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## Thoughts from Bangkok on the Anti-Thai Riot in Phnom Penh

FEBRUARY 26, 2003

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

BANGKOK, Thailand – On January 29, 2003, a mob in Cambodia's capital looted and burned the Royal Thai Embassy. The Phnom Penh riot began with a protest in front of the Embassy, prompted by reports that Suvanan Kongying, a Thai soap-opera star with a large following in Cambodia, had said that she would not visit Cambodia until Angkor Wat was returned to Thailand. Considered one of the architectural wonders of the world, the Angkor Wat temple complex is Cambodia's national symbol. Every Cambodian national flag since independence from France in 1954 has featured an image of Angkor Wat, including the flag of Democratic Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge regime that presided over the death of two million Cambodians from 1975 to 1979.



*An image of Angkor Wat  
embellishes the Cambodian flag.*

Days before the riot, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen had castigated Suvanan for her alleged comments, saying, "She's not worth a few blades of grass that grow around Angkor." Protesters burned Thai flags before storming the Embassy and attacking Thai-owned businesses. The Embassy's Thai staff members were forced to flee by boat after climbing over the Embassy compound's rear wall. One Cambodian employee of a Thai-owned hotel was killed in the violence, and many people were robbed and injured. Cambodian security forces and firemen failed to intervene until late at night when the violence had largely run its course.

In the wake of the riots, Thailand evacuated several hundred Thais from Cambodia, suspended bilateral aid and cooperation, closed the border and downgraded its diplomatic ties to *chargé d'affaires* level. Thailand's defense minister ordered that all Cambodian "workers and beggars" be rounded up and "dumped at the border." The Cambodian government expressed regret at the incident, arrested a number of people in connection with the riot and agreed to pay US\$50 million in compensation. Suvanan denied having made the comments attributed to her by the Cambodian media and expressed sorrow at the incident.<sup>1</sup>

The Thai government and media immediately recognized the riot as a manifestation of what passes for politics in Cambodia, where democracy remains more a promise than a reality. The day after the riot, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin

<sup>1</sup> The editor of the Cambodian newspaper *Rasmei Angkor* (Light of Angkor), which first ran the story alleging Suvanan had demanded the "return" of Angkor Wat, was arrested and charged with printing false information and inciting people to riot. According to the editor, three anonymous visitors to his office told him of Suvanan's alleged comments. "Newspaper Editor Charged with Inciting Riot," *Bangkok Post*, February 2, 2003.

Shinawatra explained, “[Thailand is] a victim of complications in Cambodian politics. Someone tried to make a stir of nationalism [sic], to make it look as if Thailand wanted to snatch Angkor Wat from [Cambodia].”<sup>2</sup> The Thai ambassador confirmed that the mob was organized rather than spontaneous. Indeed, even before the violence, Thai media interpreted Hun Sen’s comments about Suvan as an effort to gain some political advantage over his rivals before a general election in July by kindling nationalist sentiment.<sup>3</sup> Thus there was instant understanding that the violence was not simply a spontaneous outburst of anti-Thai sentiment, but a political ploy run amuck.

This appreciation of the domestic Cambodian provenance of the incident has not precluded a search for “root causes.” Indeed, the violence was so shocking to most Thais that it seemed to demand further explanation. While no one denies that the protest and subsequent riot were organized,<sup>4</sup> Thai and Western journalists and academics sought to elucidate features of the Thai-Cambodian relationship that might explain why Cambodians appeared to be primed for such an explosion of anti-Thai sentiment. Put crudely, many Thais sought an answer to a question that has become familiar to Americans, namely, “Why do they hate us?”<sup>5</sup> As with the American query, although the question is worth answering, it may not speak directly to the cause of violence perpetrated by self-professed champions of an oppressed people against the perceived oppressor. Answers to the question are interesting in



<sup>2</sup> “Envoy Recalled, Apology Rejected,” *Bangkok Post*, January 31, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> “A Soap Opera or Déjà Vu?” *The Nation*, January 28, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy, Cambodia’s major opposition figure, have each blamed the other for instigating the riot.

