



Moving Beyond The January 7 Narratives
Briefing Note – 06 January 2017

Introduction

A lot is changing in Cambodian politics. Since the late 1990s, Prime Minister Hun Sen and the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have presided over the longest period of peace in Cambodia's modern history. Political stability has brought strong economic growth, spawning a growing middle-class with disposable income to spend on consumer goods. This is immediately clear to anyone visiting Phnom Penh, which has been transformed by the construction of shopping malls, luxury real estate developments, and high-rise office blocks, as well as a widening industrial belt which employs hundreds of thousands of workers in garment production and other forms of basic manufacturing.

Although there has been a growing middle class that has been fueled by the economic growth, a middle class which is marginally better off each year, the bottom 25% continue to be left behind while the richest 2% - the well-connected people – continue to enrich themselves. The government, enabled by the lack of truly functional political institutions, has incentivized land speculation and deforestation, while doing relatively little to improve the agricultural economy, the growth of which has lagged far behind the urban industries. This process of accumulation has only accelerated since the CPP's landslide victory at the 2008 national election: as the party has consolidated its hold on government, it has distributed land and business opportunities as rewards for political loyalty, consigning many ordinary people to the margins of Cambodia's economic revolution.

As a result the past decade has seen far-reaching social changes. As the rural economy has stagnated, many young people have left the land in favor of jobs in garment factories and on construction sites, frequently sending money home to support their families. An equal number – or perhaps even higher – have ventured abroad. In many cases, these young people represent the first generation of their families to move away their native villages; Cambodia's 700,000-odd garment workers also constitute the first significant Khmer urban working-class in Cambodian history. The number of people who have migrated to Thailand for work is estimated by some to be as high as one million.

The cumulative effect of these changes has been to simultaneously raise expectations and stoke discontent within the young Cambodian electorate.¹ This was illustrated starkly by the results of the last national election in July 2013, in which the CPP saw its majority fall from 90 seats in the 123-seat National Assembly to just 68. The main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), cleverly tapped into the growing discontent, empowered by the increasing spread of Facebook and internet access, which helped it circumvent the CPP government's control of the print and broadcast media.² Greater access to information has also helped people to perceive local problems — such as land-grabs, deforestation, and corruption — as part of a wider system. Instead of being seen as a potential savior and benevolent national patriarch, Hun Sen is now viewed by an increasing number of people as the source of the problems.

This marks a remarkable shift in attitudes, and speaks to the quickly changing realities of a nation in the midst of historically unprecedented transformations. But while there has been much talk of the ways in which Cambodian politics is changing, the country's politics remain, in fundamental ways, shackled to the past. Even as political leaders embrace social media in an attempt to court a younger, more tech-savvy electorate, political debate and discussion remains overwhelmingly clustered around two competing national myths—one supporting the status quo and another seeking to undermine it.

Both of these myths stem from hotly contested interpretations of 7 January 1979, the date that the regime of the Khmer Rouge was overthrown by the Vietnamese military, supported by a small band of Cambodian rebels. While the CPP interprets the Vietnamese action as a “liberation” of the country from Pol Pot, its opponents see it as an “invasion” by a dreaded national enemy. Nearly four decades on, “January 7” remains by far the most significant fault-line in contemporary Cambodian politics, a pivot-point for two competing political myths. Exploring the origin and content of these myths is important because they remain a primary obstacle to the formulation of new politics driven by consensus, dialogue, and mutual respect, rather than the fierce hostility which has characterized Cambodian politics since the country's independence. As long as Cambodian politicians continue fighting old battles, they will struggle to put forward concrete policies that stand any chance of addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

Dueling interpretations of “January 7”

On 7 January 1979, the Vietnamese army, accompanied by Khmer Rouge defectors, entered Phnom Penh and overthrew the regime of Democratic Kampuchea, known generally as the “Khmer Rouge.” Led by “Brother Number One” Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge had ruled the country since 17 April 1975, when they seized power from the United States-backed Khmer Republic. In the intervening time, the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea attempted a radical

¹ The United Nations estimates that nearly two-thirds of Cambodia's population is under the age of 30. See <http://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/countryinfo.html> (last accessed February 5, 2016).

