

Toppling Cambodian dictators is not impossible if we think and act smart

Dr. Gaffar Peang-Meth

My grandson, 12, a seventh grader, read *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (2004), a bestseller by a former Soviet prisoner, Natan Sharansky. He passed the book to me, saying I might be interested in reading it.

I had read about Sharansky, a prisoner in the Soviet gulag for nine years; I hadn't read his book. I immediately opened the book to pages my grandson had bookmarked: Sharansky's distinction between "free societies" and "fear societies"; Sharansky's description of believers, dissenters and the millions of "double thinkers" who don't speak their thoughts because of fear of arrest, imprisonment and physical harm so they speak with their "eyes" but go through the motion of supporting rulers who are interested only in remaining forever in power.

Sharansky contends that elections are not enough to dub a society free—a free press, an independent judiciary, the rule of law must exist before genuine free elections are held. He became controversial as he blasted conservatives for placing "stability" above human rights in international relations, and liberals for failing to distinguish between struggling democracies and authoritarian regimes that overtly trample human rights. Sharansky advocates the universality of freedom and human rights.

As I browsed through the book, a Khmer saying came to my mind: "Tumpaeng snorn russey," referring to young bamboo shoots that grow to replace aging bamboo trees—the future is in the making.

A day later my grandson forwarded me comments by an anonymous blogger, 'Pissed Off', on KI-Media, regarding "potential Cambodian leaders" who oppose Hun Sen's rule as "different streams that run fiercely toward the same goal, but cannot merge to reach that goal with a strong and full force. Perhaps the four rivers that merge in front (of) Phnom Penh can serve as an enlightenment for them to see."

Pissed Off's most relevant question: "(C)an't potential leaders of Cambodia be bound together by their education and the common goal of saving and helping Cambodia and her people?"

Inquisitive minds

Those who read my columns know that my purpose in writing springs from my role as an educator. I write to share what I know and have experienced and to nudge readers to remain curious and inquisitive: A mind that does not question is intellectually useless, especially in this ever changing world. Cambodia, the land of my birth, has gone through hell and fire for too long and her people have suffered greatly. The least I can do at my age is to write while my brain still functions.

As a political scientist, I have engaged in the discipline's conventional tasks: to describe objectively what is; to explain through analysis, causes and effects; to project what may or may not happen in the time ahead; and to suggest what or what not, to do. Of course, I don't expect everyone to agree with my views. But diversity is what democracy is about, and in a civilized world gentlemen disagree and move on.

In the past, I carried my tasks further: I became a political activist and “actionist” – a pursuit I put to rest when I left the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front in 1989, to become a teacher. I taught in formal classrooms and engaged in writing for wall-less classrooms. Since my retirement, I continue to share, seeking to educate, and inspire – another form of activism.

The Chinese say, “Talk doesn’t cook rice.” True enough. But I have also often referenced Lord Buddha’s words: “An idea that is developed and put into action is more important than an idea that exists only as an idea.” It has been said, “The ancestor of every action is thought.”

An old Khmer saying tells of a place for anything and any person in a Khmer’s world: “A vieach york mork thveu kang; A trang york mork thveu kamm; A sam rognam york mork thveu os dot” – “Bent woods make wheel; Straight woods make spoke; Crooked/twisted woods make firewood.” So, think smart, make room; make use of it or him/her, or his/her ideas and thoughts.

The New Year 2012: An unhappy beginning

My end of the year article in December in this space contained unhappy news on Cambodia and her people. The New Year didn’t begin with happy news, either.

On January 3, 2012, some 500 hundred police supported by emergency vehicles provided security to employees of private developer Phan Imex, and to its hired men armed with axes and crowbars, who were bulldozing citizens’ homes in Phnom Penh’s Borei Keila.

The police fired shots and used sticks and electric batons against about 200 residents – including children, as photos and videos on the Internet illustrated. The residents fought back. They threw stones, Molotov cocktails, and used tree branches to fence off those who had demolished nearly 300 homes. Phan Imex was armed with a court order that ruled the land belonged to it.

A 2003 agreement between the government and Phan Imex authorized the latter to construct 10 buildings on 2 hectares of land to house 1,776 families, and to have development rights over a remaining 2.6 hectares. However, Phan Imex has constructed only 8 buildings leaving some 400 families without housing. On Jan. 3, 2012 Phan Imex, backed by the government, began dismantling the rest of the Borei Keila residents’ homes.

The remarks of Var Ponlork, a member of the uniformed military, were posted on the Internet. He asked how Premier Hun Sen could send soldiers to protect Khmer land at the border while taking away land that belongs to the people?