<sup>5</sup> Sutichai Yoon, group editor-in-chief of *The Nation Group*, wrote, “On our part, the main task is to launch a national search for the real answer(s) to the big question: Do we know why they think we are exploiting them?” “In Search of Deeper Answers to Cambodia,” *The Nation*, February 6, 2003.

their own right, but are potentially misleading as an explanation for a particular instance of violence.

An article in the *Bangkok Post*<sup>6</sup> acknowledged that the riot was organized for some political end, then went on to declare, “[T]here are other factors that must be taken into account, including a long history of territorial disputes and pent-up resentment at Thailand’s overwhelming economic and political influence in a much poorer Cambodia.”<sup>6</sup> This quotation suggests two broad themes that emerged in the reports, commentaries and analyses about the incident in Thailand and the West. First, the riot was explained as an expression of resentment of Thailand’s economic and cultural dominance in Cambodia. Given the fact that the riot appeared to be sparked by comments attributed to a Thai starlet who was very popular in Cambodia, and that Thai businesses suffered serious damage at the hands of the rioters, this theme appears to carry much explanatory power. The second theme, related to the first, concerns the burden of history on Thai-Cambodian relations. Some argued that the riot exemplified the suspicion and even hatred that many Cambodians have toward Thais owing to a history of Siamese territorial aggrandizement at Cambodia’s expense. Some who looked a little deeper saw the riot as a malignant consequence of a powerful but faulty nationalist view of Thailand’s history that has bred a dangerous kind of Thai chauvinism.

### **Battlefield to Marketplace: Baht Imperialism and Cultural Colonialism**

Negative perceptions in neighboring countries about Thai business practices and cultural influences may be traced to the late 1980s, when the Cold-War thaw prompted a reorientation of Thailand’s foreign policy. For a decade after Vietnam invaded Cambodia and ousted the Khmer Rouge at the end of 1978, the regional dynamics of mainland Southeast Asia were characterized by stalemate over Cambodia, with the Vietnamese unable to defeat the coalition of anti-Vietnamese resistance dominated by the Khmer Rouge and supported by Thailand, China and the US. The Soviet-Chinese rapprochement and Vietnam’s 1988 announcement of the withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia changed everything.

At this time, Thailand’s Prime Minister, Chatichai Choonhavan, initiated a new approach to relations with Thailand’s neighbors that emphasized economic possibilities instead of ideological confrontation. In December 1988, Chatichai famously expressed the strategic shift when he declared his intention to transform Indochina,

“from a battlefield to a trading market.” The spirit of Chatichai’s “New Look” diplomacy was symbolized by his invitation to Cambodia’s Vietnamese-backed premier, Hun Sen, to visit Thailand in January 1989. In essence, the new policy sought Thai security as a result of regional prosperity rather than regional conflict. Recognizing the commercial opportunities of a region no longer at war, particularly in reconstruction of a shattered Cambodia, Thailand advanced a vision of itself at the center of a peaceful and prosperous mainland Southeast Asia. Thailand would serve as the gateway for capital, technology and expertise to Indochina and Burma as those countries integrated with the world economy. Meanwhile, Thailand would benefit from access to natural resources in neighboring countries. This vision came to be associated with the term *Suwanaphume*, or “Golden Land,” which the Thai government used to signify a new era of peace and prosperity for mainland Southeast Asia.

The reality fell somewhat short of this optimistic vision. Although the economic orientation of Thai policy prevailed over the old “security-first” approach,<sup>7</sup> Cambodia remained a battlefield throughout the 1990s. With a large stockpile of Chinese weapons and a wink and a nod from the Thai military, Khmer Rouge forces carried on a fight against Phnom Penh. The longevity of the Khmer Rouge illustrates that fighting and trading are not mutually exclusive. Thai businesses, most with close ties to the Thai army, struck deals with the Khmer Rouge and Phnom Penh authorities alike, mostly to extract logs and gemstones from western Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge used the revenue thus generated to prolong the war. Indeed, it was only after international pressure forced Bangkok to stop looking the other way (and Phnom Penh offered amnesty to enemy troops), that the Khmer Rouge began to splinter. The Khmer Rouge finally collapsed altogether in 1998.

