

PUBP 764: Transnational Crime and Corruption
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A Case Study of Cambodia as an Emerging Center of Modern Human Trafficking and Organized Crime

Although it is possible human trafficking is one of the oldest transnational criminal enterprises in the world, it is also one of the most insidious and adaptable. Organized gangs continue to grow in size and scope, enabled by modern technology and globalization to extend their markets far beyond traditional boundaries. This increased access to revenue and cooperation with other, international illicit gangs, has empowered mob bosses to achieve large spheres of control within states and through corruption, sometimes significant national level power as well. The following paper will investigate one such modern example, Cambodia. How the country's fraught history and unstable government has made it a regional and global hotspot for modern human trafficking, how the pandemic accelerated this process, and how organized crime is benefitting from human trafficking to create new, more dangerous criminal enterprises on an industrial scale.

Before delving into the current situation with transnational organized crime in Cambodia, it is important to understand the country's history and the circumstances which have weakened the state and entrenched a system of wide-spread governmental corruption. Although Cambodia was not the target of the Vietnam War, being its neighbor still had serious consequences for the country. In 1969 when Nixon became President, he was worried about the protracted state of the war and launched an expanded offensive. This new operation included Cambodia as the United

States was afraid the North Vietnamese communists were becoming quite close to the Cambodia communists and would use Cambodia as a new base of operations to attack American soldiers (Power, 92).

Over the few years, the US Air Force flew 3,875 bombing sorties on Cambodian territory, and 70,000 American and South Vietnamese ground troops invaded (Power, 92). At the same time, the pro-United States dictator Lon Nol took power in Cambodia and in coordination with America, began shelling so-called “sanctuaries” for communists within his own country (Power, 93). This combined military campaign by the pro-American Cambodia regime and the United States killed tens of thousands of civilians and razed hundreds of villages to the ground (Power, 94). As often happens when the West supports unpopular foreign authoritarians for their own strategic interests, there was an uprising against the US-backed Cambodian government.

The destruction and resulting economic hardship from the campaign, caused the Cambodian people to become disenchanted with Lon Nol and support Saloth Sar, who later became known as Pol Pot (Power, 93). Pol Pot’s communist regime and his party, the Khmer Rouge, are responsible for many of the seeds of the country’s current political instability, corruption, and economic problems. Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge killed between 1.5 and 3 million of their own citizens who they view as enemies of the state or democracy sympathizers (Enemies of the People, 2009). Pol Pot also intensely consolidated his control of the state by installing trusted allies and loyalist in key economic and political position (Enemies of the People, 2009). This set up a system of deep, endemic corruption in Cambodia at the highest levels which, even though no longer under Communist rule, has continued into the current democratic government.

In 2005 a World Bank representative when asked what the main problem facing Cambodia was responded “corruption, corruption, corruption” (Piromya, 2022). For years, the country has ranked near the bottom of Transparency International’s index and as of 2021 it was ranked 157 out of 180 countries surveyed (Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, 2021). Corruption, combined with the country’s democratic backsliding over the past few years has resulted in a severely weakened state.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in power since 1985 and has slowly consolidated his power to the point where in the 2018 election, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) won the prime ministership and every seat in both chambers in an election seen as rigged by international observers (Freedom House Report, 2022). Since that point it has been virtually impossible for a democratically elected change or opposition for to CPP rule. And in the classic style of most authoritarians, Prime Minister Hun Sen has begun to more heavily rely on corruption and nepotism to solidify his allies’ loyalty.

In 2018, before the election, anti-corruption NGO Global Witness published a detailed report on the government leaders who Hun Sen had enabled in exploiting the country and its resources for personal gain. What is perhaps most alarming about the Hun Sen administration’s form of corruption, is how closely it is tied to illegal trades and criminal markets. Global Witness found senators under the prime minister’s protection were engaged in illegal multi-million dollar enterprises of logging, sand dredging, casinos, marijuana, and smuggling, to bring all these goods to market (Global Witness, 2018).

The judiciary system is largely powerless to hold the government to account and is frequently complicit in enabling the personal enrichment of CPP officials while prosecuting members of the opposition (Freedom House, 2022). This level of national control of the

legislature, judiciary, and key economic sectors, demonstrates how completely Prime Minister Hun Sen has managed to solidify his rule.