² Since 2010, the number of Cambodians online has leapt from 320,000 to more than five million — around a third of the population — according to official government figures. An estimated three million use Facebook, which has also become the second-most popular source of news in Cambodia.

remaking of the Cambodian nation, putting most of the population to work on vast rural communes. This misguided experiment ultimately cost the lives of an estimated 1.7 million people from starvation, disease, or outright execution.

Vietnam's invasion followed two years of increasingly brutal cross-border raids by Pol Pot's armed forces, which left hundreds of Vietnamese civilians dead. Within days of toppling the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam had established a new communist regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). This was nominally led by the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), the forerunner to today's ruling party, which claimed a lineage stretching back to the foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. Despite this plating of Cambodian involvement, Vietnam retained final say over government decision-making, posting advisors in every ministry and party institution.

The new regime was also supported by an occupying army of some 100,000 Vietnamese troops, which backed the PRK in its civil war against three resistance factions that had emerged along the Thai border. One of these was formed by the ousted Khmer Rouge regime, which, thanks to the logic of Cold War politics, was able to reconstitute itself with Chinese military backing and diplomatic support from the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and much of the West. Paralleling the Cold War divide that fueled the civil war, January 7 became a flashpoint for deep divergences about how to interpret Cambodia's troubled history and present circumstances.

To start with, the symbol of "January 7"—ប្រាំពីរមករា in Khmer, or *prampi makara*—became, and has remained, central to the national mythology undergirding the KPRP/CPP's rule. Installed in power by Vietnam, which many Cambodians view with deep suspicion, the party was forced instead to legitimize itself by focusing on its involvement in the downfall of the Khmer Rouge. Today January 7 is inscribed in the calendar of Cambodian national holidays as Victory Over Genocide Day, and each year the ruling party puts on elaborate celebrations and erects billboards across town reminding Cambodians of its role in toppling Pol Pot. The party claims January 7 as the date of the Cambodian nation's "second birth", a sentiment which is still sometimes echoed by elderly Cambodians—testament to both the depth of their traumas, and the persistence of the regime's propaganda over the past 35 years.

In a speech at the CPP's celebrations in 2016, Hun Sen said, "*We celebrate this historical victory in a spirit of respect and deep gratitude for the fighters who stood up to fight and dared to sacrifice fresh flesh and blood, and their lives, to rescue the nation.*"³ Naturally, the CPP downplays the contribution of the Vietnamese, whose military forces did most of the work in overthrowing Pol Pot and during the decade-long civil war that followed, alluding only to Hanoi's "help" for an indigenous rebel movement. (In this vein, Hun Sen this year offered "*gratitude to the volunteer Vietnamese armies that provided support for this supreme cause.*"⁴) The main motivation here is for the CPP to avoid being seen as puppets of

³ Khuon Narim, "PM Nixes Ban on Dual-National Party Leaders," *Cambodia Daily*, January 8, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

Vietnam—an old opposition standby—and to claim sole credit for ending the nightmare of Democratic Kampuchea.

CPP propaganda about January 7 sets up a political dichotomy that equates Hun Sen's rule exclusively with peace, prosperity, and political stability—as the sole embodiment of the Cambodian national interest. Meanwhile, anyone opposing this idea is painted as a foreign agent or ungrateful “extremist” bent on undermining peace and political stability. The legacy of January 7 has thus come to be seen in all-or-nothing terms, in line with older Cambodian traditions in which politics represents a life-or-death struggle between competing centers of power. In a speech on Victory Over Genocide Day in 2009, Hun Sen described those contesting the meaning of January 7 as “animals” and apologists for the Khmer Rouge.⁵ In 2015 he addressed his opponents: “*You hate Pol Pot, but you oppose the ones who toppled him. What does this mean? It means you are an ally of the Pol Pot regime.*”⁶

The CPP's political mythology contains many contradictions. The greatest of these is the fact that the regime has always included former low- and mid-ranking members of the Khmer Rouge. Throughout the 1980s, with Vietnam's blessing, the KPRP tried to solve this inconsistency by ascribing responsibility for Khmer Rouge atrocities to two leaders—Pol Pot and Ieng Sary—while letting loyal comrades off the hook. The regime also hoped to distance international communism from the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, by claiming that a small band of “Hitlerite fascists” had hijacked the Cambodian revolution and perverted true communist doctrine, as represented by the KPRP.⁷ In the midst of the civil war, the authorities also pragmatically held out an olive branch to potential defectors, promising that they would be forgiven. During the 1990s, the CPP absorbed thousands of Khmer Rouge defectors — a strategy which was instrumental in bringing about the movement's defeat.

