part of their willingness to reintegrate into the national armed forces, Khmer Rouge defectors were also assured of job security and basic rights, such as the right to private property. They were given authority to maintain autonomy over their areas of control. For instance, the former Khmer Rouge commander of Division 315, Y Chhean, was given the position as governor of Pailin under his control during the armed rebellion.

Co-option as part of the CPP's strategy to divide and conquer its opponents was not based on party defection alone. Hun Sen co-opted opposition members by letting them stay with their parties if they chose to do so, but only as long as they did not challenge him openly or threaten to

undermine his power publicly. He could accept criticism, but only as long as it would not pose a credible threat to his survival or to the survival of his party. He would not have removed Ranariddh from power by force had the latter been willing to play second fiddle to him. But the prince and some of his supporters did not want to play a submissive role; they chose to challenge Hun Sen because of his threat to their security, thus culminating in the founding of the National Unity Front (NUF) in February 1997, which included FUNCINPEC, the KNP, Son Sann's BLDP, and the Khmer Neutral Party. According to the CPP, the NUF offered the Khmer Rouge in Anlong Veng a chance to join it and the Khmer Rouge (led by Khieu Samphan and others) responded positively by saying that their Khmer National Solidarity Party would support the Front (Sowath, 2012: 157). Those whom Hun Sen had once considered his enemies, such as Ranariddh and his top general, Nhek Bun Chhay, were allowed to live and keep their parties or even to form new parties, but as long as they posed no existential threat to the CPP. Nhek was allowed to form a new party (the Khmer National United Party) and even received calls from Hun Sen asking if the general needed any money (interview October 21, 2016).

The CPP is the wealthiest party in the country and its wealth has enabled it to co-opt various elements and to maintain political loyalty to the party. Global Witness, which investigated corruption and illegal activities in Cambodia, alleges that the Hun Sen family pulled the strings on the economy; family members allegedly engaged in illegal activities such as forced evictions and land grabbing and did so with impunity. Their combined wealth is estimated to be somewhere between US\$500 million and US\$1 billion. Global Witness also alleges that "individuals within the family have also allegedly committed serious criminal offenses without facing prosecution. Over the years, family members have been implicated in a US\$1 billion heroin-smuggling operation, shoot-outs and a fatal hit-and-run" (Global Witness, 2016: 4).

Much has been written about the Cambodian system of patronage from a cultural perspective and the culture of impunity, but little attention has been paid toward security dynamics in the country where state institutions are deeply politicized by the fear of retribution. Corruption is not driven by greed alone; it is also deeply part of the struggle for security. It is close to impossible to maintain an army of loyalists and to win votes without adequate material resources. By allowing supporters to enrich themselves, the CPP hoped to count on their loyalty and financial contributions during election campaigns. During the 2017 commune election campaign, for instance, the CPP spent US\$24.7 million (US\$15,000 on each commune), while the CNRP spent only US\$5.6 million (US\$3500 on each commune) (Mom, 2017). This is not to say that material resources determine election outcomes. Many voters accepted bribes from the CPP but still voted for opposition parties. The point is that the CPP did not rely on coercion as the only tactic for buying loyalty and maintaining domination.

The ruling elite's trusted friends and family members have also been coopted to take over top government positions. The RCAF has increasingly come under Hun Sen's personal leadership, especially after 2009. Up until this year, members of the armed forces pledged loyalty to Prime Minister Hun Sen or to CPP President Chea Sim who enjoyed good relations with General Ke Kim Yan (RCAF's commander-in-chief who was also related to Sar Kheng, the CPP Minister of Interior). In 2009, however, Hun Sen removed Ke Kim Yan from his position and replaced him with one of his loyalists, General Pol Sareourn, and elevated seven generals known for their loyalty to him to the positions of deputy-commanders-in-chief, some of whom were involved in the negotiations with Khmer Rouge defectors (Sowath, 2012).

Hun Sen also appointed his family members to high positions of power. His oldest son, Hun Manet (born in 1977), was promoted from the rank of colonel to major general in January 2011,

after he had been appointed deputy commander of the his father's bodyguard unit in September 2010, and also to deputy chair of the RCAF joint staff. In June 2013, just before the 2013 election, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general. This fast-track promotion had little to do with military experience. He received his diploma from the US Military Academy at West Point in 1999 at the age of 21 and then moved on to complete his doctorate in economics in 2007 (Strangio, 2011). He has also served as commander of the National Counterterrorism Task Force. Hun Sen's second son, Colonel Hun Manith, was also promoted, when appointed deputy chief of the ministry of defense's military intelligence unit (Saing and Vrieze, 2012). In September 2015, Hun Manith was promoted to chief of the unit (*Free Radio Asia*, 2015). It is worth mentioning that Hun Sen's nephew-in-law, Neth Savoeun, was also promoted to the highest-ranking position in the police force, after his predecessor, General Hok Lundy (also one of Hun Sen's in-laws), died in a helicopter crash in 2008.

In sum, co-option as a political strategy for domination adopted by the CPP takes on different forms, but its reliance on this tactic became more evident after the use of coercion succeeded in weakening political opponents, many of whom were left with little choice but to compromise or cooperate and even kowtow in compliance with the ruling party.

