Like father, like son in Cambodia

By Sebastian Strangio

PHNOM PENH - On May 29, 1999, Hun Manet, the eldest son of Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, mounted the dais at the United States Military Academy at West Point to collect his diploma from General Dennis J Reimer, the US Army's former chief of staff. Clad in a traditional grey jacket and red sash, then 21-year-old became the first-ever Cambodian alumnus of the prestigious academy - one of just seven foreign cadets to graduate that year.

During the ceremony, television news cameras followed Hun Manet up to the podium, eager for a glimpse of the son of Cambodia's war-tested strongman. His presence at the graduation had prompted controversy. Congressman Christopher Smith of New Jersey said in congress before the ceremony that Hun Sen was a "mass murderer" and that the US government "should be handing him an indictment, not a visa".

While most of the graduates posed for photographs with their families in a nearby stadium, the New York Times reported that Hun Manet met his father and his entourage beneath shaded bleachers under close guard from US Secret Service agents.

In the years since, Hun Manet completed a PhD in economics at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom. Throughout his time in the West, he maintained a low profile and rarely made public appearances. Recently, however, his inconspicuousness has masked a rapid rise through the country's military ranks.

In September, Hun Manet was promoted to deputy commander of his father's powerful personal bodyguard unit. Four months later, in January, he was appointed to the rank of two-star general and as deputy commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) infantry. He also serves as director of the Ministry of Defense's counter-terrorism department, which works closely with the US.

Hun Manet's rapid rise has led to widespread speculation that he is being groomed to eventually succeed his father, one of Asia's longest-serving leaders who has been in power in one form or another since 1985. Cambodian officials including Hun Sen have denied any hint of nepotism in Hun Manet's meteoric ascent, frequently pointing out that his academic credentials are sound. At the age of 33 - the same as his father when he was first appointed prime minister - Hun Manet's political star is only beginning to rise.

"If you have power, you try to maintain that power and you have to have someone you trust to continue [it]." said Son Soubert, a political commentator and former member of Cambodia's Constitutional Council. "In the human sphere it's quite natural, though not in a democratic system."

Ou Virak, head of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), said that though he is unlikely to take over from his father any time soon - Hun Sen has said he wants to remain in power for at least the next decade - further promotions were a "distinct possibility" for Hun Manet.

Those signs grew clearer last month when deadly clashes broke out between Cambodia and Thailand close to Preah Vihear temple, an 11th century Angkorian temple perched on a cliff along the countries' border. Hun Manet reportedly played a prominent role during four days of armed skirmishes in a disputed area adjacent to the temple, which killed at least 10 people and injured dozens on both sides.

The exact nature of his involvement remains unclear. Thai media carried unsourced reports that said he
took a "leading role" in the fighting on the night of February 6. Hun Manet has since been credited with helping to negotiate ceasefire arrangements with his Thai counterparts, according to Thai media reports.

Some experts believe the appearance of Hun Manet, who has two brothers and three sisters, during the border skirmish could be part of a bid to boost his public profile. Carlyle Thayer, an analyst based at the Australian Defense Force Academy in Sydney, said Manet was clearly being prepared for a military career to provide Hun Sen with assurance that the army will remain loyal - a key concern in Cambodia's highly-personalized political system.

The Preah Vihear fighting, one of the first times Hun Manet had emerged onto the public stage, was likely intended to establish his credibility as a military commander - whatever his exact role during the clashes.

"I see his emergence as part of a process of taking responsibility for defense matters first, demonstrating competence, and then embarking on a political career all the while under the tutelage of his father who will remain as prime minister," Thayer said.

Western reform hopes

Hun Manet's education at West Point symbolized the tentative resumption of ties between the US and Cambodia following years of Cold War estrangement. Barely two years earlier, Hun Sen had ousted his main rival, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, in a series of pitched battles in the streets of the capital Phnom Penh.

Dozens of members of Ranariddh's royalist Funcinpec party were butchered in a July 1997 coup, which brought international opprobrium down on Hun Sen's regime and strained Phnom Penh's nascent relations with Washington. So, too, did a grenade attack against an opposition rally in Phnom Penh that same year, which killed at least 16 people and injured 100 more, including a US citizen. The incident was later investigated by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Since Hun Manet received his PhD and returned to Cambodia, however, relations with Washington have blossomed. In August 2005, restrictions on US military assistance to Cambodia were lifted and the following year Defense Minister Tea Banh paid a visit to the US Pacific Command to request American military support.

In 2007, the US resumed direct foreign assistance to Phnom Penh, making it the third-largest recipient of foreign assistance in East Asia after Indonesia and the Philippines. The blossoming relationship was capped off in June 2009 when the US removed Cambodia and Laos from a Cold War-era blacklist of Marxist-Leninist nations, paving the way for US Export-Import Bank support for American companies to do business with the two countries.

At a time of rising Chinese influence in Southeast Asia - Cambodia has received billions of dollars in aid and investment in recent years - all this raises the question of whether an increasingly prominent Manet, well connected to the US through his West Point connections, could help cement Cambodia's relationship with Washington. Others wonder whether Hun Manet would in a leadership role prompt some liberalization of the country's ossified political system, which his father has presided over in authoritarian fashion.

At the time of Hun Manet's graduation, the New York Daily News quoted an unnamed government official as saying granting West Point educations to the children of foreign leaders gave Washington "an automatic in" with those nations. Hun Manet's recent promotions have also prompted calls for him to act as a fifth column of reform within the Cambodian armed forces.

Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division, told Radio Free Asia after Manet's promotion in January that his group would welcome any attempts to reform the military -
especially Hun Sen's bodyguard unit, which has been accused of complicity in a range of rights abuses, including the bloody grenade attack of March 1997.

Other observers say it is unclear how much influence Hun Manet will be willing or able to wield. Thayer believes defense ties with the US will likely continue to improve, with Manet's West Point education acting as "a conduit" for the development of a more robust military relationship. As his career progresses, however, Hun Manet is expected to be more attuned to the vagaries of domestic politics than to any external loyalties, heading off the possibility of significant reforms.

"West Point teaches civilian control over the military, which is not the case in Cambodia," Thayer said. Getting too close to the US could also "expose" Hun Manet in the event of a cooling of bilateral relations. "He is likely to be a more professional military commander but Cambodia's political culture and existing political system will mitigate against rapid liberalization," he added.

Though he is believed by some to be more sympathetic to Western-style liberal democracy and human rights than the stalwarts of his father's ruling Cambodian People's Party and the armed forces, CCHR's Ou Virak discounted the potential for Hun Manet to enact deep-reaching structural or political change. He compared Hun Manet to the sons of Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and North Korea's Kim Jong-il, neither of whom has shown signs of departing from their fathers' authoritarian ways.

Son Soubert said that he witnessed a previous generation of enlightened, French-educated Cambodians - including many members of the Funcinpec party - cast democratic ideals aside and willingly engage in the corruption of Cambodian politics once they returned home. "I think the whole atmosphere of the country is what is at stake," he said of Hun Manet's chances of engineering reform. "If he can maintain his credibility and what he has learned in the US then that would be the best for Cambodia."

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