However, Hun Sen is walking a delicate line with his strategy to remain in power. He has to retain the loyalty of his cronies in key government and economic sectors, while also maintaining tight control over the criminal elements and corruption he has perpetuated and expanded into the system. Unfortunately, in recent years increased media, international, and regional government attention has begun to shed light on how these elements, introduced to keep Prime Minister Hun Sen in power, have started to create serious security issues for both the state and the international community.

In 2018, the Chinese Communist Party began a serious crackdown on the Triad and other organized crime groups in the country and placed increased restrictions on the use of crypto, their preferred method of untraceable money transfer (Lin, 2019). Of particular concern to the Chinese government were online scams the Triad conducted targeting Chinese citizens (Lin, 2019). This caused these groups to seek new territories in which to operate and the weaker states to China's south presented a prime new location (Lin, 2019). Because China acted on their own and without regional coordination against these illicit gangs, they failed to stamp them out through incarceration and the crime groups responded to these new conditions by fleeing China and infecting other states.

Because of the environment Prime Minister Hun Sen had created over the decades of his rule, Cambodia with its weak central control and tolerance of corruption and organized crime, was a desirable location for a displaced illegal operation. And ironically for China, the Triad and other groups since they had merely been driven out and not arrested or detained, began running their same online scams targeting Chinese citizens from the relative protection and tolerant state

of Cambodia (McCready, 2022). Once established, there were a few unforeseen shocks to this already fragile environment which supercharged these newly empowered gangs.

The first of these unforeseen circumstances which amplified the transnational organized crime groups was the harsh economic consequences of Cambodia's 2019 online gambling ban. Gambling is illegal in China, and so Cambodia built a huge gambling industry for Chinese tourists consisting of over 100 casinos (McCready, 2022). However, when online gambling ban went into effect it severely undermined the revenue of these casinos, and the pandemic of 2020 devastated in-person travel from China to these locations (McCready, 2022). This vast industry needed a way to make up for lost revenue and the crime-friendly environment of Cambodia provided the perfect opportunity. The two factors of the 2019 gambling ban and the 2020 pandemic opened the possibility of a new partnership between transnational organized crime and another well-established criminal enterprise in Cambodia, human trafficking.

Human trafficking has long been a significant problem in Cambodia. In 2022, the US State Department downgraded Cambodia from a Tier 2 to a Tier 3 country on their human trafficking index, citing the increasing number of victims and lack of prosecution (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022). Two thirds of the human trafficking victims in the world, about 25 million, are in East Asia and the Pacific and this number is only growing (The Global Slavery Index, 2016). This same region also accounts for the largest share of forced labor trafficking profits, \$51 billion of \$150.3 billion globally (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2018). It is quite likely these numbers could be even higher though as corruption in the region makes accurate data collection quite difficult (Caballero-Anthony, 2018).

The government makes marginal efforts to arrest those engaged in human trafficking, but no government officials involved are prosecuted and often local police warn traffickers so the

raids are more for show (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022). This enabling of crime through corruption is what has allowed Cambodia to become a regional and international hotspot for all kinds of illegal and harmful activity, but especially human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor. More importantly, however, the environment has allowed for using aspects of state infrastructure and the labor supplied by human trafficking as key ingredients in crafting new and more nefarious criminal enterprises. The most alarming one of these are the new pig-butcherer online scams being run with human trafficked forced labor out of casinos whose gambling customers evaporated during the pandemic lockdowns.

Pig-Butcherer

Pig-butcherer is a new formation of a classic online scam. Essentially it is a long con where scammers meet potential victims in online platforms such as dating websites, social media, or email correspondence (Massive Losses Define Epidemic of ‘Pig Butcherer’, 2022). Then victims are convinced to buy cryptocurrency and invest on platforms controlled by the scammers (Massive Losses Define Epidemic of ‘Pig Butcherer’, 2022). The money remains there for a time, building up to a significant level as victims see perceived “gains” on their investment before the scammers drain the account and disappear (Massive Losses Define Epidemic of ‘Pig Butcherer’, 2022).

When the ban of online gambling and the pandemic occurred in 2019 and 2020, the casinos desperately needed to replace their income. Cambodia's new organized crime groups from China needed a new place to establish control and work out of. The resulting partnership allows a kind of symbiotic relationship for the two which has taken over entire cities.