While the CPP has been forgiving towards the past actions of its political allies, lesser lapses by its opponents — for instance, the past involvement of opposition figures and civil society leaders in the 1980s resistance coalition that included the Khmer Rouge — have been denounced in the strongest terms. All this suggests that the CPP is less concerned about ascribing true responsibility for the atrocities of the past than about whether or not people are loyal to its rule in the present. This view of history leaves no room for principled opposition, on either political or historical grounds. The party's myth, based on the acceptance of January 7 as the date of the country's “second birth” and the CPP as the pure and natural embodiment of the national interest, is a zero-sum proposition: one can either accept it, or oppose it.

Just as the CPP has used January 7 to build a powerful national mythology, so too have its rivals in the CNRP and other opposition groups created their own, inverse, myth. This is built on the idea that January 7 was not a liberation but rather an invasion by a hated enemy which set Cambodia on a road to corruption, moral degradation, and national decline. Perhaps not

⁵ Sam Rith, “PM Defends Divisive Celebration,” *Phnom Penh Post*, January 7, 2009.

⁶ Hul Reaksmey, “Hun Sen Invokes Assad, ISIS in Defense of January 7,” *Cambodia Daily*, January 6, 2015.

⁷ Cited in Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation-Building* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 8.

surprisingly, many of the opposition figures who take this view were members of the armed resistance coalition which fought Hun Sen's Vietnam-backed regime throughout the 1980s. Sam Rainsy, the president of the CNRP, was a founding member of Funcinpec, a political group formed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Paris in 1981 to oppose the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Kem Sokha, Rainsy's deputy, served in the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, a nationalist group founded by Son Sann, a former prime minister. Between 1982 and 1991, both of these organizations were part of a resistance coalition — the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea — which included the ousted Khmer Rouge.

The opposition's mythology has roots in a Khmer nationalism centering on the deep suspicion of Vietnam and the Vietnamese, often referred to by the derogatory term *yuon*. Fear of Vietnam stems from the slow loss of former Angkorian territory by the *nam tien*, the southward march of the Vietnamese state in the 18th and 19th centuries, culminating in the creation of a short-lived Vietnamese protectorate over the Cambodian kingdom in the 1830s and 1840s. Since then, the “*yuon*” have come to stand as a potent symbol of Cambodian national decline. For Sam Rainsy, Vietnam continues to pose a clear and imminent threat to Cambodia's survival as an independent nation — as it did in the nineteenth century, when competing Vietnamese and Thai incursions into Cambodia were prevented only by the establishment of a French protectorate in 1863. More recently, Rainsy has compared present-day Cambodia to the current situation in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian Territories and Poland before the Partitions of the 18th century.⁸ It is worth noting that while Cambodia has also lost large amounts of territory to Thailand, its western neighbor is rarely viewed with the same animosity as is Vietnam. This is likely due to the perception that Thais and Cambodians share a similar Indian-inflected culture, orthography, and religion, making them appear less starkly alien than the more Chinese-influenced Vietnamese.

Given the CPP's close historical relationship with Vietnam, especially in the 1980s, the opposition viewed the Vietnamese overthrow of Pol Pot as the beginning of an “invasion” in which Hun Sen and his colleagues were willing “puppets” of the Vietnamese. This rhetoric survived the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of the Vietnamese occupying army in September 1989, so that today, despite all the changes in Cambodia's relationships with foreign countries, the Cambodian opposition continues to see CPP leaders as stooges of Hanoi and “traitors” to their Khmer heritage. At a rally in 1998, Sam Rainsy referred to the CPP as “*one who has a yuon... head and a Khmer body,*” a statement echoing a phrase used by the Khmer Rouge during the purge of the regime's Eastern Zone in 1977-78.⁹ In June 2014, CNRP deputy Kem Sokha went so far as to blame Vietnam for somehow being behind the tragic bridge stampede at Koh Pich in Phnom Penh, which killed 353 people and injured many hundreds more during the 2010 Water Festival. “*They created the scene to kill Khmers*

⁸ Sebastian Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 96.

