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Cambodia Today

Cambodia is a compelling country to visit, in part due to the complex socio-political system in which the country is cocooned. The political landscape shifted decisively in the 2013 election and that promises to make for some interesting years ahead. The economy continues to grow at a dramatic pace, albeit from a low base, but many observers are beginning to question at what cost to the delicate environment.

Best on Film

The Killing Fields (1984) This definitive film on the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia tells the story of American journalist Sydney Schanberg and his Cambodian assistant Dith Pran during and after the war.

Apocalypse Now (1979) In Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece, a renegade colonel, played by Marlon Brando, goes AWOL in Cambodia. Martin Sheen plays a young soldier sent to bring him back, and the ensuing encounter makes for one of the most powerful indictments of war ever made.

Best in Print

Cambodia's Curse (Joel Brinkley) Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist pulls no punches in his criticism of the government and donors alike.

Cambodia Now (Karen Coates) A no-holds-barred look at contemporary Cambodia through the eyes of its diverse population.

The Gate (François Bizot) Bizot was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge, and later held by them in the French embassy.

Voices from S-21 (David Chandler) A study of the Khmer Rouge's interrogation and torture centre.

Politics

The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has dominated the politics of Cambodia since 1979 when it was installed in power by the Vietnamese. Party and state are intertwined and the CPP leadership has been making plans for the future with dynastic alliances between its offspring. Just look at the roll call of marriages in the past decade and it soon becomes apparent that senior leaders such as Prime Minister Hun Sen have their eyes firmly on a potential handover of power to the children of the elite.

However, this sophisticated system of control was shaken in the 2013 national election when the united opposition was able to make significant gains in the national assembly. Long-standing opposition leader Sam Rainsy united with Human Rights Party leader Kem Sokha to launch the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

Official results from the National Election Commission (NEC) showed the CPP had won 68 seats and the CNRP 55 seats, a dramatic decline for the previously unassailable CPP. However, the opposition cried foul, as the NEC is seen by observers as a tool of the ruling party. According to official opposition counts and some independent observers, the CNRP may have even won the popular vote by a slight majority and claimed 62 seats to the CPP's 61 seats.

The CPP pushed ahead with official results and the new assembly was sworn in with only 68 MPs, as the opposition refused to take its seats. Mass demonstrations were called and petitions delivered to embassies around Phnom Penh. At the time of writing, the demonstrations remained largely peaceful, but the political impasse continued. Many Cambodians hope that both sides will reach a compromise and that in time this surprise result will put pressure on the CPP to introduce much-needed political and electoral reform. The next five years will be very interesting indeed.