Sihanoukville is a coastal city in the south of Cambodia which has become one such city. In fact, the conditions there are so bad, and crime is so widespread, it is considered the de facto capital of online fraud and scams (Podkul and Liu, 2022). Casino owners and other landlords have rented out vast apartment complexes, casinos, and resort compounds to organized criminals from which to run their pig-butcher scam operations (McCready, 2022). To staff these call centers, human trafficking victims are either lured by fake job postings or kidnapped from elsewhere in the region and sold to the gangs (Podkul and Liu, 2022).

A ProPublica investigation found that human traffickers use online messaging apps such as Telegram to post advertisements of people for sale and lists their qualifications such as typing and English ability (Podkul and Liu, 2022). Once they are taken into these compounds, they have little hope of escape. A 2022 Al Jazeera documentary shows rows upon rows of people seated at desks with computers with guards holding batons and tasers patrolling the rooms (Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves, 2022). In many ways these operations look like rudimentary corporate offices, both in their setup and scale.

The true supercharging event for this new industry and scam format came in the form of the pandemic. Suddenly a large percentage of the world, especially the wealthier countries with large white-collar populations found themselves trapped inside, isolated and lonely. Online scammers took advantage of this new opportunity. They started with countries which were geographically close to Cambodia, but soon expanded their reach and began to target the West,

all while sucking more trafficking victims into their compounds to meet their expanding labor needs (McCreary, 2022). With the internet, distance was no barrier and the scammers in Cambodia found a whole new market of victims were suddenly much more online and willing to respond to messages they might not have before. With Cambodia's history of little to no government oversight and a plentiful supply of forced labor, organized criminals were free to expand their pig-butcherings as rapidly as they were able.

Although estimating the numbers of people in these compounds is difficult due to lack of government cooperation, there are likely tens of thousands of people in these held in these scam compounds (McCreary, 2022). Victims have identified dozens of huge, high-rise buildings across Cambodia, with many in the city of Sihanoukville, which they claim are full of people forced to swindle victims out of their money (McCreary, 2022). Some victims respond to fake advertisements for jobs at "call-centers" showing facilities such as gyms, and pools, while others are kidnapped or smuggled into the country by traditional human trafficking organized crime routes and groups (Podkul and Liu, 2022).

Once taken inside these compounds, the conditions are extreme. An Al Jazeera documentary was able to source footage from inside some of these compounds which show traffickers beating, shocking, and torturing people who try to escape or haven't met their quotas of online scam victims (Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves, 2022).

The profits from these online scam compounds are truly enormous. While difficult to estimate, some estimates put the number in the tens of billions of dollars a year (Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves, 2022). If the current state protection and corruption continues, it could easily grow larger and further diversify into new internet-based scams. One primary

reason there has been so little national accountability despite the international documentation of the issue, is that many in the Cambodia government directly benefit from these profits.

According the Al Jazeera documentary, almost all of the scam compounds in the country can be traced back to close allies and relations of Prime Minister Hun Sen (Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves, 2022). Owners of these giant apartment buildings include a nephew, an advisor, a former advisor and a wealthy supporter known to supply Hun Sen with personal favors (Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves, 2022). Perhaps even more worryingly, there are also three prominent Chinese investors who are convicted of financial crimes in China who are funding the construction and expansion of many of the projects (Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves, 2022).

This represents a rather dark turn in the organized criminal enterprise of Cambodia. Until around 2019, the state had primarily engaged in nepotism and national corruption in order to maintain power and enrich the allies and inner circle of the Cambodian People's Party. They were still a weak, corrupt state which turned a blind eye to large-scale criminal activity. However, soliciting outside funding from convicted criminals in order to build compounds which are being used to imprison tens of thousands of people forced to scam or be tortured begins to start down the path of a state-sponsored and state-run diverse criminal organization.

It is unlikely that the full extent of the connection between the organized crime, the government, and the private sector is known since insufficient research has been conducted especially on the more modern evolution and situation. However, given the historic patterns, the monetary incentives to the government from supporting criminal activity, and the power it gives Prime Minister Hen Sun to distribute this wealth to maintain his position mean it will likely continue. The criminal organizations also benefit from the arrangement. So far, they have a safe

harbor from which to operate and are at the crossroads of many other illicit trade networks into which they can tap to expand their own enterprise.