Cooption also works at the international level. This tactic has also been pursued by Hun Sen and proved to be quite effective. Attempts at weakening opposition elements have also been made by the CPP through getting external actors on its side. The PRK/SOC leadership faced monumental challenges from day one. First, the new leadership was made up of young and inexperienced individuals. The four top leaders were Pen Sovann, Hun Sen, Heng Samrin, and Chea Sim, none of whom held any previous top government positions. Second, the PRK leadership was factionalized. Third, the PRK government was internationally isolated. The regime's isolation resulted from the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia. By the time Vietnam began to withdraw its troops from Cambodia in 1989, the PRK was roughly 10 years old but had managed to build party and state structures, but its reliance on external support as a way to dominate the state power structure continued. Since the early 1990s, the international donor community has played an important role in rebuilding the country and in making efforts at reform, spending billions of dollars, but democracy is far from consolidating (Ear, 2012). Global efforts to make the political system democratic and the judiciary institutionally independent have proved unsuccessful (Peou, 2007, 2017b).

Hun Sen has accepted any foreign aid that would boost legitimacy for his regime, but went out of his way to co-opt any external actors willing to keep him in power. Instead of moving closer to other democratic states in the West that have criticized his government, he has moved ever closer to Russia (which is not really democratic under President Vladimir Putin's leadership) and China, which is still governed by the Communist Party. Hun Sen has even been convinced that the West has sought to overthrow his government by supporting the opposition and stirring up trouble in Cambodia. The Cambodian position on the South China Sea and the allegations about Hun Sen's government's poor record of human rights were seen by Washington as standing in the way of Washington's strategic efforts to build an anti-China alliance in the region. By moving closer to China and Russia, the CPP felt well-protected and saw no need to take democracy seriously. At the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2016, Foreign Minister Sokhon Prak (Prak, 2016) warned against any expectations to make Cambodia a "perfect democracy" and accused the opposition of committing "very serious crimes."

Thus, the CPP relied on co-option as a political tactic at different levels with the aim of consolidating and maintaining its power. At one level, Hun Sen was willing to welcome and

reward anyone in the country willing to support him or at least showed no willingness to challenge him. At another level, he was willing to work with any international actors prepared to give him the support he needed by giving his government foreign aid and diplomatic support in exchange for his support for their policies. Without support from some authoritarian states like China and Russia and without the reluctance of democratic states to challenge his regime, the CPP would not have been as dominant as it has been in the last two decades.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that the CPP's dominant-power status still persists today, despite the 2013 election results that put the ruling party leadership on notice that it should take nothing for granted. Overall, the ruling party's political dominance looks set to continue, despite its insecurity, largely because of the effective strategy the CPP elite led by Hun Sen has adopted. To a large extent, the CPP has benefited from its party structure that was built during the 1980s when its opponents were still armed movements with no real party organizations. By the time the Paris Peace Agreements were signed, after which the CGDK no longer existed, the CPP emerged as the strongest party in the country in terms of its political domination over state institutions. The royalists won the 1993 election, but were forced to share power with the CPP and unable to exercise power effectively. The CPP continued to dominate the deep state power structure beneath top-level power-sharing arrangements. After the violent removal of Ranariddh in 1997, FUNCINPEC could no longer play any meaningful political role. More recently, the CNRP emerged as the alternative opposition party and did well in the 2013 election, but it has now been banned from competing in the 2018 election. Unlike the opposition, Hun Sen has adopted a much more effective political strategy through his reliance on at least three tactics – control, coercion, and co-option – to weaken his opponents. He took careful steps to tighten control over state institutions, his own party, and the opposition. He also relied on coercive instruments (initially physical violence but subsequently legislative and judicial coercion) to weaken political challengers. Moreover, he co-opted those willing to join his party, appointed friends and family members to top government positions, and was prepared to move closer to external powers willing to support his government. This pattern of power consolidation shows that capturing state power by violent force is followed by efforts to control, coerce, and co-opt any power challengers, but the latter two tactics tend to be used more openly when state institutions are already subjected to the elite's control.

The analysis presented in this article makes the case that insecurity rooted in the fear of retribution is one of the biggest challenges to the process of democratization and rule-of-law institution building in post-war countries like Cambodia. As someone who is rational in terms of his 'strategic calculations' for power consolidation, Hun Sen would not kill any political opponents unnecessarily unless his powerbase came under serious threat. While willing to control and coerce his political enemies into submission or silence, he was willing to co-opt them or let them live as long as they did not pose a credible threat to his power base. This point is least understood among ideologues, culturalists, moralists, and legalists. Having been a military commander under the murderous Pol Pot regime bent on purging alleged traitors, Hun Sen must have learned that Cambodian politics can be a nasty business. Still operating within a political environment where formal institutions hardly function and a history of violence is long, leaders like Hun Sen who has been accused of human rights violations can never be sure of what might happen to them and their families if they lose power. He must have learned about the terrible fates of leaders who have lost power, such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Suharto of Indonesia, Slobodan

Melošćvic of Serbia, and Momad Gaddhafi of Libya. Any relentless pursuit of retributive justice is a moral thing to do, but may not be the cause of democratization when leaders think that it pays to stay in power (Peou, 2016, 2017b). Hun Sen's tactics to ensure his political domination through democratic and undemocratic processes and his determination to hold on to power show that the CPP is likely to stay in power until it implodes or unless the ruling elite feel secure enough to let the opposition win. Unfortunately the persistence of insecurity tends to result in dictators not knowing when to stop.

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