While illicit economic relations with the Khmer Rouge gave Thailand a black eye in world opinion, the activities of Thailand’s “legitimate” businesspeople did little to improve Thailand’s international image. Thai economic and commercial activities in neighboring countries earned Thai business a reputation for corruption and short-sightedness, particularly in exploiting natural resources such as timber and fish. In short, the Thais were seen as greedy. As an analyst writing in the early 1990s noted, “[M]uch of the economic flurry in recent years has rested primarily upon individual economic opportunism motivated by short-term profit-making incentives. This has given resonance to frequent charges of Thai ‘neo-colonialism’.”<sup>8</sup> One Cambodian official in 1992 maintained

<sup>6</sup> Songpol Kaopatumpit and Tunya Sukpanich, “Making an Enemy Out of Misunderstanding?” *Bangkok Post*, February 2, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> This was by no means certain. Under pressure from China and ASEAN, Chatichai was forced to back down from his maverick approach to Indochina. His recognition of the State of Cambodia seems to have disturbed not only Thailand’s allies and partners in ASEAN, but also the foreign-policy establishment in Thailand. Chatichai was deposed in a coup in 1991, though his downfall probably owed more to perceptions that his government was corrupt and conventional political failings than to his foreign policy. Indeed, Chatichai’s successors continued to follow the economic approach.

<sup>8</sup> Khatharya Um, “Thailand and the Dynamics of Economic and Security Complex in Mainland Southeast Asia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 13, no. 3, December 1991, p. 251.



*The Nation*, February 5, 2003

that “Among 100 Thai businessmen, 80 are cheats.”<sup>9</sup> These perceptions are persistent. A prominent image from the television coverage of the recent riot was graffiti on the wall of the Thai Embassy that read, “Thai robber.”

On the surface, however, perceptions of Thailand’s economic domination of Cambodia appear overblown. According to the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Thailand ranked fifth among foreign-investor nations in Cambodia for the period from 1994 to 2001, with US\$131 million pledged. This puts Thailand behind Malaysia, Taiwan, China, and Singapore. Indeed, Cambodians seeking a scapegoat for their country’s economic subjugation might be more justified in blaming Malaysia. Malaysian investment accounts for 41.8 percent of total investment for that period. The next largest foreign investor, Taiwan, accounts for only 8.4 percent.<sup>10</sup> Even when it comes to the controversial issue of logging concessions, those acquired by Malaysian and Indonesian companies dwarf those of Thai firms.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the relatively low level of Thai investment, combined with the high profile of Thai businesses, particularly in the tourism and telecommunica-

tions sectors, may be a factor in Cambodian resentment. It probably doesn’t help Thailand’s image that so much Thai investment in Cambodia today is directed toward building casinos, and roads leading to casinos, that serve mostly Thai gamblers. Never mind that taxes on these casinos provide as much as four percent of Cambodia’s state revenue.<sup>12</sup> Thai business must still contend with the reputation for greed and irresponsibility it earned more than a decade ago. In the wake of the riot have come renewed calls for Thai business to take responsibility for these negative perceptions. Thai businessman Amarin Khoman said, “We Thais must look at ourselves, our business practices and the aspirations of our brothers and sisters in neighboring countries, and not be found wanting.”<sup>13</sup>

One reason, perhaps, that Cambodians do not perceive Malaysia as a threat to their sovereignty is that Cambodian young people are not devoted to Malaysian pop stars. Perceptions of Thailand’s commercial dominance in Cambodia are linked to the popularity of Thai popular culture. According to Thai researcher Chontira Sattayawattana, “Cambodians now are facing Thai imperialism with the Thai media being used as a tool.”<sup>14</sup> Thai pop music and television programs are widely heard

<sup>9</sup> Murray Hiebert, “Baht Imperialism,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 25, 1992, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Embassy, Phnom Penh, “Country Commercial Guide 2002 – Cambodia.” Available at <http://usembassy.state.gov/cambodia/www0030.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Kirk Talbott, “Logging in Cambodia: Politics and Plunder,” in Frederick Z. Brown and David G. Timberman, eds., *Cambodia and the International Community: The Quest for Peace, Development and Democracy*, New York: The Asia Society, 1998; available at: <http://www.asiasociety.org/publications/cambodia/logging>.