Eleven human rights groups issued a joint statement condemning the “destruction of ... homes” and the “violent eviction” of the residents, “Phnom Penh’s urban poor.” The Phnom Penh Post dubbed it “A Battle for Borei Keila” – a far cry from being a welcoming New Year!

If the past is a guide for the future, forced, violent evictions will continue, and more “battles” will be fought between the people and developers backed by the government.

Ironically, an almost identical event occurred in Southern China's fishing village of 20,000 residents in Wukan, where an open popular revolt took place against local Chinese Communist Party officials following seizures of farmland and land deals. The Wukan revolt began as a protest against officials selling a village-owned pig farm to developers of luxury housing community for USD 156 million. The townspeople received none of the proceeds of the transaction. The protesters alleged that their village leader died as a result of a beating by police. Subsequently, Wukan villagers ousted the local officials. Worried, China's higher-ranking authorities called for negotiation – but the fate of the land deal remains unclear.

Some Cambodians speak

After my December column, a Phnom Penh University student, Phiev Tong Him (he authorized me to use his name), identified himself as a teacher of English in a state school and noted he is worried as a “culture of corruption (is) now being promoted in Khmer society”: “Children in all grades do not study hard as they rely on the teachers to whom they bribe to get high scores.” He claimed the situation is “critical” because “corruption is rampant from the bottom to the top in all fields in the country.” He asked “what will happen to society if this habit continues?”

A former comrade-in-arms of mine from the royalist faction of the Khmer Non-Communist Resistance lamented from Phnom Penh about former leaders – both KPNLF and Royalist – “crippled” by the force they once had fought against, as they have been lured by a thirst for “power, money and prestige.” The ranking royalist called “pathetic” a Phnom Penh overpass called “7 January Overpass” – in recognition of Vietnamese seizing the capital in 1979 – and which “the new Khmer people called ‘Liberation Day’ overpass.” He optimistically asserted, “Personally I don't think this is the end”; “The silent majority is hard at work.”

They will have to work quickly, however. Teveakor, a young Khmer activist I introduced in this space at an earlier time, wrote that he travelled last month from commune to commune in northwestern Cambodia looking for “land to rent, to grow cassava in the next year.” He was shocked, he reported, that “thousands of hectares of land already belonged to foreign companies through land concessions, about 10 hectares only are owned by a middle class family in the city, the Khmer farmers and villagers in the area no longer own land.”

I could feel Teveakor's nationalist blood boiling in his e-mail, as he asked: “Does this not mean that the Khmer villagers, once masters of the land, will in the short future become farm workers and immigrants on their ancestors' soil?” The nationalist sentiment is also very personal: “I always owned ten hectares of land in this area, but the authorities found reasons to let a foreign company grow rubber on them.”

He assured me that what happened to him with the land he owned also happened to “countless citizens” throughout Cambodia. Teveakor is angry, and frustrated.

Elections

The years 2012 and 2013 are election years that will change or sustain the status quo for another term in Cambodia. Looking ahead, Teveakor, a democrat, believes in elections as a founding principle of a democracy. He questions how anyone says s/he believes in democracy but rejects elections even in adverse conditions: If conditions are adverse, then do something to render them more favorable, he says.

Early this month, political analyst Lao Monghay told the Voice of America that, “Now, their destiny is in the hands of the Cambodian people entirely.” In a perfect world, this would have been true. As Pissed Off commented, “Dictators in Cambodia maintain their grip on Cambodians using violence, fear, suppression of justice, false image of monarchy . . . control of the justice system and most importantly with a new method of providing just, or barely, enough for the poor, so they won’t revolt . . .,” et cetera.

Teveakor doesn’t doubt that Hun Sen and the ruling CPP will rig and manipulate the elections, use fear and intimidation, in order to hold on to power. But, he thinks they can hold on to power perhaps for another decade only. There is still much work for rights and democracy advocates to do – like instilling a political awareness and new political thinking in the Khmers. But progress will be made over time.

Teveakor’s thinking dovetails with that of democracy advocate Sambath and colleagues (who seem to keep low profiles at this moment). Even the ranking royalist correspondent shares the same thought.

What will happen when these different forces – and many others not mentioned here – converge against the same adversaries, to attain the shared goal of ending the autocrats’ rule? Of course, democrats must not forget that the autocrats, too, seek to divide, weaken, and defeat them at every opportunity.

Non-Violent Resistance to Topple Dictators

I have written elsewhere about two men whom the December issue of Foreign Policy Magazine identified as among 100 top global thinkers.