There has been some international and regional scrutiny of Cambodia's seeming slide into a haven for organized crime. The Al Jazeera documentary released in July of 2022 prompted a slew of high-profile articles by newspapers such as the BBC, DW, ProPublica, and Vice. These stories in turn elevate the reports of corruption and human trafficking by local NGOs, and gave them national attention, forcing the Prime Minister to respond condemning human trafficking and blaming the crimes which occurred on illegal foreigners in the country (Piromya, 2022).

Although these words from Hun Sen likely do not mean much and fall far short of any kind of accountability, local anti-trafficking NGOs have also been able to appeal their case on the international stage. In September, a group of them which operate in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, asked Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to establish a permanent desk in neighboring Myanmar to combat crime syndicates and human trafficking (Hunt, 2022). Additionally, warnings have been issued by multiple Asian embassies from some of the highest trafficked countries, warning them specifically against falling for the false advertisements for these "call centers" or from being lured into a trafficking situation (Hunt, 2022).

All of this international pressure has forced Prime Minister Hun Sen to conduct some raids on the compounds, but they appear to be mostly for optics. There have been over a dozen raids of these giant compound particularly in Sihanoukville, freeing thousands of imprisoned workers to return to their homes (Podkul, 2022). However, many experts remain unconvinced the new government attention towards law enforcement will last and view this as possibly more of a brief interruption to this industry (Podkul, 2022). These pig-butcher and other online

scams are an incredibly lucrative enterprise with little risk when compared to drug trafficking, or other criminal activities which require the movement of physical goods. Criminal networks tend to behave much like corporations in that they adapt and modify operations in order to pursue profit and there is no indication the gangs in operation have received anything close to a fatal blow by these raids.

Evidence of curbing of the effects and reach of this latest round of international scrutiny through intimidation and arrests can already be seen. Prime Minister Hun Sen and the CPP over the decades have crafted a political and law enforcement engine designed to quell popular uprisings and dissidents in service of remaining in power and allowing them to continue to benefit from their illegal businesses.

The most recent example of this reversion to corruption and illegal profit in the country is the illegal logging industry in the country. In 2021, USAID suspended funding to the Cambodian government which was supposed to be used for protecting their forests (U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh Statement on the USAID Greening Prey Lang Funding Redirect, 2021). The Cambodian government has a history of harassing NGOs and indigenous peoples trying to prevent the destruction of these habitats. In the early months of 2021, numerous activists who document the deforestation were arrested and given harsh jail sentences (US Cuts Funding to Cambodia's Prey Lang Forest, Citing Government Failure to Protect the Land, 2021). The State Department also found many indigenous communities have been driven off their land in order to cut down trees in these illegal operations (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022).

This response is hardly surprising given the close connection between illegal logging and Prime Minister Hun Sen's allies. As discussed earlier, key members of his inner circle benefit from controlling the logging and smuggling operations used to move the lumber out of the

country and insert into legal markets or sell it. Very likely Hun Sen, as many authoritarian leaders do, has offered protection for these illicit industries in exchange for their continued buy-in into his rule.

However, this apparatus has recently been turned to target the victims and NGOs which brought the unwelcome attention to the country for the scam compounds. After the Al Jazeera documentary and the subsequent media and international government attention it generated, the Cambodian government began responding by suing some of the local NGOs and jailing their members, and shaming and harassing escaped victims who attempt to go public (McCreary, 2022). There are also reports of these scam compounds having the backing of local police who act as protectors and enforcers for them, warning of upcoming token raids and often returning escapees back to their imprisonment (McCreary, 2022).

Some of these criminal compounds have evolved beyond depending on government protection and local law enforcement. According to the United States Institute for Peace, as of November 2022, 50,000 – 100,000 people were still held against their will in enclaves completely run by online scam gangs (Clapp and Tower, 2022). Such enclaves began in neighboring Myanmar, but have since spread to Laos and Cambodia, assisting in the facilitation of the human trafficking boom (Clapp and Tower, 2022). These enclaves represent a new era and model for organized crime in the region. Although there are other countries which have similar large areas of territory under the control of gangs, such as the favelas in Brazil, the international reach of the online scam business and the tens of billions in profits they steal from people all over the world are an evolution.

Now organized crime can use these pig-butcherings supercharged through tens of thousands of forced laborers to an industrial scale, with a global reach and state protection.

