

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE “REAL” ANGKOR, CONCLUSION

This dissertation has focused on the narrative creation of Angkor, and on the physical creation of Angkor Historical Park, during the colonial period. These works had a tremendous impact on the way in which Cambodia was understood and viewed in the West, while also exposing the motivations and beliefs of those who created them. The writings, drawings, and photographs of early explorers, the guidebooks of later *Conservateurs*, the colonial expositions, and interwar novelists all created and codified the Western vision of Angkor, while simultaneously effecting the modification of the physical reality within the boundaries of the Park.

Angkor Wat today is one of the most recognized sites in Asia. Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit the Historical Park each year, and Cambodia’s Ministry of Tourism hopes the country will issue one million tourist visas before the decade has ended.¹ While Cambodia is still seen as off-the-beaten-track by many tourists, and the country’s fledgling tourism industry is combating the country’s lingering reputation as a war zone, the number of visitors to the country grows with every tourist season. The vast majority of these visitors make Angkor their main destination, and for many it is their only destination in Cambodia, often added to a tour of neighboring Thailand. For many of the international visitors to Cambodia, the country is still contained within the image of Angkor Wat.

Guidebooks have continued to be published for both Cambodia, and for Angkor. In general, these books focus mainly on the backpacker set, being led by

¹ More than 700,000 tourist visas were issued in 2002.

Lonely Planet's Cambodia guide, however, this shoestring traveler standby has in recent years been joined by editions from Rough Guide, Footprint Guide, AsiaHorizons, Insight Guide, Bradt Travel Guide, and others. In addition to country guides, there have been a number of new guides to the temples published in a variety of languages, including English, French, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Thai, and others. Tourists pour into the Park each morning, paying at the modern kiosk by the main entry road where they have their picture taken and laminated onto their souvenir entrance pass to the temples. Visitors flock to the Bakheng hill at sunset, some walking up the steep and uneven stairs, others riding on the backs of elephants driven by young mahouts wearing vests with a pocket sewn into the back that reads "tips." Hundreds of tourists crowd the walkways of Angkor Wat each morning at dawn to watch the sun rise over the towers, clutching the guidebook that has instructed them to get up while it is still dark in order to view the spectacle. Men and women ask the monks who live in the monastery inside Angkor Wat's precincts, in a variety of languages and with accompanying hand gestures, to pose for pictures in front of the ruins. And hundreds of visitors stream through the temple of Ta Prohm each day, marveling at the enormous tree roots curled between the stones of the temple, and imagining what Angkor was like when every temple looked like this one.

The work at Angkor—the restoration, conservation, and scholarship—has continued since independence, however, it is no longer the exclusive realm of French scholars and architects. While the *EFEO* continued to oversee the monuments until the 1970s, the restoration work of the Historical Park is now divided amongst numerous countries, each providing financial support and personnel to projects inside the park. Numerous groups are at work on a variety of conservation and restoration projects, many utilizing the anastylosis process that the *EFEO* implemented in the park, particularly at Banteay Srei. A German team is currently conducting conservation work at Angkor Wat; a Japanese team is reconstructing portions of the

Bayon; the World Monument Fund, a foundation based in the United States, has been working at Preah Khan for more than a

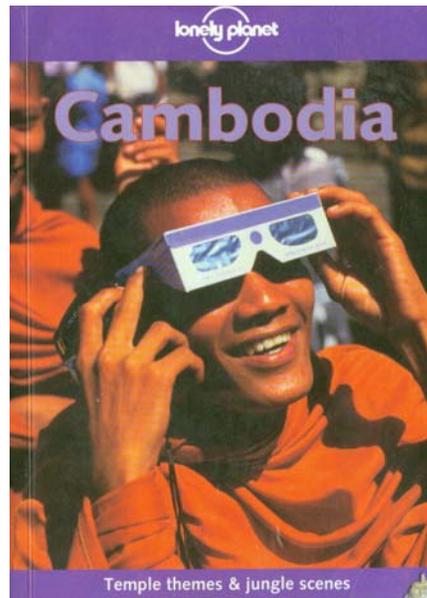


Figure 43 Lonely Planet Cambodia guide

decade; and the *EFEO* is proceeding with a massive restoration project at the Baphuon. The *Conservation d'Angkor* compound is still dotted with sculpture, with various parts of the yard's surrounding storage buildings given over to groupings of like objects, so that fifty-two headless Buddha statues sit quietly under a lean-to roof across from a nearly equal number of snarling guardian heads.

