



ASIA INSIGHT

SUCCESSION STRATEGY

Cambodian strongman Hun Sen plans to hand over power to his son and the children of his allies

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Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, center, has worked assiduously to maintain his family's grip on power, grooming his eldest son, Manet, left, to succeed him.

PHNOM PENH A momentous generational shift in power looms in Cambodia, as Prime Minister Hun Sen works out when to hand over the reins to his eldest son after nearly 40 years of iron-fisted rule.

The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) announced in March that Hun Manet, the prime minister's eldest son and commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, would run as a parliamentary candidate in July's national elections. This would make him eligible to become prime minister after his virtually guaranteed election.

On April 24, Manet suspended his army duties, cementing his move from a military to an explicitly political role.

Hun Sen has previously said that Manet, a 45-year-old West Point graduate with a doctorate in economics, would not assume power until the 2028 elections. Yet with septuagenarian Hun Sen's health worsening and political conditions seemingly favorable, succession plans appear to have been fast-tracked so that Manet can take over, possibly this year.

CPP spokesperson Sok Eysan downplayed the hype: "His Excellency Hun Manet is the candidate for the future, the future means not now." Eysan explained that if Hun Sen retired from office after the next election, King Norodom Sihamoni would declare the next prime minister after a vote of confidence from a parliament whose members have already endorsed Manet's rule.

But to secure his son's place at the top, Hun Sen is overseeing a sweeping transition within the ruling party to provide the children of CPP elites with positions of prestige and influence, part of a vast patronage system that he has built up over decades.

"Access to top jobs isn't based on competence, but on patronage and maintaining power within the Hun family," said Neil Loughlin, a researcher on authoritarian politics at City, University of London. "It also relies on others within the system accepting the legitimacy of dynastic power transition within the Hun family."

In Cambodia, nepotism abets nepo-

tism. Ministerial secretary of state and provincial governor posts have been increasingly awarded to CPP "nepo babies," foreshadowing the likely nudging aside of the party's old guard to clear the way for Hun Manet's rule. A host of new, younger ministers is expected to be appointed after the elections.

A list of CPP parliamentary candidates reviewed by Nikkei Asia reveals that Hun Sen's old guard, many of whom are peers from the earliest days of post-Khmer Rouge state-building, will run in the upcoming July election. But ministers are appointed directly by the prime minister, suggesting that Manet could bring in a new cabinet while allowing the older generation to step into National Assembly roles.

"We 80-year-olds will walk away [from the cabinet], we agreed," Hun Sen said last year, while announcing that a shadow cabinet for Manet had already been prepared.

"The Cambodian People's Party is ready to transfer power to the next generation," said political analyst Em Sovannara. "And all the next generation is coming from parents and relatives who have a position in the government."

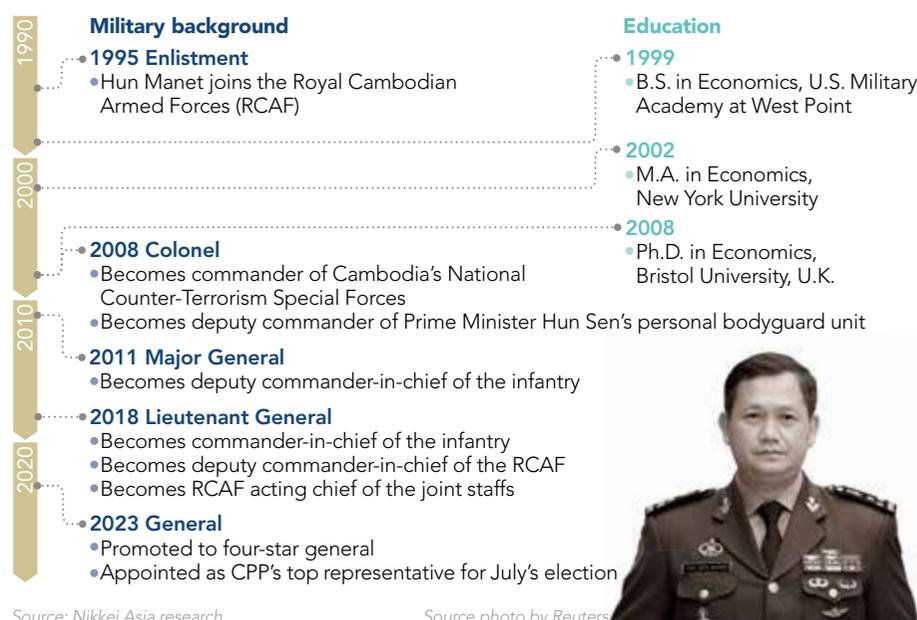
Some "CPP princelings" like Dith Tina, the son of the Supreme Court's chief justice, have already been handed top jobs leading sectors that they have no background in, as Tina himself admitted when he became agriculture minister last October.

While members of the younger generation are typically Western educated and more polished than their parents, they are hardly more liberal. Shortly into his tenure, Tina told reporters he would "accept criticism," adding in the same breath that he would sue anyone who damaged his ministry's "dignity."

By boosting the nepo babies, Hun Sen may soothe the potential resentment from old rivals who have built fiefdoms that are not entirely under the thumb of the world's second-longest serving prime minister.

