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## The reluctant politician of Cambodia

Anis Kamil

PRIME Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia is a man of contradictions. He has been called ruthless, yet is looking forward to having grandchildren. He has been a fighter but is surprisingly soft-spoken.

He dislikes politics, but has been Prime Minister in one way or another for the past 14 years. He became Prime Minister in 1985, at the age of 33, making him the world's youngest such minister.

However, his love for Cambodia is unquestionable and so is his determination to bring peace, stability, reconciliation and reconstruction to a country that has witnessed violence and social unrest for more than 30 years.

"Because there is no fighting does not mean there is complete peace as yet. To move forward, peace is a pre-requisite ... to implement social and economic development," he says.

Over the next five years, the Government will reduce the armed services, both the military and the police, by 79,000 members. The money saved from this will go towards improving public health and education.

"The Government must also put an end to corruption and make the administration more effective. Corruption is a chronic disease and makes the economy ineffective."

The Government must also reform its efforts in collecting taxes, says Hun Sen and stresses that the forest policy must be reformed, otherwise Cambodia will lose this precious natural resource.

Prior to the surrender of the Khmer Rouge, Hun Sen, a sports enthusiast, compares his country to that of weight-lifter who is capable of lifting 200kg but is only lifting 100kg.

"Before, we used one hand to obstruct the Khmer Rouge from returning to power and the other for national reconstruction.

"Now with reconciliation, we can bring a complete end to the war and devote all our time to national reconstruction."

However, he says, the regional economic crisis has made things more difficult. And there are still wars and natural disasters in the world which requires the donors to allocate assistance to these areas as well.

"But I still hope that with the end of the war, there will be opportunities to promote the economy. It is not our intention to turn Cambodia into a dragon, but at least into a small snake," he says with a smile.

Cambodia's entry into Asean is an important factor in the country's efforts to move forward - both politically and economically.

"First of all, the political benefit and national security will be enhanced. It would mean the end of Cambodian isolation within this region and we could also benefit from Asean's partnership outside the region. This would strengthen Cambodia's position in the international arena.

"In the economic field, Cambodia has to pay a price, but that is just at the beginning. In return, however, we would benefit from the investment that would be entering the country."

The Most Favoured Nation status and the General System of Preferences provided by the United States and the European Union could also be better maintained after being admitted into Asean.

"In short, we could say that there is nothing Cambodia could lose and much it could gain from joining Asean."

During his visit to Kuala Lumpur last week, he expressed gratitude on

behalf of Cambodia to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Malaysia's efforts and support to bring Cambodia into Asean.

"The happiest point of my visit was when I received the support of Dr Mahathir that Malaysia would secure the market for Cambodia's agrarian products."

For many years, he explains, Cambodia has found it difficult to find markets for its produce which include maize, rice, soya bean and beef. These products have been flowing to other places without proper arrangements or control.

"When we can secure a market for the export of these products we can also secure that our people can continue to produce.

"The growing labour force and the opportunities for employment is also one of the problems of our country. Therefore, we have requested the favour from Malaysia to accept Cambodian workers.

"Sending our workers to Malaysia is not only to solve the unemployment problem but to acquire skills and technology to bring back to Cambodia."

He adds that Cambodia can learn from Malaysia in social, economic development and rural development and land management. He has also submitted a proposal for human resource development to Dr Mahathir. Malaysia will help train officials after Cambodia's entry into Asean.

Another first for Cambodia is the participation of an opposition party in the National Assembly. When asked how that would help the political stability of Cambodia, he says having a legal opposition would add value and effectiveness to the Government's policies.

"It is the first time in the history of Cambodia that we have an opposition party in the National Assembly. We will absorb their good ideas for national reconciliation.

"If they do not voice their opinion within the National Assembly, they may resort to taking arms against us or some anarchic activity that would destroy political stability."

He says it is a source of pride for the country that it forms a culture of democracy on its own.

"When he (referring to Sam Rainsy who heads the self-named opposition party) voices his opposition, he is helping the Government. He can bring up members of the Government who are not acting appropriately.

"So, sometimes there is no need for the Prime Minister to take action, because the opposition is taking care of it," he says.

And what of the reluctant politician? He says that when it looked like the Cambodian Peoples's Party was leading in the elections, he made a request to step down on July 28, last year.

"I prepared a seven-page statement for my resignation, but no one accepted it," he says with a slight shrug.

When he was a young man, he says, he was held hostage by a war. For the last 20 years he has been a "political hostage". He is planning to step down as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, which he says is a complicated post.

"I would like to liberate myself from being a hostage of politics. I will do so step by step..."

Hun Sen, 48, has been in politics for 20 years, first as Foreign Minister, then Deputy Prime Minister and finally as Prime Minister.

He says that he will prevent any of his children from getting involved in politics. "They can be soldiers, civil servants, or businessmen but not politicians."

He dreams of living as a farmer in the country, somewhere by a river where he can fish for his dinner. "If my resignation had been accepted..."

"For now, I want to be a grandfather. My brothers and sisters all have grandchildren, but not I, the politician. However, my daughter is getting

married next month...."

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