Beneath a photograph of an orange-robed monk holding over his eyes a set of cardboard glasses for viewing a solar eclipse, the cover of the 2000 *Lonely Planet Cambodia* bears the words: Temple themes & jungle scenes. (Figure 43)² The informational map in the guide's opening pages indicates that the view of Cambodia has expanded beyond the "(i)ncredible ruins and religious monuments that once

² *Lonely Planet Cambodia*, 2000, cover.

formed the heart of the Khmer empire.”³ However, the desertion that Maurice Glaize once indicated he believed created the appropriate atmosphere for viewing the temples has spread to descriptions of many additional locations. Of the locations indicated on the map as destinations, several are described as attractive because of their abandonment, desertion, and wilderness: the Bokor National Park offers “(j)ungle vistas, abandoned buildings and breathtaking views of the Gulf of Thailand”; Sihanoukville features “(e)mpty beaches and unexplored islands”; and Mondulkiri is characterized by its “(i)solated jungle villages where you can hitch a ride with an elephant”; while its neighbor Ratanakiri is “Cambodia’s ‘wild east’, home to shy hill tribes and abundant wildlife.”⁴ For the country’s “temple themes,” the tourist is urged to visit the “sheer grace and majesty of Angkor Wat,.... The enigmatic and intimidating faces watching over the Bayon; the devouring might of the jungle eating its way through Ta Prohm; and the demure beauty of Banteay Srei...”⁵ The guide notes that while Cambodia is more than the Angkor Historical Park, “you could be forgiven for not realizing this from the promotional material available in the country.”⁶ Thus, for the outside world, Cambodia remains best represented by the image of Angkor Wat, the Bayon, and Ta Prohm, whose origins and development this dissertation has traced.

For many of the foreign travelers who arrive in Siem Reap to see the temples, and for many of the Westerners who travel to Angkor only from the comfort of their armchairs, the tropes of earlier eras continue to hold a prominent place. The sense of danger that pervaded early, French descriptions of Cambodia has only been heightened for many of these readers and visitors by the Khmer Rouge genocide and subsequent civil war. The county became, in the late 1970s and early 1980s,

³ Ibid, map in preface.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p. 48.

⁶ Ibid.

synonymous with danger and crisis.⁷ The instability that arrived in the wake of the Khmer Rouge, has attracted a class of tourists who are visiting the country not to see Angkor, but in pursuit of “guns, girls, and ganja.”⁸

From this evolving tourism culture, both cultural and non-cultural, a new generation of adventure travelogues and novels has emerged. These include travelogues describing Westerners behaving badly, such as Amit Gilboa’s *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh* and Carol Livingstone’s milder *Gecko Tails*.⁹ These publications also include semi-autobiographical novels such as Robert Bingham’s *Lightening on the Sun*,¹⁰ whose main character has washed up in Phnom Penh after having worked in monument preservation for UNESCO at Angkor, and whose use of the semi-autobiographical novel recalls André Malraux’s fictionalizing of his own poor behavior seven decades earlier. And, as in earlier eras, there are adventure

⁷ For example, in 1980 the punk band “The Dead Kennedys” released a single entitled “Holiday in Cambodia,” that railed against the privileged classes by suggesting that they take a holiday in Cambodia:

For a bowl of rice a day
 Slave for soldiers til you starve
 Then your head skewered on a stake
 Now you can go where people are one
 Now you can go where they get things done
 What you need my son:
 Is a holiday in Cambodia
 Where people dress in black [etc.]

⁸ This is the subtitle of one of the more well-known novels about Westerners performing the ‘foreigner free-fall’ in Cambodia: Amit Gilboa, *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh, into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1998). Cambodia’s tourism industry is almost completely bifurcated, and was encapsulated succinctly in an exchange between a fellow researcher and a middle-aged man he met in a bar, who asked whether the researcher had come to Cambodia for the temples or the cheap prostitutes. When the researcher answered that he was there as an anthropologist, the man answered, “Oh, I guess that means you’re here for the temples.” The researcher actually studies the creation of Khmer Rouge tourist sites, particularly in the Anlong Veng district, but for the man he was talking to, there was nothing in Cambodia besides the temples, and his own objective: affordable sex tourism. Personal communication with Timothy Dylan Wood, Phnom Penh, 2001.