<sup>12</sup> Onnucha Hutasing and Yawadee Tonyasiri, “Cross-Border Gambling,” *Bangkok Post*, April 17, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Songpol Kaopatuntip and Tunya Sukpanich, “Making an Enemy Out of Misunderstanding?” *Bangkok Post*, February 2, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Onnucha Hutasingh, “Thai Media Partly Blamed for Sparking Riots in Phnom Penh,” *Bangkok Post*, February 11, 2003.

and viewed in Cambodia and Laos, thanks to spill-over signals from Thai radio and TV stations. Some observers believe the disparity between the affluence represented on Thai TV and the reality of poverty in neighboring countries leads to feelings of frustration among viewers that can cause social problems.<sup>15</sup> As one Thai commentator observed, “After the riot in Phnom Penh, nobody now can underestimate the power of [Thai] soap operas.”<sup>16</sup> Others suggest that popularity of foreign stars contrib-

utes to a kind of inferiority complex, a sensation not unknown to Thais. The respected Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri argues that “It’s a love-hate relationship [between Cambodia and Thailand]. We Thais also feel the same. We love American culture and Japanese culture, but at the same time we also feel we’re being controlled culturally by Hollywood movies and Japanese comics.”<sup>17</sup> Sutichai Yoon of *The Nation* writes, “The sense of helplessness caused by being overwhelmed by foreign influence and arrogance that over time translates into frustration and anger waiting to explode isn’t alien to Thais.”<sup>18</sup>



“Gop: A Victim of Cambodian Politics.” The cover of *Nation Weekend Magazine*, February 3, 2003. Suvanana, known to Thai fans by her nickname, “Gop,” (Frog), denied making the remarks attributed to her by the Cambodian press.

The Suvanana incident is not the first time a Thai star has been falsely accused of disparaging Thailand’s neighbors. In March 2000, a popular Thai singer named Nicole Theriault was accused of having denigrated the women of Laos during a television interview. The controversy began two weeks after the interview when a Thai disc jockey in Nong Khai (just across the Mekong River from the Lao capital, Vientiane) read on air a letter that claimed Nicole had defamed Lao women by describing them as dirty and stupid. Lao people were outraged. The Union of Lao Women, a quasi-official organization, spearheaded protests. The Thai ambassador in Laos received at least one letter that carried a threat to kill Nicole. For her part, Nicole denied having made the comments. Indeed, Thai researchers who reviewed the tape of the program found no indication that Nicole made a derogatory statement, nor any corroboration from those who viewed the program the night it aired. These researchers contend that a “third hand,” possibly Lao nationalists anxious to counter Thailand’s cultural influence, manufactured the incident.<sup>19</sup>

The threat of ‘dangerous foreign influences’ is often a pretext for defending the status quo. This is the case today in Burma, Vietnam and even in Thailand.<sup>20</sup> Communist authorities in Laos are apprehensive about Thai radio and television, which they see as vehicles for social evils and heterodox ideas that could erode the Party’s grip on power. In Cambodia, however, where politics is no longer a one-Party game, the relationship between Thai pop culture and the powers-that-be is more ambiguous