One was American political scientist Gene Sharp, 83, a Ph.D. degree holder in political theory from Oxford, Professor Emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and founder of the nonprofit Albert Einstein Institution in Boston, devoted to studies and promotion of nonviolence action in conflicts worldwide. The other was Srdja Popovic a former marine biology student at Belgrade University, who at age 29, and influenced by the work of Gene Sharp, formed “Otpor” (“Resistance” in Serbian) in 1998, to mobilize Serbia’s populace against Slobodan Milosevic, Serbian president (1989-1997) and Yugoslav president (1997-2000), ending Milosevic’s rule in 2000.

Sharp’s work has become a blueprint for the world’s activists against dictatorship, and Popovic’s first hand experiences and his writing have become sought after knowledge by democracy advocates in more than 50 countries – especially the Arab Spring movements against their dictators.

It is more the reason, and with urgency, that Cambodian rights and democracy advocates become familiar with the work by Sharp and by Popovic. Of course Cambodia is not Serbia nor Egypt. But we need to examine the similarities where they exist and learn to see many trees in a forest and see a whole forest from different trees.

I have written on Sharp’s 1993 book published in Thailand, “From Dictatorship to Democracy, A Conceptual Framework for Liberation,” and I am happy to see the

book, and Popovic's "Nonviolent Struggle, 50 Crucial Points" posted on the Khmer Blog KI-Media.

Sharp's 1973 classic, "The Politics of Nonviolent Action" has influenced revolutionists the world over, and Popovic's Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies' (CANVAS) one-hour documentary film, "Bringing Down a Dictator," is said to be a must-view film (which inspired Burma's Saffron Revolutionists). There is no substitute for reading their writings. But here are some of Sharp and Popovic's ideas that opponents of Hun Sen might draw upon. Activists and "actionists" from other nations have already benefited from them.

Gene Sharp

A dictatorial regime remains in power thanks to the obedience, submission and cooperation of the people it governs. Therefore, democracy activists' goal is to convince the people that their withdrawal of obedience, submission and cooperation from the regime would end the regime's hold on power. As a regime is like a building that is supported by columns, activists must pull those columns from it to their side. Two very important columns to pull away from autocrats are the police and the military – and Popovic's Otpor and the Egyptian protesters did precisely that. Sharp's seven reasons why the many obey the few are applicable to the Cambodian situation. People obey out of habit, and from fear of punishment if they don't obey. Thus, many people are what Sharansky called "double thinkers." Also, there are those who feel a moral obligation to obey (as Cambodians obey "Sdech phaen dei" or the king of the earth); those who obey out of a kind of emotional-psychological identification with the ruler; and those whose "zone of indifference" allows them to tolerate and overlook areas that are unpleasant, so they endure.

Many people obey out of their own "self-interest" in prestige, power position, direct or indirect financial gain incurred. Cambodians in general fit this criteria so well. Those whose self-interests include desire to travel in and out of the country find using Hun Sen's travel passport and visa to be within their zone of indifference or tolerance. Sharp also mentioned people without the self-confidence to disobey and resist – Sharp refers to this as an avoidance of responsibility.

Can Cambodians reverse some or all of these reasons?

Sadly, Sharp argues, obedience is essentially "voluntary" – a person consents to obey because s/he is unwilling to face the consequence(s) of disobedience. Sharp mentioned Russian Leo Tolstoy's writing on the English subjection of India: "What does it mean that (a commercial company of) 30,000 men . . . ha(s) subdued 200 million . . .? Do not the figures make it clear that it is not the English who have enslaved the Indians, but the Indians who have enslaved themselves?"

Sharp also cited 16th century French writer Etienne de La Boetie on the power of a tyrant: "He who abuses you so has only two eyes, has but two hands, one body, and has naught but what has the least man of the great and infinite number of your cities, except for the advantage you give him to destroy you."

Sharp's "Methods of Nonviolent Action" lists about 200 methods available for democracy activists to use against autocrats, including methods of social, economic,

and political “noncooperation” and methods of nonviolent intervention (psychological, physical, social, economic, political).

Srdja Popovic

Born on October 29, 1969, the Belgrade University marine biology student Srdja Popovic who, with his friends, founded the Otpor resistance movement on October 10, 1998, at a time when Serbian dictator Milosevic’s rule was firmly entrenched, decided that it must be Otpor’s primary objective to transform the political culture of the Serbian people. Their political consciousness needed to change, and all issues were considered in terms of the overall goal of removing Milosevic.