⁹ Carol Livingstone, *Gecko Tails a Journey through Cambodia* (London: Phoenix Paperbacks, 1997).

¹⁰ Robert Bingham, *Lightening on the Sun* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). Bingham’s novel created quite a stir in the Phnom Penh expatriate community, who found many of the characters easily recognizable. Bingham had lived in Phnom Penh as a reporter for the newspaper, *The Cambodia Daily*, and, like its main character, he found solace in heroin. He died of an overdose in 1999, just months before the book was published.

novels such as William T. Vollmann's *Butterfly Stories*,¹¹ pulp fiction and mysteries, such as Christopher Moore's *Cut Out*,¹² all set before the backdrop of Cambodia, or even of Angkor. The temples have even been the location for a recent French adventure comic book, *La Colonne*.¹³

Many of the works focusing on Angkor that have been published in the years not only following independence, but also following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and thus aimed at a new generation of tourists, also continue to describe or discuss the temples in vocabulary that repeats the colonial era sense of them as mysterious, picturesque, and romantic. One work, originally published in Japanese, which focuses on the "royal roads to Angkor" contains a chapter entitled "Traces of the Angkor Kingdom Buried in the Jungle."¹⁴ Beneath a photograph of Ta Prohm, the text of this chapter states that: "one can't help but be impressed by the power of nature and the weight of history. There are many ruins—perhaps even on a scale similar to Angkor Wat—still slumbering peacefully in the tropical forests of Cambodia, long inaccessible..."¹⁵ Another volume, focusing on the mythology behind the bas-reliefs that cover the monuments at Angkor and based on the author's doctoral dissertation, explains the images in great detail, but is entitled, somewhat incongruously, *Khmer Mythology Secrets of Angkor*.¹⁶ The description of Ta Prohm in Dawn Rooney's *Angkor An Introduction to the Temples*, probably today the most widely read guidebook to the monuments, describes the temple's attraction as being a result of "its natural state, (making) it possible to experience at this temple some of the wonder of the early explorers... shrouded in the jungle, the temple... is ethereal in aspect and

¹¹ William T. Vollmann, *Butterfly Stories* (New York: Grove Press, 1993).

¹² Christopher Moore, *Cut Out* (Bangkok: Heaven Lake Press, 1994).

¹³ Jacques and Charles Simon Martin, *La Colonne* (Paris: Casterman, 2001).

¹⁴ Hitoshi and Yoshiaki Ishizawa Tamura, *Along the Royal Roads to Angkor* (New York: Weatherhill, 1999), p. 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Vittorio Roveda, *Khmer Mythology*, Third ed. (Bangkok: River Books, 2000).

conjures up a romantic aura.”¹⁷ In the preface to this volume, Amanda Reynolds notes, in a quotation that echoes Henri Marchal’s 1928 description of Ta Prohm, that for Rooney, “the background of the verdant vegetation against the grey sandstone and reddish brick of the temples is a magical combination.”¹⁸



Figure 44 Grand Hotel d'Angkor

Many of these descriptions evoke the vocabulary of earlier times, and the echo of Marchal’s and Glaize’s guidebooks can be heard in many of the publications on the temples from the last decade. These publications have been produced in response to the growing number of visitors to the temples. However, in tandem with the increasing number of visitors to Siem Reap has been a visceral nostalgia for the stylistic trappings of the colonial era. Grand resorts and hotels of earlier eras across Southeast Asia have been bought and refurbished by the Raffles International Hotel Group, including the *Hôtel Le Royal* in Phnom Penh and the *Grand Hôtel D’Angkor* in Siem Reap. (Figure 44)¹⁹ The halls of the *Grand* in Siem Reap are decorated with colonial era photographs of the ruins, and posters advertising the 1931 Colonial

¹⁷ Dawn Rooney, *Angkor an Introduction to the Temples* (Lincolnwood, Illinois: Passport Books, 1997), p. 219.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁹ Photograph by the author.

Exposition in Paris. Many of the rooms are decorated in period furniture, or in “explorer” themes, with suites named for Henri Mouhot and Francis Garnier. Porters at the door are dressed in an impressive costume mixing the Cambodian *loungyi* with a vaguely marshal jacket that recalls the mixed outfits of Cambodian kings. Hotels like the *Grand*, and its explorer suites, seek to return visitors, once again, to the time of the first Western tourists. Many tourists today are, like their predecessors, traveling as much through time as through space: they are hoping to visit the Angkor of the 1920s and 1930s where their interwar predecessors hoped to visit the Angkor of Mouhot.

While a perusal of Western publications or a look at the Cambodian tour packages that are offered to foreign tourists appear to indicate that much of the perception of Cambodia and Angkor outside of the country has changed little since the colonial era, the situation inside the country has changed greatly over the course of the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, centuries. In the fifty years since Cambodia gained its independence the country has been wrought with tragedy: international and civil wars; massive bombings; revolution; genocide; refugee crises; food crises; education crises; humanitarian disaster. The situation in the country has improved precipitously in recent years, particularly in areas such as education, where the adult literacy rates have risen from percentages in the mid-thirties to nearly seventy percent in 2002 according to UNESCO and the UNDP.²⁰ Cambodia still reports an infant mortality rate of nearly seventy-six deaths per thousand births, and has an average life expectancy of just under fifty-six years. In 2001 it had the highest estimated rate of HIV/AIDS infection in Southeast Asia, with between three and four percent of the population infected.²¹ Despite these obstacles, the capitol is bustling with

²⁰ http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2002/en/indicator/indicator.cfm?File=cty_f_KHM.html. Viewed March 30, 2003.

²¹ Statistics taken from the Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Website (get URL). These statistics compare to U.S. infant mortality rates of 6.75% deaths per 1000 births (check), and life

motorcycles and Japanese automobiles brought across the border from Thailand; the markets are bursting with activity; the karaoke bars fill the neighborhoods with the crooning of government officials, businessmen, and not just a few gangsters; while beauty queens attend Phnom Penh's charm and beauty school to brush up on their skills.



Figure 45 Cambodian flag featuring Angkor Wat

In opposition to the French colonial assertion that Cambodia was a land without memory, the symbolism of Angkor and its importance, specifically because of its long history, is everywhere on the streets of Phnom Penh. A drive along any of the main thoroughfares in the capital will produce a plethora of acknowledgements of the temples, and to the dancers who are also an important symbol of Cambodian culture: the Bayon supermarket; the New Apsaras Tailor; the Ta Prohm hotel. The importance of Angkor is multi-faceted, and is often linked specifically to its ability to bring in much needed tourist dollars, however, Angkor's economic potential is by no means the only meaning that is assessed to the structures. Nor did the attachment of symbolic meaning to the temples did not begin in the post-colonial period: the first

expectancy averaging 78 years (check), while the rate of HIV/AIDS infection is 0.6%. As of 1979, the literacy rate in the U.S. was 97%. Viewed April 18, 2003.

Khmer language newspaper, which began publication in 1936, was not named the Phnom Penh Mail or the Cambodian Times, but took the name *Nagara Vatta* (Angkor Wat).²² The royal chronicles of King Norodom Sihanouk's reign, which began in 1941, "often stressed Cambodia's past greatness, and continuities between Angkor and the present."²³ By the time of independence, it had become standard for public figures to refer to the glorious Cambodian past, and to the temples as a witness to that past, in their speeches. Even the Khmer Rouge, who declared that "two thousand years of Cambodian history have virtually ended,"²⁴ still looked to the mobilization of manpower necessary to create the monuments as a model for citizens of Democratic Kampuchea.²⁵ As David Chandler notes, every Cambodian government since independence has featured an image of Angkor Wat on its flag.²⁶ (Figure 45)²⁷ Furthermore, the Independence Monument in Phnom Penh is comprised of a single tower that mimics the towers of Angkor Wat, which stands in the middle of one of the busiest traffic circles in the city. (Figure 46)²⁸ Angkor Wat, as much as it was during the colonial era, is still a symbol for Cambodia, though it is now the symbol that Cambodians use to represent themselves, their past, and their future. How deeply connected to that symbol many Cambodians feel is exemplified by recent events in Phnom Penh.