<sup>15</sup> Pennapa Hongthing, “Thai TV Gets Mixed Reviews,” *The Nation*, January 27, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Thanong Khanthong, “Suvanana is a soap-opera Helen of Troy,” *The Nation*, January 31, 2003. The power of Thai soaps was demonstrated long before the Phnom Penh riot. In May 2002, in a bid to ease tensions with Burma, the Thai government presented the Generals in Rangoon with videotapes of two long-running Thai soap operas. Depending on the report, either General Maung Aye or Burma’s foreign minister Win Aung let on that the tapes of “Ban Sai Thong” (House of Golden Sand) and “Vaen Thong Luang,” (The Brass Ring) would be welcome. “TV Sans Borders,” *Bangkok Post*, June 4, 2002; “Govt Pins Border Hopes on Soaps,” *The Nation*, May 25, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Montlake, “Thailand’s Cultural Might Sparks Regional Jealousy,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 3, 2003; available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/2003/p07s02-woap.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Sutichai Yoon, “In Search of Deeper Answers to Cambodia,” *The Nation*, February 6, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Khien Theeravit and Adisorn Semyaem, *Thai-Lao Relations in Laotian Perspective*, trans. Soravis Jayanama, Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University and the Thailand Research Fund, 2002, pp. 172-182.

<sup>20</sup> Newt Gingrich and Peter Schweizer recently turned the “dangerous foreign influences” idea inside out. They cite research by Boston University professors Marvin and Margaret de Fleur who concluded, “that pop culture, rather than foreign policy, is the true culprit of anti-Americanism.” Gingrich and Schweizer maintain that popular American culture poses a serious and immediate threat to the U.S. because it creates in the minds of young foreigners “negative images” of the U.S., which in turn cause them to hate the U.S. and become terrorists. Security, one must conclude, will only be achieved when the U.S. entertainment industry conforms to Taliban or Gingrichian ideas of propriety. Newt Gingrich and Peter Schweizer, “America has an Image Problem – Hollywood’s to Blame,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 2003.

and the reasons for manufacturing such a controversy are less clear. Certainly, Cambodia has a long tradition of xenophobia, with Vietnamese settlers bearing the brunt of the violence over the past 30 years. Politicians of various stripes, including opposition figure Sam Rainsy, have also sought mileage from sounding the alarm about Thai designs on Cambodian territory in the far west that has only recently come under Phnom Penh's direct administration. Whoever started the rumor about Suvan, and whatever their intention, Hun Sen seized the opportunity to bash Thailand.<sup>21</sup>

While ugly statements were falsely attributed to Nicole and Suvan, they caused controversy because they resonate with unfortunate truth. Undeniably, some Thais *do* look down on Laotians and Cambodians, who are considered poor, unattractive and unsophisticated. Thais often refer to Laotians (and sometimes Cambodians) as "brothers and sisters" (*ben pi nong gan*).

Although the term may convey a sense of closeness and even warmth, it inevitably conveys a hierarchical relationship. One cannot express the idea of a sibling in Thai without also expressing the relative age, and therefore status, of that sibling. There is no escaping the implied inferior relationship, and no confusion about who is the older sibling and who the younger. When it comes to Thai standards of beauty, Thai stereotypes about Laotians and Cambodians are a complicated business and appear to include a degree of self-contempt. How else to explain the popularity of whitening creams and nose jobs in Thailand? On TV and in advertising, Thai middle-class (i.e., Sino-Thai) standards of beauty prevail, so that Thai women often complain about their own dark skin and small noses, which are considered "Lao" attributes.

### History of Abuse or Abuse of History?

In addition to the argument that the riot was caused by Thai greed and cultural imperialism, it was also argued that the riot somehow expressed historical antagonisms between Thais and Cambodians. Consider the subtitle of a report in *The Nation*: "Resentment of Thailand's historical dominance over Cambodia continues to stir

conflict between the two neighbors." The article states, "While some may say last week's conflict was the result of a vicious political game, one cannot deny how conflict has simmered over past centuries. [...] The burning and looting of the Thai Embassy . . . reflects how fragile the situation is and how much history plays a role in nationalism and hatred of neighbours."<sup>22</sup>

This line of reasoning recalls the decline of the once-mighty Angkor empire, which ruled much of modern-day Thailand, Laos, Cambodian and southern Vietnam from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. The Siamese kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthya, which rose up in what is now Thailand's Central Plains, expanded at the expense of Angkor. By the time Siamese troops sacked Angkor in 1353, the empire had been in decline for a century. When Siamese troops again sacked Angkor in 1431, the Cambodian court moved to Phnom Penh. Subsequent



Bangkok Post, February 5, 2003

Cambodian courts, faction-ridden and weak, were susceptible to manipulation by Siam and Vietnam. Cambodian rulers paid tribute to Siam and Vietnam, which openly competed for influence. Nineteenth-century Siamese and Vietnamese chronicles described the Cambodian court as a servant, or child, that needed to be alternately nurtured and punished.

