



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive

Faculty and Researcher Publications

Faculty and Researcher Publications

2011

Book Review by Sophal Ear of: The Persistence of Cambodian Poverty: From the Killing Fields to Today written by Harold R. Kerbo



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

***The Persistence of Cambodian Poverty: From the Killing Fields to Today.* By Harold R. Kerbo. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: MFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011. Softcover: 211pp.**

Few books on Cambodia have excited me as much as this one in recent years. While it paints a damning, if accurate, picture of contemporary failures of development in Cambodia, the author, Harold Kerbo, a professor of sociology at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, does so convincingly with his anthropological and statistics-laden methodological approach. The book begins ominously enough with a refusal to name the author's informants in Cambodia: "Unfortunately, for reasons that will be more clear throughout the pages of this book, I cannot thank any of these people in Cambodia by name. Especially in the case of Cambodian academics and government officials because I fear for their safety if they are identified" (p. 3). Indeed, years ago I published a paper on Cambodia in which I hid the identities of most of my informants. However, an international adviser, who was among the few I named, suffered retribution. This experience is corroborated by Kerbo who adds, "I have no reservations about naming my sources for information from my fieldwork for this book in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. I will *not* [emphasis original] name my sources in Cambodia; in fact, I will give misleading clues about whom they might be because I fear for their safety" (p. 8).

In the parlance of political science, Kerbo's dependent variable is poverty, which he never defines precisely, although it is obvious he adopts per capita income at one point, and the dollar-a-day benchmark subsequently. He explains that while there has been impressive economic growth (8 to 10 per cent in the 2000s) and some poverty reduction in the past decade, "More recently, however, conditions for tens of thousands of poor Cambodians have grown worse ... Many more poor Cambodians are losing their homes and land because of the economic boom since 2001. A building boom in Phnom Penh has resulted in 'land grabs' by rich Cambodians and foreign construction companies (mostly South Korean and Chinese)" (pp. 5–6).

Kerbo's independent variable — or at least the one he argues matters most — is bad governance. He would have found a fan in George Soros who quipped that "Most of the poverty and misery in the world is due to bad government, lack of democracy, weak states, internal strife, and so on." As Kerbo explains, "Much, but

not all, of the continuing tragedy for Cambodians is related to the government in place since the mid-1980s. The 2006 annual corruption report from Transparency International included Cambodia for the first time. Cambodia was ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world” (p. 7). As I refereed the 2006 annual corruption report from Transparency International favourably, Kerbo is preaching to the converted.

Numerous World Bank statistics aside — some of which can make one’s eyes glaze over — Kerbo shares the story of Tima whose life and death in Dey Krahom is particularly touching (pp. 12–14). He does this throughout the book. This is the strength of the anthropologist coming through loud and clear.

Both Chapters 5 and 7 which compare Cambodia with Thailand and Cambodia with Vietnam and Laos, respectively, provide much needed perspective. The impression is that far from the Kingdom of Wonder, Cambodia may be the “New Philippines”. Early on, he makes clear that Vietnam and Laos as comparator countries are better off: “people in formally communist countries in the region, such as Vietnam and Laos, are faced with less corruption and fear from their government than people in Cambodia” (p. 8). Cambodia’s debauch Communism during the Khmer Rouge period has indeed been replaced with a debauch Capitalism. The moderation of its neighbours stands in stark contrast.

I do have a few quibbles. There are some errata: Kerbo refers to the World Bank Development Report (pp. 5, 49, 91, and 212) when he should refer to the World Bank’s *World Development Report*; he misspells at least one name, that of my friend Chan Sopal which he spells Sopal (pp. 209, 210, 219) and refers to verity (p. 11) when he means variety. On pages 31, 33, and 177, he refers to the “Angkor Kingdom” but surely means the “Khmer Empire”. More substantively I take issue with the characterization that Cambodia’s civil society is “very weak” (p. 183). Numerically not — there are thousands of civil society organizations — but it is under assault. Unlike the media (especially television and radio), however, it has not yet been captured by the authorities. Kerbo’s assertion of a “CIA-supported military coup in 1970” (p. 8) is unproven, although it is an old canard. He subscribes, much like William Shawcross did in his *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (1979), to the idea that America bears much of the responsibility: “the violent death came largely from intense bombing from U.S. warplanes during the Vietnam War. The evil, in the minds of many rural Cambodians of the time, came also from the government in

Phnom Penh which sided with the United States from 1970” (p. 20). I also find Kerbo insufficiently critical of Vietnam’s actions in Cambodia following the 1979 invasion. In all, however, his book is worth reading and a highly valuable contribution to our understanding of poverty and its root causes in Cambodia (hint: it has to do with governance).

SOPHAL EAR is an Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. The views expressed above are his alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Navy or the Department of Defense.