



Sam Rainsy with David Whitehouse We Didn't Start the Fire: My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books 210 pp., \$25.00 paperback ISBN: 978-6162150630 Publication Date: June 2013

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though Keyes admits that Thai democracy has a “checkered history,” he points out that it allowed elected politicians from *Isan* to represent constituents (60). Suspicious that they were mostly Communist-leaning, the state repressed many of them. According to Keyes, such repression was perceived by northeasterners as symptomatic of central Thai discrimination. In Chapter 5, Keyes examines the period 1957–1973, during which the military administered Thailand with support from monarchy. For Keyes, *Isan* people recognized the Thai king as their leader but felt that the then-military regime prevented them from redressing their grievances. Some thus supported Communist revolution. However, as Keyes shows in Chapter 6, insurgency had faltered by 1983 partly due to new state decrees allowing amnesty and assistance for surrendering rebels and permitting the establishment of non-governmental organizations. In Chapter 7, Keyes illustrates how northeasterners, having experienced more upward mobility and interconnectedness with the world, have become increasingly involved in organizations to safeguard the environment, community rights and other regionally based interests. Lastly, in Chapter 8, Keyes argues that northeasterners have, since 2001, finally come to make their voices heard through supporting populist political parties of Thaksin Shinawatra and participating in the Red Shirts protest movement.

As for strengths, this book, based upon Keyes’s extensive research, offers an elaborately detailed history of *Isan*, which elucidates the growing political role of Thai northeasterners.

Though the book is meant primarily for academics and policymakers engaged with Asia, Keyes’s straightforward writing makes it accessible to the general audience. Yet the book does have weaknesses. First, Keyes sometimes tends to overgeneralize about *Isan* from work he has done over the years in *Nong Tuan* village. Second, there is much more diversity within *Isan*’s identity and history than Keyes acknowledges. Third, to emphasize northeasterners’ growing political participation, Keyes overemphasizes Red Shirts’ support from *Isan*, lessening the importance of its backing from northern and central regions. Fourth, Keyes never acknowledges that some northeasterners, including farmers comprising NGO “P-Move” and politician Newin Chidchob, are anti-Thaksin. Finally, though this book was written before the 2014 anti-Shinawatra coup, one wonders why Keyes’ “cosmopolitan peasants” only slightly resisted it. Ultimately, however, as a book revealing crucial socio-political transformations in Thailand, this book is one of the better studies available—aside from works on *Isan* written in Thai by Thai authors.

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We Didn't Start the Fire: My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia is the autobiography of Sam Rainsy, the leader of Cambodia's largest opposition political party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party. The book relates the story of his life from his youth as the scion of a political family, forced into exile as a result of his father's political travails, to his education abroad and experiences as economy and finance minister, and then more recent personal political challenges in Cambodia today. Besides being a personal recounting, the book also seeks to explain why Cambodia has, since its independence, been beset by conflict and dictatorship, and how Sam Rainsy, through his political party, endeavors to move Cambodia to stability and democracy (vii-viii).

Born in 1949, Sam Rainsy was appointed to the cabinet in 1993, following United Nations-monitored elections, and served until 1994. He has since headed up three successive political parties. In 2010 he was convicted of crimes, charges which he says were politically motivated. Following this book's publication in 2013, he was pardoned and allowed to return to Cambodia. In 2015 he is the Minority Leader of Cambodia's parliamentary opposition. His goals, he says, are to initiate "real political, social and economic reform" (back cover).

Beginning the narrative, in Chapter 1, Rainsy discusses the 1965 expulsion

of his family from Cambodia, upon the orders of then-Prime Minister Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who considered them traitorous (5). Six years earlier, Rainsy's father Sam Sary, an opposition politician, had been ordered arrested, though Sary had earlier escaped the country. In Chapter 2, Rainsy describes how the dictatorial Sihanouk came to hate his father and eventually forced him into exile in Laos where he was assassinated in 1962. Chapter 3 examines Rainsy's life growing up in France where he received his education. Chapter 4 looks at the period 1970, when a coup ousted Sihanouk in Cambodia, until 1975, when the Khmer Rouge forced their way to power. During this time, Rainsy himself remained abroad. Chapter 5 describes what happened in Cambodia following Vietnam's 1979 invasion of Cambodia and occupation of the country. He emphasizes that Cambodia in the 1980s suffered under a corrupt "Vietnamese regime" led by former Khmer Rouge officials, including Hun Sen. In Chapter 6, Rainsy indicates that Hun Sen surrendered parts of Cambodia's border to Vietnam, agreed to the Vietnamese occupation and cared only about personal interests (64). But the 1989 Vietnamese withdrawal, followed by the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, allowed Rainsy to return home and serve as Finance Minister in 1993. But he was fired in 1994 because he reported corruption inside the government. In Chapter 7, he discusses his establishment of the Khmer Nation Party, and then the Sam Rainsy Party, which paralleled intimidation by the state. Chapter 8

argues that Hun Sen entrenched his power through a 1997 coup followed by a 1998 election involving irregularities. In Chapter 9, Rainsy implies that the Hun Sen government has acquiesced to corruption and land-grabbing to benefit the “small elite” that support him (111). Meanwhile, the state has tightly controlled the judiciary and terrorized the opposition. In Chapter 10, Rainsy compares Hun Sen to Khmer Rouge despot Pol Pot (153). He calls upon Cambodians to unite together to democratically oust Hun Sen’s CPP from office. In Chapter 11, Rainsy contends that his 2010 10-year conviction was unjust and the state has unjustly forced him into exile. Chapter 12 sums up Rainsy’s political program for a future Cambodia. Through his new Cambodian National Rescue Party he hopes to more forcefully challenge the CPP in up-coming elections.

As for strengths, this book is significant as the self-described narrative of one of Cambodia’s leading politicians. It should be particularly appealing for policy-makers and academics interested in Cambodia, Asia-in-general and democratization. But the author’s easy-to-read writing style makes it accessible to anyone. However, the book possesses weaknesses. First, he never explores his father’s alleged cooperation with the Central Intelligence Agency in the late 1950s.¹ Second, the book often appears as a simple campaign instrument for Rainsy. Third, at

times his anti-Vietnamese nationalism hinders on serious analysis (e.g., 181). Fourth, Rainsy insinuates that the CPP would steal the 2013 election, though the victory would seem “technically sound” and involve little political violence (148). In actuality, the election resulted in a near victory for the opposition, followed by greater political violence.² Fifth, and most tragically, in 2015 Sam Rainsy collaborated with the Hun Sen regime despite previously vilifying it. Some of his compromises actually weakened Thai democracy, such as the new election law that cuts the campaign period to four days.³ Ultimately, as a work which highlights lingering problems of Hun Sen’s leadership, this book should be read by anyone who really wants to understand the political perceptions of Hun Sen’s opponents.

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NOTES

1. Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 109.

2. Teehan Cheang Sokha and Shane Sean, “Crackdown Turns Deadly,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 3, 2014, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/crackdown-turns-deadly>

3. “Draft election law achieves consensus but risks democracy,” *Economist*, March 4, 2015, http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=742934058&Country=Cambodia&topic=Politics&subtopic=_4