⁹ David W. Roberts, *Political Transition in Cambodia 1991-99: Power, Elitism and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 194. Ironically, this was the same series of purges that triggered a young Hun Sen to defect to Vietnam in mid-1977.

at Koh Pich,” he said.¹⁰ For many CNRP officials, the CPP’s past association with Vietnam makes it illegitimate as a matter of definition.

In the CNRP’s counter-narrative, Hun Sen and other CPP leaders are accused of being both Vietnamese stooges *and* members of the Khmer Rouge, a contradictory formulation which only makes sense if one believes — as figures like Rainsy do — that the Vietnamese were ultimately responsible for the atrocities committed by Pol Pot’s government. On 7 January 2016, the CNRP president illustrated the point by posting a cartoon on his Facebook page of a Vietnamese soldier, complete with conical hat, setting Cambodia homes on fire in 1975, and then returning to douse them with water in 1979. As he explained,

7 January 1979 is a military and political show organized by the Vietnamese. They say they came to liberate us from the Khmer Rouge. But if there were no communist Vietnamese in the first place there would be no Khmer Rouge either... [T]he major events that took place over the last 50 years were actively initiated and organized by the communist Vietnamese in order to control Cambodia and to mislead the Cambodian people. Infiltrated Vietnamese agents trained in Hanoi in the 1950s and 1960s pushed and incited Cambodians to kill Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge regime.

The implication seems to be that Cambodians ultimately bear no fault for the nightmare of the Khmer Rouge, while was purely the fault of foreigners, i.e. Vietnamese. Leaving aside the fact that this depicts Cambodians as political innocents deprived of any sort of agency, Rainsy’s view comes to within an inch of the self-exculpations offered by former Khmer Rouge leaders, including Pol Pot. In his October 1997 interview with the American journalist Nate Thayer, the ageing leader admitted his government had made “mistakes,” but claimed that deaths under its rule were caused by “Vietnamese agents.” He also described S-21, the fearsome Khmer Rouge security prison in Phnom Penh, later turned into a museum by the PRK government, as a “Vietnamese exhibition”. “*If we had not carried out our struggle,*” he told Thayer, “*Cambodia would have become another Kampuchea Krom in 1975.*”¹¹ Kem Sokha, too, has claimed on at least one occasion that S-21 was “staged” by the Vietnamese.¹²

Most of Cambodia’s current problems can be seen through the same Vietnam-focused lens. To take one example, Rainsy and his colleagues rightly focus on the lack of transparency surrounding economic land concessions (ELCs) granted to Vietnamese companies, but rarely mention the greater number of such concessions granted to companies from China, Singapore, and Malaysia. In an interview with Thailand’s *The Nation* newspaper in March 2014, Rainsy argued that the majority of investments in Cambodia were Vietnamese. “If you look at the breakdown, the investment, especially the most destructive investment, is

¹⁰ Mech Dara, “CNRP Verbally Attacks CPP at Kampuchea Krom Ceremony,” *Cambodia Daily*, June 5, 2014.

¹¹ Nate Thayer, “Day of Reckoning,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 30, 1997.

¹² Eang Mengleng and Zsombor Peter, “Kem Sokha Says S-21 Was Vietnamese Conspiracy,” *Cambodia Daily*, May 27, 2013; Chhorn Chansy, “Kem Sokha Summoned Over Tuol Sleng Comments,” *Cambodia Daily*, June 24, 2013.

controlled by Vietnamese companies,” he said.¹³ In fact, Vietnamese companies control just under a third of foreign-held ELCs, according to the local rights group LICADHO, slightly less in terms of area than those controlled by Chinese companies.¹⁴ By framing the argument this way, Rainsy takes an issue of transparency surrounding the granting of ELCs, and redefines it as a manifestation of Vietnam’s historic desire to “swallow” Cambodian territory (his phrase).