These two powerful neighbors fought a series of inconclusive wars in Cambodia during the 1830s and 1840s. Historians commonly observe that only French intervention and the establishment of colonial protectorates in Cambodia and Laos preserved these entities from being completely absorbed by Siam and Vietnam. It is this history of subjugation and humiliation that is said to fuel contemporary resentment of Thailand by Cambodians.

Another, more reflective, analysis maintains that it is not so much the events of this history that stir Cambodian resentment, but the representations of these events in nationalist historical discourse. This interpretation is informed by the scholarly debate about the origins and nature of nations and nationalism. This scholarship challenges the idea of a nation as a given, natural, primordial entity, and seeks to expose the contingent and invented character of modern nations. In Southeast Asia, as in many parts of the world, the encounter with Western co-

<sup>21</sup> Hun Sen has a history with famous, beautiful film stars. In 1999, Cambodia's most famous and best-loved performer, Piseth Peaklica, was murdered by gunmen. Piseth is widely believed to have been Hun Sen's mistress, and her murder is rumored to have been ordered by Hun Sen's wife. Trained in classical Cambodian dance, Piseth was regarded by many Cambodians as a national treasure. More than 10,000 people turned out to mourn at Piseth's funeral. According to one fan, "Her performances represent the entire nation and her death is like losing Angkor Wat." "Cambodia Mourns 'Executed' Film Star," BBC News Online, July 13, 1999; available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/393407.stm>.

<sup>22</sup> Subhatra Bhumiprabhas and Pravit Rojanaphruk, "The Deadly Weight of History," *The Nation*, February 5, 2003.

lonialism coincided with the emergence of national (as opposed to dynastic) histories.<sup>23</sup> Histories of the nation served the particular end of creating national identities, such as “Thai,” “Lao,” or “Vietnamese,” where none existed before. One way the nationalist narratives do this is by projecting the modern notions of nation, sovereignty, territory and ethnicity into the past when these notions did not obtain. Such anachronisms may help tell a story about the evolution of a nation, but they also distort our understanding of the past. It is meaningless, for example, to contend that Thailand invaded Cambodia in the fifteenth century, when Thailand and Cambodia did not exist. As Dr. Charnvit observes, “This is a misuse of history. There was no war between Thailand and Cambodia but between Ayutthaya and Angkor or [the Cambodian court at] Udong.” The consequence of such misuse of history, Charnvit says, “is an historical heritage that’s full of misunderstanding, prejudice and hatred.”<sup>24</sup>

This questioning of nationalist narratives of history has been employed most visibly by Thai academics to correct popular Thai perceptions of Burma as Thailand’s natural enemy. Siamese resistance to Burmese invasion is the most prominent theme of Thailand’s official history, which portrays the looting and burning of Ayutthya by Burmese forces in 1767 as a great national tragedy. Recent tensions on the border and the influx of illegal immigrants from Burma give this history an immediate, contemporary context. Popular Thai historical dramas such as *Bang Rajan* (1999), which depicts with tremendous violence the battle of Siamese villagers against invading Burmese, and *Suryothai* (2001), which tells the story of a Siamese queen killed in battle against Burma, have offered historians a platform to discuss the political consequences of historical misrepresentations. As Thailand’s foremost Burma scholar, Dr Sunait Chutintaranond, explained in 2001, “The negative attitude toward the Burmese does not occur solely as a result of the past relationship. [...] It is, rather, the outcome of political maneuvers by Thai nationalist governments, especially military regimes. It is an attempt to stir up a sense of nationalism and at the same time legitimize their ruling authority by claiming that they, like their brave ancestors who fought against Burma, take as their primary concern the task of protecting the nation, religion and monarchy from external invasion.”<sup>25</sup>

