

Phnom Penh: Beautification and Corruption

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Southeast Asia

In the last week of January 2003, the ASEAN Tourism Forum saw 1,200 delegates converging upon the scrubbed and beautified city of Phnom Penh. In the same week anti-Thai rioting culminated in the sacking of the Thai embassy and the destruction of Thai businesses. These two events reflect two apparently contradictory faces of Phnom Penh. The city appears at the same time to be an emerging and orderly model of authoritarian developmentalism, and the arena of an ongoing struggle on the part of the poor and destitute to claim recognition and resources from a venal and unregulated state.

By Caroline Hughes

The strategies used by state officials to deal with the urban poor reflect these two faces of the city. An overarching policy of infrastructural redevelopment for the city, known as the Beautification Plan, envisages clean, wide boulevards, restored colonial mansions, parks, fresh air, and exercise. It also encompasses official corruption, and the dispossession of the urban poor. The twin practices of beautification and corruption, pursued by the city authorities, serve a complementary purpose: the strengthening of the state, and the disruption of efforts by the poor to gain official recognition as citizens of the city.

The treatment of squatters within Phnom Penh clearly brings out the entanglement of these apparently distinct strategies. The emergence of 'anarchic' (*anatepetey*) development by the urban poor, from 1991 onwards, offered a sharp contrast to the strict controls on urban residence that pertained in the socialist era. In 1975, the Democratic Kampuchea regime infamously evacuated the city. The People's Republic of Kampuchea resettled Phnom Penh, by allocating free housing to state officials, but maintained state ownership of all property. In 1989, reforms offered rights of ownership of city properties to their occupiers, thus an inflationary land market, in which large fortunes could be made, was created overnight.

However, the complexity of the new land registration process and a lack of regulation of the subsequent property market permitted uncontrolled land appropriation by anyone with the means to take it, during the early 1990s. A lack of demarcation between privatized and public land meant that towns of squatters' shacks mushroomed, without legal sanction, on usurped plots of land in public parks or on river banks and dykes, and were subsequently bought and sold freely.

Many of the poorer residents of these anarchic developments made attempts to gain recognition of their right to ownership of the plots they purchased and inhabited. Often, the lodging of an application for the issue of an ownership title was beyond their means, as it involved the payment of fees and bribes to officials at five different levels of government. However, since registration of residence with local authorities was required, many considered that by paying a bribe and gaining a stamp in their family identification book, they had succeeded in gaining an officially-sanctioned right to illegally appropriated or purchased land. Such rights, however, were highly reliant upon the continued status and favour of the official in question. When powerful outside actors, such as property developers or visionary mayors, intervened, the brittle shelters of right and recognition constructed by the urban poor became mere matchwood.

Sometimes literally. In May 2001, a large squatter area built on a patch of land by the Tonle Bassac river was burned to the ground. Persistent rumours suggested that the fires had

been started deliberately and that fire fighters were under orders not to save the burning homes. What is unequivocally the case is that the following morning, bulldozers, under orders from City Hall, came to clear the remaining houses that had escaped the fire. Squatters protested briefly but were evicted by police. Within weeks the area had been grassed over and re-designated as a public park. Resistance was also quelled by the offer of land in a new village to be built just outside Phnom Penh.

Squatters, interviewed in 2001, recounted their experiences of the corruption of local officials and their exploitation of the poor. One squatter family commented: 'A group of villagers whose houses were burned... haven't got a house yet because they don't know anyone working in the government. So they've got no land yet... But those who have relatives working in the government have no difficulty getting land.' Another villager went further: 'Those who have relatives working in the government got two or three plots of land, so they could sell some and make money.' Donations of materials to the squatters, by international agencies, were subject to the imposition of 'transport fees' by local officials. Interviewees commented that any attempt to complain about unfair treatment would be disadvantageous – 'We don't want to be thought of as rebellious. We are afraid that if we are thought of as rebellious, there'll be some problem.'

The experience of the Tonle Bassac squatters illustrates the twin strategies of corruption and beautification, and the way these combine to strengthen the state at the expense of the poor. This was achieved through confiscation and destruction of the resources the poor had appropriated, and the disruption of the strategies they had pursued to protect these meagre accumulations from the arbitrary intervention of the powerful. Such strategies comprised the hundreds of private negotiations, connections, and recognitions that the poor had pursued over the years, through the cultivation of personal relationships with, and the bribing of, local officials.