For many in the Cambodian opposition, Vietnam has come to represent a sort of secular evil, the defeat of which justifies any moral compromise, including the decision of many to ally themselves during the 1980s with the ousted Khmer Rouge. Naturally, while this compromise has been justified as necessary for the defence of the nation, the past actions of CPP figures are always seen in the worst possible light—as expressions of a deep and fundamental illegitimacy. In this way Hun Sen is doubly-damned — first as a member of the Khmer Rouge, then, after he turned against the regime in mid-1977, as a puppet of the Vietnamese, with no moral or political credit given in either case. Like the CPP, Rainsy and his cohorts are alert to the transgressions of their opponents while being blind to their own.

Like the CPP’s view, the CNRP’s political mythology contains many clearly contradictory elements. In addition to the fact that the opposition’s racist rhetoric towards ethnic Vietnamese kicks the legs from beneath its supposed support of human rights, it also offers a view of Cambodia’s history which is just as factually inaccurate — and just as politically filtered — as the CPP’s. Rainsy’s claim that no Vietnam War would have meant no Khmer Rouge is true, but essentially meaningless. One could just as easily say that had the US not intervened in Vietnam to start with, Vietnamese communists would never have been forced to use Cambodia as a base for their guerrilla war. Similar blame could be put on the devastating US bombing campaign in eastern Cambodia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or Prince Norodom Sihanouk’s crucial decision to throw his support behind the Khmer Rouge after his overthrow in March 1970. One can trace the chain of historical causality back as far as one wishes. But focusing solely on Vietnamese responsibility, while ignoring the huge range of other internal and external factors that paved the Khmer Rouge’s road to power, does history—and the Cambodian people—a profound disservice.

Moving Beyond “January 7”

When the Vietnamese military toppled the Khmer Rouge on 7 January 1979, it spawned two competing political myths that continue to monopolize Cambodian politics. That these myths exist is not surprising in itself; nearly all nations are founded on some kind of idealized narrative, which are very often contested by different social and political groups. The remarkable thing in Cambodia is not that the country’s history and politics are contested; it is that these two myths dominate political discussion to such an extent that they foreclose any

¹³ "Sam Rainsy: I'll be a better PM than Hun Sen," *The Nation*, March 10, 2014.

¹⁴ Of a total of 1,214,656 hectares of ELCs not run by Cambodian firms, 356,500 hectares, or 29%, are registered as belonging to Vietnamese firms; Chinese firms hold 42 concessions, totalling 369,000 hectares, or just over 30% of the total. See http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land_concessions/ (last accessed February 5, 2016).

critical discussion of Cambodia's past, and any constructive discussion about how to tackle the country's pressing challenges.

Whatever they might say in private, the country has virtually no political figure who acts and speaks independently of these two views. Even today, Cambodian politicians, from Prime Minister Hun Sen and opposition leader Sam Rainsy on down, spend much of their energy fighting an old civil war which has little relevance to the problems facing most of Cambodia's 15 million people. One of the clearest examples has been the controversy over the past actions of Foreign Minister Hor Namhong, whom Sam Rainsy and others have accused of collaborating with his jailors while incarcerated at Phnom Penh's Boeung Trabek prison during the Khmer Rouge years. Rainsy and other opposition figures have repeatedly raised the issue since the early 2000s, prompting Namhong to initiate file defamation charges in Cambodian and French courts.¹⁵ In the latest twist to this long legal tale, one of these old defamation convictions was "reactivated" by a Cambodian court in November 2015, a move that initiated Rainsy's return to exile.¹⁶

Similar issues dominate debate on Facebook, which has recently been embraced by politicians on both sides of the "January 7" divide. Unfortunately, the new technology has been used mostly to broadcast old political mythologies to a new audience, the majority of whom were born since 1979. Recent postings by Rainsy have touched on various minutiae of the January 7 debate, including his claims that Vietnam was responsible for bringing the Khmer Rouge to power (see above), that the PRK sentenced Prince Sihanouk to death for treason in the 1980s (it didn't), and that Sihanouk once said "Cambodians should never serve the Vietnamese".¹⁷ Hun Sen's page features less accusation and more exposition: in between general assertions of legitimacy—photos of economic development and the prime minister meeting with foreign officials—recent posts have showcased the CPP's role in bringing peace, Hun Sen's involvement in peace negotiations with Sihanouk in the 1980s, and photos of a young Hun Sen inspecting military positions during the civil war.¹⁸ Dominant for so many years, Cambodia's old political tropes have simply recreated themselves online.