While Burmese treachery is assumed by most Thais,

Siamese depredations in Cambodia are less well known. As one writer observed in the February 3 edition of *The Nation*:

*Siam is to Cambodia as Burma is to Siam. In Thailand’s history books, the country is always being attacked by a bad neighbour to the west, Burma, which keeps sacking the capital. Siam is never aggressive but defends itself well and honourably. In these books, there is little about wars to the east. But of course, the Khmer history books are different. They also have an aggressive neighbour to the west, which sacks its capital and covets its most glorious monument.*<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, many Thai historians blame the received version of Thai history that is taught in Thai schools for poisoning relations with neighbors. According to Dr. Charnvit, “Whatever historical misunderstandings that exist and are recorded in texts in an ultra-nationalist way should be re-written by the ministries of education in all [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] countries.”<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting here that the late-1980s Thai vision of *Suwanaphume* aroused doubts in Laos and Cambodia because it echoed the expansionist, pan-Thai ideology advanced by Field Marshal Pibul Songkhram, Thailand’s premier from 1938 to 1944 and again from 1948 to 1957. Indeed, during World War II, under Pibul’s leadership and with Japan’s assistance, Thailand pursued claims to territory in Laos and Cambodia that Siam ceded to France in 1907. From 1941 to 1946, Thailand occupied the western Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap (which means ‘Siam Defeated’). It is no coincidence Pibul’s tenure also saw the articulation and enforcement of a mass Thai national identity.<sup>28</sup> In 1939, Pibul changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand to signify an ethnic identity for the nation. The purpose was to create a national identity that excluded the economically powerful Chinese in Siam, yet implicitly included ethnic Thais (or Tai speakers) in Burma, Cambodia, Laos and China’s Yunnan province. As one researcher noted in 1991, “The notion of ‘greater Thailand’, founded on the integration, *de facto* or otherwise, of parts of Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia into a strategic whole is ... a policy *leit-motif*, with long-standing historical roots, amounting in essence to Thailand’s own concept of ‘manifest destiny.’”<sup>29</sup> In 1989, the Lao government warned that, “Having failed to destroy our country through military might, the enemy has now employed

<sup>23</sup> Although Siam was not colonized, the introduction of colonialism to the region forced Siamese elites to confront and finally conform to the Western interstate system. Thongchai Winichakul describes the “trauma” of this experience and subsequent formation of a Siamese national history in his excellent *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1994.

<sup>24</sup> “The Deadly Weight of History,” *The Nation*, February 5, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Min Zin, “Thais Yet to ‘Love Thy Neighbour,’” *The Nation*, January 20, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Chang Noi (a pseudonym), “Bad History and Good Neighbours,” *The Nation*, February 3, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> “The Deadly Weight of History,” *The Nation*, February 5, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Pibul’s government issued 12 Cultural Mandates between 1939 and 1942. Thais were enjoined to salute the flag, know the national anthem, speak central Thai rather regional dialects, and to live in a modern way, as expressed in eating, sleeping and working habits. Thais were also encouraged to dress in the Western fashion, i.e., wear shoes, trousers, ties, jackets, skirts, gloves and hats. David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1984, p. 255.

a new strategy in attacking us through the so-called attempt to turn the Indochinese battlefield into a marketplace."<sup>30</sup>

Pibul's chief propagandist was Luang Wichit Wattakarn, who served as head of the Department of Fine Arts. Wichit's 1937 musical play *Ratchamanu*, which treats the sixteenth-century defeat by Siam of a Cambodian rebellion in Battambang, does not merely lay claim to Cambodian territory or heritage. It denies a separate Cambodian identity altogether. Consider this exchange between "Thai soldiers" and their leader, the play's protagonist, Ratchamanu:

*Thai soldiers: Eh! Khmers and Thais look just the same, Sir.*

*Ratchamanu: Of course, they're Thais like us! A long time ago they happened to occupy the old Khom territory and came to be called Khmers. In fact, we're all really Thai brothers.*

*Thai soldiers: We should all be friends, no more war.*

*Ratchamanu: Yes, there's no more need to fight. All of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same . . . [but remember] the Siamese Thais [Thais from Siam proper] are the elder brothers . . ."*<sup>31</sup>