Equally, the eviction strengthened the cohesion of the state, in line with the drive to modernization that the Cambodian government pursued since the economic reforms of the late 1980s. The reforms of 1989 awarded officials at all levels of the state apparatus opportunities to accumulate wealth through corruption and rent seeking, and by this means strengthened their loyalty. From the late 1990s onwards, the erratic but profitable everyday operations of the state apparatus, in this respect, were increasingly overlaid by grand modernizing schemes such as the Beautification Plan.

The two strategies are symbiotic. Schemes such as the Beautification Plan could not be implemented without the strengthened cohesion of the state. At the same time, these schemes offer rent seeking bonanzas for officials. They heighten the uncertainty which the poor must negotiate through the pursuit of official connections; they weaken solidarities within the ranks of the poor; and they increase the possibility of state surveillance. Together, these twin strategies undermine the capacity of the poor to develop coping strategies that, over time, could coalesce into customary rights, and into collective action to defend these.

At a time when a growing mood of protest amongst the poor is discernible, beautification also offers a welcome opportunity to gain control of the city's landscape, and to stamp it with the imprint of the ruling party. The period surrounding the 1998 elections saw unprecedented public demonstrations in the city. Trade unions, whose members populated squatter housing areas, organized prominent protests in Cambodia's new garment industry. Responses to such protests have been violent. A protest in March 1997 outside the National Assembly Building was the target of three hand grenades, allegedly thrown by a member of the military, killing twenty and injuring up to 100 demonstrators. Post-election protests in 1998 were broken up by armed riot police, with some deaths. Attempts by the Sam Rainsy Party to raise a memorial to those killed by the 1997 grenade attack were violently resisted by police in 2000. In late 2002 and early 2003, violence against strikers on picket lines in the city was widely reported.

However, via the Beautification Plan, the nascent politicization of the main protest site – a park outside the National Assembly Building known by opposition activists as 'Democracy Square' – has been quashed through a redesign of city space. The National Assembly is to be moved to a new purpose-built building on a site opposite the Hun Sen Park down the road. A new city square, purpose-built for the holding of officially sanctioned demonstrations, is currently under construction – on a small peninsular of land across the Tonle Sap River, which is being developed as a tourist site and convention centre, far away from the centre of government.

Whereas the early, deregulated, and voracious privatization of property in Phnom Penh put the urban poor at the mercy of corrupt local officials, it also allowed the poor to appropriate limited resources and recognition, in return for a stream of small payments to those with locally relevant powers. Beautification swings the initiative back towards the state, by permitting the arbitrary and unpredictable disruption of such strategies, in a manner which continues to benefit corrupt local officials, but which renders the poor ever more helpless.



From Slum to Park:
Grassing over the site of the Tonle Bassac squatter settlement, following the fire of May 2001.

At the same time, Beautification offers a respectable face to the outside world and to middle class city-dwellers, helping to legitimize a state much criticized for its venality. The chief architect of Beautification, Phnom Penh's erstwhile mayor, Chea Sophara, portrayed the plan as an effort to make the city safer and healthier, characterizing squatter areas as stinking, filthy, and crime-ridden – playing to middle class fears of a criminal class and an influx of 'Vietnamese' prostitutes. Indeed, the rhetoric of the plan awards no space to the poor at all – Chea Sophara, interviewed in 2001, commented: 'We want to keep a high standard of living by not encouraging the poor to live in the city.' This attitude was exemplified by the removal of street-side hawkers and the threat to round up and deport street children to the provinces, before the ASEAN Tourism Forum. Yet the rhetoric relies, arguably, on the knowledge that rural-urban migration continues, and that those sporadically deported from the city must, of necessity, find a way to return. A year after the deportation of the Tonle Bassac squatters, a dearth of jobs near their new village meant that many of the poor abandoned it, and returned to the city.

Beautification offers a vision of a healthy, crime-free city created through the regulation of space, the exclusion of misfits, the disruption of personal links with the state, and the disconcerting reorganization of places that had acquired, however briefly, political resonance as sites of resistance. It undermines the strategies used by the urban poor – private negotiation and public protest – to attempt to claim resources and rights for themselves in the city. Yet, it depends upon an ongoing relationship of corruption, exploitation, and abuse between state and society. The violence of the anti-Thai rioting that broke out in January 2003 was arguably a displacement into patriotic anger of the ugly side of Beautification – the ongoing problems of poverty and personal insecurity. Phnom Penh's cosmopolitan and beautified facade conceals a troubled and frightened soul. ◀

Reference

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