¹⁵ The exact role played by Hor Namhong at Boeung Trabek remains unclear. The prison camp, located in the southern suburbs of Phnom Penh, was used to house returning intellectuals and diplomats, many of whom were subsequently killed. According to the available evidence, Namhong may have helped run the camp as a "chief" or representative of the detainees, gaining some privileges in return, but he has consistently denied any hand in atrocities committed there. Rainsy offers as evidence a short, unsourced biography on file at the US Embassy, which claims that Namhong and his wife "collaborated in the killing of many prisoners". This was released as part of a dump of diplomatic cables by the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks in 2011. See https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/02PHNOMPENH1361_a.html (last accessed February 10, 2016). Of course, the question of evidence and truth is more or less beside the point; as US officials noted in a separate diplomatic cable in 2008, Rainsy is using the accusation to mount "a high-profile slur-campaign", one which has little to do with the practical needs of most Cambodians. See https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08PHNOMPENH399_a.html (last accessed February 10, 2016).

¹⁶ Phak Seangly and Shaun Turton, "Sam Rainsy Faces Arrest Warrant," *Phnom Penh Post*, November 14, 2015; Meas Sokchea, Taing Vida, and Daniel Pye, "Rainsy Stands By Namhong Accusation," *Phnom Penh Post*, November 20, 2015.

¹⁷ Available at <https://www.facebook.com/rainsy.sam.5/> (last accessed February 10, 2016).

¹⁸ Available at <https://www.facebook.com/hunsencambodia/> (last accessed February 10, 2016).

In spite of massive social and technological changes, Cambodian politics remains locked in a battle of myths that leaves very little room for constructive discussion or legitimate dissent from either side. Rather than establishing a viable policy platform, offering possible solutions to Cambodia's many problems, the two sides have stayed within their mythological comfort zones, asserting decades-old historical claims and counter-claims. The guns may have fallen silent, but the old civil war rages on.

It is time to move beyond January 7 and the political paralysis that has grown out of it. A true accounting of Cambodia's recent history would recognize that both internal and external factors contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge in 1975 and its overthrow by the Vietnamese military in 1979. It would recognize that both contending myths are made up of elements of truth and falsehood. "January 7" did represent a Vietnamese invasion and the beginning of a decade-long military occupation; it also represented a liberation from the horrific excesses of the Khmer Rouge, even if the invasion wasn't motivated by humanitarian concerns.

Until Cambodian politicians start moving beyond these two rigid views of the country's history, politics will have little hope of transcending old, destructive patterns of conflict. It is worth remembering that in Cambodia's modern history, no politician has ever admitted electoral defeat; nor has there ever been a peaceful transfer of power from one political faction to another. A new template for political debate is sorely overdue.

For the ruling party, perpetuating an old myth based on January 7 offers no real plan for the future—only a pretext for its perpetual rule. For the CNRP, pulling down an old myth only to erect a new one does little to offer feasible solutions to the corruption, corporate pillaging, and human rights abuses that have taken place on Hun Sen's watch. As long as both sides claim to be the sole legitimate representatives of the Cambodian people, there will be no room for any lasting compromise, nor any space for people to discuss their country's history critically. Both of these are vital for meeting the country's present challenges and building a more just and prosperous future.

Despite the diverging rhetoric espoused by both sides, January 7 remains an important day for many Cambodians. Celebrations of the day should be refocused on the victims of the Khmer Rouge, and the use of the day for political gains should be avoided. The public should be given space to interpret the events of January 7 and the ensuing period in Cambodia's history and to discuss their opinions freely; while political parties turn their focus to developing and implementing policies that address Cambodia's current day challenges.