In January and February of 2003 Phnom Penh, the capitol city of Cambodia, was rocked by several days of riots involving thousands of protestors. The riots are

²² Chandler, 1996a, p. 159.

²³ Chandler, "Cambodian Royal Chronicles (Rajabangsavatar), 1927-1949: Kingship and Historiography at the End of the Colonial Era." (1996b) p. 200.

²⁴ Phnom Penh Radio, January 1976, as quoted in David P. Chandler, "Transformation in Cambodia," in *Facing the Cambodian Past Selected Essays 1971-1994* (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 1996b), p. 207.

²⁵ David P. Chandler, "Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea," in *Facing the Cambodian Past Selected Essays 1971-1994* (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 1996b) p. 234.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 246, see footnote.

²⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambodia> , December 3, 2005.

²⁸ Photograph by the author.

estimated to have caused more than \$54 million in damage. Mobs of what newspapers described as students roamed the streets, destroying cars, offices, businesses and buildings. Nearly all of the property damage was meted out upon “Thai” targets: the Thai embassy was broken into and set alight, as were numerous Thai-owned businesses. The Royal Phnom Penh Hotel was gutted by



Figure 46 Independence Monument, Phnom Penh

fire and looted; the Juliana Hotel sustained significant damage; and the Shinawatra and Samart offices were also looted.

Cambodia, a country that only at the close of the twentieth century has begun emerging from a series of devastating conflicts, civil wars and genocide, is no stranger to either political or social instability, or to riots. However, the target of mob anger, the rhetoric surrounding the incident, and the purported motivation for mass mobilization, make the extended days of rioting noteworthy. According to media reports in the days leading up to, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the riots, the anger, ire and vitriol that coalesced into violence were initially raised by the rumored words of a Thai soap opera actress named Suvanan Kongying.

In the January 18th edition of the Khmer-language newspaper *Rasmei Angkor*, the Thai actress is reported as saying during an interview that she would not perform in Cambodia unless Angkor Wat was returned to Thailand, and the story reported that the interview proved that Kongying looked down on Cambodia and Cambodians.²⁹ The story was picked up by a second Khmer-language newspaper, the *Koh Santepheap*, which then prompted a hail of call-ins to radio talk shows in Phnom Penh criticizing the actress. The talk show discussions then prompted stories in the English language *Cambodia Daily* and the French-language *Cambodge Soir*.³⁰

In an appearance at a school in Kompong Cham province on the same day, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen is reported to have responded to this demand by saying, "I have seen that people have had a strong reaction around the rumor of 'Morning Star' who looks down on Cambodia and demands Angkor Wat before she will visit Cambodia... The life of 'Morning Start,' or thief star, is not equal to a few bushes of grass near Angkor Wat."³¹ The Prime Minister went on to urge TV5, the station which had been broadcasting the soap opera, "hurry to stop broadcasting the films that have Kop Suvanan Kongying because I am afraid people will go to destroy the television station."³²

Demonstrations began on January 27th in front of the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, with protestors burning tires and destroying images of the actress. The protests turned violent the morning of January 29th when a false rumor spread among the protestors that the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok had been sacked, and several Cambodians killed. In the days of rioting that followed, the Thai embassy was gutted by fire and looted; numerous businesses were lost; the Thai ambassador was forced to

²⁹ "Step by Step: The Road to a Riot," *Phnom Penh Post*, January 31- February 13 2003.

³⁰ Thet Sambath and Matt McKinney, "Rumors That Sparked Riots Spread by Media, Politicians," *The Cambodia Daily Weekly Review*, January 27 to January 31 2003.

³¹ "Hun Sen Blames Extremists for City Riots, Calls for Calm," *The Cambodia Daily Weekly Review*, January 27 to January 31 2003.