Two CPP titans Hun Sen is counting on to accept Manet's leadership are Defense Minister Tea Banh, who oversees the military forces, and Interior Minister Sar Kheng, who controls the National Police. Sar Kheng was notably slower than other ministers to endorse Hun Manet's succession. Both ministers want their sons, who are in their 40s and already

Hun Manet's move from the military to politics



Source: Nikkei Asia research

Source photo by Reuters





AFP/Jiji

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 Cambodian Defense Minister
 Tea Banh places the four-star
 general insignia on the shoulder
 of Gen. Hun Manet, the eldest
 son of the prime minister, during
 a promotion ceremony
 in Phnom Penh on April 20.

hold high-level government positions, to inherit their posts, observers say.

But exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy believes the prime minister will try to prevent his rivals' ministries from exercising real power, even if the ministries are initially in the hands of their sons.

“[Hun Sen] will never allow the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior, at least the police, to be outside Hun Manet's control,” Rainsy said. “This arrangement is temporary, for the transition period, to calm down potential opponents.”

A government spokesperson denied that Hun Sen would try to cut the police out of the Interior Ministry, noting it would leave the ministry “toothless.”

Maintaining influence over key components of the armed forces is seen as essential for Hun Manet to protect his still-untested leadership. “The military forces' duty is to defend the head of government,” Manet has said, while his father has noted that ultimate authority over the troops is in the hands of the prime minister.

After a flurry of promotions left Manet as a four-star general on the eve of his move into civilian politics, command of the army was temporarily handed in late April to Hun Sen ally Mao Sophan, who led the infamous Brigade 70 that served as the prime

minister's bodyguard unit in the 1990s.

If Sophan fully takes over, this keeps the army with someone who has “a long history of loyalty to Hun Sen,” Loughlin pointed out, noting that in that case Manet would not really be relinquishing control over the armed forces as prime minister.

The rest of Hun Sen's children have established niches within the dynasty. Younger brothers Hun Manith, who was promoted to deputy commander of the army in March, and Hun Many, an elected parliamentarian and a leader of the CPP's youth wing, play supporting roles at arm's length from their elder brother. Hun Sen's daughters, Hun Mana and Hun Maly, run business empires.

Another way that Hun Sen and his allies stay in power is by providing plumb government jobs to repentant opponents.

In one notable case, an outspoken government critic, Hun Kosal, was released from jail, joined the ruling CPP and received a high-ranking civil service job in the span of three days in April. He and another activist had faced years behind bars for Facebook posts implying that the prime minister was more powerful than the king.

Kosal (no relation to the prime minister) apologized profusely to Hun Sen, who is often referred to by Cambodians with the

Hun Sen casts his vote during a Senate election in the central Cambodian city of Ta Khmau in February 2018.



Reuters

title of nobility “Samdech,” and expressed gratitude for his forgiveness.

“This behavior shows that Samdech is a man with a heart that is not malicious and vengeful,” Kosal said in a Facebook post. “Samdech Father’s soft and powerful voice really reminds the children [us] of precious wisdom and important lessons in life.”

But the threat of violence lurks for anyone who contests the CPP’s supremacy. Hun Sen has warned his opponents that they face legal action or a stick. “I will gather all the CPP’s supporters to hold a demonstration and hit you,” he said in a January speech.

Activists for the strongest remaining opposition group, the Candlelight Party, have since been chased down and beaten with metal rods by unidentified men and rammed by an SUV in a suspicious accident. Several elected opposition officials and more than a dozen other would-be political adversaries have been imprisoned in recent months, including leading opposition figure Kem Sokha.

The CPP and Hun Sen’s embrace of authoritarianism has been evident since the court-ordered dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party in 2017, leading the CPP to claim all 125 parliamentary seats in the country’s last national elections in 2018.

Amid the machinations of Cambodia’s elites, political outsiders like Grassroots Democracy Party leader Sam Inn, a former student with a civil society background, say they have learned that all they can do is submit to the system. Discouraged by his party’s lack of popular support, Inn defected to the CPP in April and took a government position, explaining it was the only way he felt he could contribute to the country.

“My work to strengthen democracy -- I know I don’t have enough ability,” Inn said. “To do politics, having a good heart is not enough.” **N**

Cambodia’s family politics

	General Kun Kim	Son: Kim Rithy
	Deputy supreme commander of Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF)	Appointed Preah Vihear provincial governor in July 2022
	Say Chhum	Son: Say Samal
	Senate president	Minister of environment since September 2013
	Dith Munty	Son: Dith Tina
	Supreme Court chief justice	Appointed minister of agriculture, forestry and fisheries in October 2022
	Tea Banh	Son: Tea Seiha
	Defense minister	Appointed Siem Reap provincial governor in 2018
	Sar Kheng	Son: Sar Sokha
	Interior minister	Secretary of state, Ministry of Education, since 2018
	Chea Chanto	Daughter: Chea Serey
	National Bank of Cambodia governor	Promoted to National Bank of Cambodia deputy governor in March 2023
	Prak Sokhon	Son: Prak David
	Minister of foreign affairs and international cooperation	Appointed secretary of state, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in April 2023
	Chea Sophara	Son: Phara Mongkul
	Minister of land management	Appointed secretary of state, Ministry of Land Management in March 2023
	Thong Khon	Son: Thong Rathasak
	Minister of tourism	Appointed secretary of state, Ministry of Tourism in March 2023

Source: Nikkei Asia research