Otpor leaders were very frustrated by the different opposition political leaders who were more concerned with protecting and promoting their own interests, and who fought among themselves rather than working to remove Milosevic.

A document, “Declaration of the Future of Serbia,” was drafted to expose Otpor’s vision for Serbia’s tomorrow: It defined Serbia’s main problems, Otpor’s objectives, and the methods Otpor proposed to use to remove Milosevic from power. Happily, the document was endorsed and approved by “all” important student organizations in Serbia, and prominent figures from different walks of life emerged to throw their support behind Otpor. Otpor’s symbol of the clenched fist was adopted.

Otpor’s two-pronged strategies included mobilizing the Serbian people to vote, although Otpor leaders knew well that Milosevic would never accept defeat in the elections. As Sharp puts it in his book, “Dictators are not in the business of allowing elections that could remove them from their thrones.” So, while people were encouraged to vote, they were also encouraged to carry out “individual resistance” using nonviolent methods of civil disobedience. Otpor made clear that it was a must that the opposition must get more votes than Milosevic, and that in order to reach this objective the different opposition parties must “unite” behind one opposition presidential candidate, and that the only goal in the struggle was removing Milosevic. Otpor leaders thus worked on improving analytical skills to promote and maintain “unity, planning, and nonviolent discipline” – the analytical skills that can be taught and learned.

Serbian students who led Otpor made use of Serbian translations of Prof. Gen Sharp’s writings on nonviolent action as a theoretical basis for their struggle.

Slowly, the Otpor leaders stripped away the traditional “fear, fatalism and passivity” of the Serbian people, and creatively turned those factors into positive action by making it “even cool” to be a revolutionist. They used humor and creative street theater in public protests to mock Milosevic, to make “those grey and square-headed bureaucrats look stupid and ridiculous.”

The idea was to break down fear, and to inspire “the tired, disappointed and pathetic Serbian society.” Elevate enthusiasm and humor, and fear and apathy would diminish. People needed to be empowered to see the regime’s vulnerability, thus, overcoming their fear of punishment.

“Gotov je” (He is finished!) and “Vreme Je!” (It’s Time!) became slogans to galvanize public discontent. One month before the people stormed Serbia’s

parliament, Milosevic's police arrested some 2,000 Otpor activists in September 2000. But, in October 2000, Milosevic resigned.

Advice on Violence

Sharp posits: "Constitutional and legal barriers, judicial decisions, and public opinion are normally ignored by dictators." On the other hand, "By placing confidence in violent means (in the struggle against dictators), one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority."

Popovic advises: "There are two things you need to avoid if you don't want your movement to be doomed: One is violence . . ." Popovic sees the maintenance of a "nonviolent discipline" as indispensable for the success of a revolution. A protester who throws rock at the police opens door for the police with superior power to respond with force on the whole group.

The second thing to avoid is "taking advice from foreigners."

On reliance on outside saviors

Sharp says, oppressed people who are "unwilling and unable to struggle" for lack of "confidence in their ability to face the ruthless dictatorship . . . understandab(ly) . . . place their hope in for liberation in . . . outside force" to come to their rescue.

Sharp presented "a few harsh realities." Frequently, Sharp tells us, "foreign states will tolerate, or even positively assist, a dictatorship" to serve the foreign states' "own economic or political interests." Also, foreign states "may be willing to sell out an oppressed people instead of keeping pledges to assist their liberation at the cost of another objective"; they will act against a dictatorship "only to gain their own economic, political, or military control over the country." Foreign states may become actively involved "only if and when the internal resistance has already begun shaking the dictatorship . . ." However, Sharp posits, "International pressures can be very useful . . . when they are supporting a powerful internal resistance movement." "Foreign governments don't have friends, only interests," warned Popovic.

He encouraged democrats to "try to cultivate external support, get the knowledge and material resources from those offering it and use it for your movement's mission. But beware of their political advice because successful revolutions are only those which are home grown, designed and followed by local people in a certain country."

Happy 2012

I write this article hoping to spark discussion and cause Cambodians to reflect on what opponents to Cambodia's autocracy can learn from the experiences of others. Some Cambodian democracy activists may feel helpless and lonely in their fight, but they must not feel hopeless or alone. Many people under the sun have traveled this road and some have seen success.

"Never" is too long a time. Humans' liberation from oppression is not impossible. Remember Lord Buddha's words, "Nothing is permanent"; "He is able who thinks he is able"; "I believe in a fate that falls on (men) unless they act."

Happy New Year 2012 to all Cambodian democracy activists!

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