Although there are other examples of states with strong organized crime presences which either partner with the state or are directly under the state, such as Afghanistan or North Korea, Cambodia represents a new category of such states. Afghanistan represents a similar model in that it has a long history of Soviet and United States military intervention which has enabled a fractured political system. North Korea has incredibly centralized control and is the frequent perpetrator of cyber attacks for revenue. However, both of these countries are fairly heavily ostracized or sanctioned by most of the international community. Even the Russian cybercrime model, though potent, has come under widespread international criticism since their efforts to interfere in democratic elections and the Ukraine invasion.

The most relevant model to help understand the possible future of Cambodia is likely Honduras. For over two decades, including during his tenure from 2014 – 2022, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez allowed almost the entire state to be used by drug traffickers to export cocaine to the United States (Weiser and Suazo, 2022). He benefitted from the cocaine profits himself, receiving millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks, and used them to enrich his allies and fund his political campaigns (Weiser and Suazo, 2022). Cambodia bears a lot of similarity to Honduras' system under President Hernandez. It is still part of the global trade, financial, and political systems despite Cambodia's increasingly close ties with organized crime. However, there is one important distinction between the two countries.

Cambodia is also one of the countries in the Southeast Asia region which has begun to draw much closer to China. In 2006, Prime Minister Hun Sen called China Cambodia's "most trustworthy friend" and China has poured investment into the country over the past three decades (Why Cambodia has cosied up to China, 2017). Between 2011 and 2015, China supplied \$5

billion to Cambodia, a staggering sum which amounted to 70% of the country's total economic investment (Why Cambodia has cosied up to China, 2017).

And the ties are not only economic. In July, China started construction on a massive new naval base on the coast of Cambodia, which would give them access to the Gulf of Thailand and greatly expand China's influence on trade in the Indian Ocean (Detsch, 2022). This project is shrouded in secrecy and both sides have gone to great lengths to obscure their roles and the extent of the project (Detsch, 2022). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this new naval base is located just outside another major recipient of Chinese investment and influence, the city of Sihanoukville.

The closer these two countries become, the less likely it is the United States will be able to use its power and influence to curtail the reach of crime and its usurping of the Cambodia state. In Honduras when corruption and criminal involvement reached the highest levels of government, the United States was able to partner with the Honduran military and law enforcement and leverage their DEA office in Tegucigalpa in order to extradite, Juan Orlando Hernandez, the former president to stand trial for enabling cocaine shipments to the US.

Cambodia is increasingly under the shadow and protection of the Chinese state. An international actor who has repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to ignore or directly play into corrupt administrations in order to further their own national strategic interests. As China increases their global economic and military presence through the Belt and Road Initiative and the construction of new civilian and military projects, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario where criminal networks pick weak states which enjoy the protection of the Chinese government. From under the umbrella of protection of an economic and military great power, the United States and the West would be hamstrung in their ability to fight transnational organized crime in all its forms.

It remains to be seen what effect the publicity this new industry has attracted in the last 6 months will have on the past several years of groundwork. However, on their current trajectory, there is little doubt the allure of tens of billions of dollars from these online scams and the money they supply to criminals and corrupt Cambodian government officials means they are a permanent fixture in the country for the foreseeable future. What is unknown is how the twin elements of the Cambodian government under Prime Minister Hun Sen and the transnational organized criminal groups will continue to intertwine and benefit each other.

To this end, far more academic research is needed on the subject. Granted this issue has only been raised to the international spotlight in the past few months. But now that the news organization and local NGOs have done their job in reporting these atrocities, it is the job of academics, research organizations, and government agencies to plumb the links between the two. The West and the broader international coalition cannot hope to combat online scammers, human traffickers, and organized crime if they do not understand the structure, profits, and beneficiaries of these schemes.

With Cambodia under the economic and likely soon military protection of a rival great power, the United States will have to develop new partnerships and international working groups to combat the proliferation and targeting of its citizens. These new dialogues must be founded on the results of new research and data on this evolved method of crime. There is a strong likelihood that other transnational criminals have already or will soon take note of the model of mass online scams conducted through forced labor, and take note of their tens of billions in profits. If other compounds similar to the ones in Cambodia begin to emerge, the United States, the European Union, and other partners need to begin crafting an effective response immediately before the problem spreads and becomes much larger.

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