

Book Review

SOPHAL EAR, 2012. AID DEPENDENCE IN CAMBODIA: HOW FOREIGN ASSISTANCE UNDERMINES DEMOCRACY. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Harold Kerbo

I suppose it is rare to pick up a book and find that the author was doing similar research to that of the reader, at about the same time. While I interviewed many NGO and government officials, as well as academics in Cambodia, my focus was more on poor villages and slums in Cambodia. Professor Ear was more focused on interviews with NGO and government officials, as well as business people. Despite differing interview targets, our findings about conditions in Cambodia today are almost identical. Cambodia is a country with an extremely corrupt government where little is being done to achieve sustained and evenly spread economic development.

Professor Ear's main point is that the massive foreign aid Cambodia receives every year mainly furthers corruption rather than helping promote economic development and poverty reduction. Furthermore, this foreign aid detracts from government responsibility for their own fate when about half of all government spending comes from foreign aid with little pressure from donors to reduce corruption on all levels of the Cambodian society. In large part this is because NGOs have a stake in continuing the foreign aid for their own existence. Without favorable reports back to their NGO headquarters and donors the aid money would start to dry-up. Professor Ear focuses in part on the garment industry, rice production, and livestock development (or the lack thereof) as case studies to specify the ineffectiveness of foreign aid and government policies. In another chapter he details how foreign aid to stem the spread of avian influenza in Cambodia was done more in the interests of donor countries and wealthy Cambodians behind the tourist industry than what was most needed for the Cambodian people. For example, while there were very few cases of human infection due to avian influenza (and many of these even covered up so as not to frighten away tourists), hundreds of Cambodian children die each year of dengue fever with little foreign aid attention. And unlike in other countries in the region, when small Cambodian farmers were forced to kill their chickens to stem the spread of avian influenza, there was very little if any compensation to these poor small farmers.

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Another problem in Cambodia today that received less attention in this book, but was accurately described, is the lack of civil society. In large part this civil society, along with much of Cambodia's human capital, was another casualty of the Khmer Rouge years. The trauma of genocide has destroyed much of the trust Cambodians once had for their neighbors. This subsequent decline in civil society has helped make possible the dominance of Hun Sen's Cambodian Peoples' Party and little realistic challenge to extreme corruption in government.

Despite all of my agreement with Professor Ear's analysis of Cambodia's current situation, I am less optimistic about how this can be changed. For example, I don't see how his solution of increased domestic taxes instead of relying so much on foreign aid to run the government will be possible. He argues tax payers will then have a greater incentive to demand better government. I simply do not see that current elites (Hun Sen and his rich friends) will allow it.

His argument that donor states, the World Bank, and the United Nations should be more strict in demanding less corruption if aid is to continue for Cambodia is a good one. However, a problem is that China is now the biggest donor to Cambodia, and as China has shown throughout the world's poor countries, China main goal in these countries is to continue to get essential resources.

From my interviews with labor union officials in Cambodia, I am more optimistic about Professor Ear's call for rich countries to restrict imports from Cambodia if human rights and conditions for labor are not improved. For example, Professor Ear found some positive impacts of the US law requiring garment unions to be allowed in Cambodia and working conditions improved if exports to the US are to continue. Likewise, rich countries could require transparency for revenues coming into the country for the purchase of mineral resources. A problem with this, again, is indicated with the oil revenues starting to flow into Cambodia from recently discovered off-shore reserves. All of the tracks have been leased to China or oil companies from other countries in the region except one track leased by Chevron. There is thus little leverage for rich countries over Cambodia in this situation. As one NGO official charged with trying to change Cambodian law so there is more transparency told me: "Its not going to happen, most of the oil revenues will be stolen."

One has to hope that Professor Ear's possible solutions to Cambodia's current situation can somehow work. A regime change is likely to be the best solution, but with a wrecked civil society and Hun Sen's iron fist over the country, a regime change seems unlikely anytime soon.

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