³² Ibid.

flee the country; and Thai nationals were evacuated from Phnom Penh for their safety. Borders between Thailand and Cambodia were closed—a situation that soon resulted in a food crisis in the Cambodian town of Poi Pet, which relies on Thai gamblers visiting their casinos for its economy, and Thai products coming over the border to stock its markets. The situation was, at one point, so tense that F-16 fighter jets were readied to assist in the evacuation of Thai nationals from Phnom Penh. In the political fallout that followed, the Cambodian ambassador to Thailand was expelled from the country; a Cambodian envoy sent to Bangkok to apologize for the riots was denied an audience with Thailand's King Rama IXth; the governor of Phnom Penh, Chea Sophara, was dismissed from his post and sent to Burma as Cambodia's ambassador in Rangoon; and diplomatic ties between the two countries were suspended. In addition, Mam Sonando, head of the Beehive FM Radio station, the country's only independent radio station, was accused of inciting the riots in their broadcasts and arrested. Meanwhile, as per the Prime Minister's suggestion, Kongying's soap opera, which had previously been widely watched, was pulled from Cambodian television.

In the months of negotiation and diplomacy that followed, relations between the two countries have been characterized by stabilized, if strained, relations: diplomatic ties were re-established, if not completely normalized; Phnom Penh pledged to pay for a significant portion of the damage; and the border at Poi Pet was re-opened, allowing Thai gamblers to once again visit the border casinos, including one that is designed to resemble Angkor Wat. Investigations into the veracity of the statement attributed to Ms. Kongying discovered that the alleged interview had never taken place. The newspaper editors who first printed the lines, attributing them to the

actress, later stated that they had printed the story based on rumor, without checking sources.³³

Over the course of the following months, numerous accusations, suppositions and rumors—not least from the ousted Thai ambassador to Cambodia, Chatchawed Chartsuwan—have surfaced questioning the spontaneity of the riots.³⁴ There have been numerous speculations about whether or not the



Figure 47 Domestic tourists visiting Angkor Wat

protesters were organized; and if so, then by whom; and whether or not the motivation may have had more to do with domestic politics than international relations.³⁵ Tensions had been rising between the two countries over border and trade issues in previous months. In addition, the Prime Minister's public comments on Ms. Kongying's purported declaration, which preceded the outbreak of violence by two

³³ McKinney, "Rumors That Sparked Riots Spread by Media, Politicians."

³⁴ Robert Carmichael and Micheal Coren, "'Deplorable Incident' Ruins Thai-Khmer Relations," *Phnom Penh Post*, Januar 31 to February 13 2003.

³⁵ "Questions Remain over Riot," *Phnom Penh Post*, February 14 to February 27 2003. The article quotes unnamed diplomats in Phnom Penh speculating over whether or not the riots were organized by the government, and whether or not they were connected to the July elections, or to ousting Chea Sophara, who was becoming too powerful.

days, occurred exactly six months prior to Cambodia's national election, and outbreaks of instability in the months leading up to elections have been known to occur in the past.³⁶ However, whether the supposed "insult" and vague verbal threat of a pop idol against one of Cambodia's most important cultural icons was, in fact, the instigation of the riots, or was the conveniently reported instigation, does not negate the fact that these comments were *perceived* as being *plausibly capable* of motivating anger, fear and resentment unruly enough to result in the burning of the Thai embassy.

That the silhouette of Angkor Wat has become so invested with symbolism and meaning, and so identified with the self in Cambodia, that it is (or is at least thought to be) capable of sparking incidents calamitous enough to close international borders and require ethnic evacuation would doubtless never have been predicted by the temples' erstwhile discoverers, researchers, and restorers. Today, Angkor has become the destination for thousands of domestic tourists as well as international tourists. (Figure 47)³⁷ Cambodia has a growing number of archaeologists and conservators being trained not only in universities, but also through hands-on experience at the monuments with the conservation programs being carried out by groups such as World Monuments Fund. As these young scholars and professionals gain training and experience, they will return to the temples, and will write a new chapter in Angkor's history.

³⁶ Political violence is common in the months leading up to elections, and has been marked by political assassinations of candidates, activist and other figures in the lead-up to each of the national and local elections since 1993. In addition, prior to the second post-DK election, in 1997 the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, staged a coup that ousted the royalist party, FUNCINPEC, from the coalition government that was formed after the 1993 elections.

³⁷ Photograph by the author.