In 1940, the Thai Ministry of Defense declared that Vietnamese, Laos and Khmers were "of the 'same nationality' as the Thai, 'as if they were of the same blood.'"<sup>32</sup> This racial idea may not have much currency today, but it was still circulating at high levels during the Cold War. In 1976, Dr Thanat Khoman, Thailand's foreign minister, explained, "there is no such thing as a Lao or Laotian race which is but a branch of the Thai race whose offshoots may be found in North Vietnam, Shan State, Assam, Laos, and, of course, Thailand."<sup>33</sup>

The indifferent reception by Thailand's neighbors to Thai efforts at promoting the *Suwanaphume* concept owes much to the legacy of these pan-Thai aspirations. Yet Thai governments continued to see cultural affinities with neighboring countries as an avenue toward greater cooperation. In the mid-1990s, partly in a bid to ameliorate the damage done by Thai business practices, the Thai Foreign Ministry tried its hand at cultural diplomacy.<sup>34</sup> An emphasis on common culture, the Ministry main-

tained, could lead to common ground for cooperation. In 1996, for example, Thailand invited dignitaries from Cambodia, China (Yunnan), Burma and Laos to the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai to celebrate *songkran*, the lunar New Year that is also celebrated in these countries. The response was subdued, at best. Burma declined the invitation, reportedly irked that the Thais intended first to invite Shan rather than Burmese representatives.<sup>35</sup> Such diplomatic gambits ran out of steam after the 1997 economic crisis forced the government to tighten its belt.

One reason Cambodians may have been so upset by Suvanan's alleged comments about Angkor Wat is that Thais have, in fact, sought to appropriate what is conventionally understood as Cambodia's national heritage. The Angkor empire extended over much of what is now Thailand, so vestiges of that empire, in the form of temple ruins, have been incorporated into Thailand's national history and packaged for Thailand's tourist industry. Specifically, the so-called 'Lopburi' style, used to describe architectural ruins dating from tenth to thirteenth centuries—when Angkor ruled the region—claims a Thai identity for architecture found in central and northeastern Thailand that would otherwise be called Khmer.<sup>36</sup>

More concretely, Cambodians are wary of Thai designs on an Angkorean temple known to Thais as Phra Viharn and to Cambodians as Preah Vihear. In the late 1950s, Thailand and Cambodia disputed ownership of the temple, which is located on the Dangrek Mountain range, on the Thai-Cambodian border. They took the dispute to the International Court of Justice, which, in 1962, ruled in favor of Cambodia. However, the fact that the temple is not easily accessible from the Cambodian side means that Thai authorities have had considerable influence over the temple's disposition. In December 2001, for example, the Thai Army closed the entrance to the temple, charging Cambodian authorities with failure to curb pollution flowing downstream into Thailand from a market inside Cambodia. Cambodians see the closure as ploy to undermine Cambodia's efforts to promote tourism in the area. Meanwhile, there are persistent reports from Cambodia that Thai troops have encroached on Cambodian territory in the vicinity of Preah Vihear. Interestingly, Hun Sen removed Phnom

<sup>29</sup> Um, p. 247.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Innes-Brown and Mark J. Valencia, "Thailand's Resource Diplomacy in Indochina and Myanmar, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 14, no. 4 (March 1993), p. 345.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Scot Barme, *Luang Wichit Wattakarn and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, "Introduction: National Identity and its Defenders," in Craig J. Reynolds, ed., *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, revised edition, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books 2002, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in William Turley, "Thai-Vietnamese Rivalry in the Indochina Conflict," in Lawrence E. Ginter and Young Whan Kihl, eds., *East Asian Conflict Zones: Prospects for Regional Stability and Deescalation*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1987, p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, "Thai Identity in the Age of Globalization," in Craig J. Reynolds, ed., *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, p. 321.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Vatikiotis, "The Thais That Bind," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 25, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Thai appropriation of the Angkorean heritage is examined by Charles Keyes in "The Case of the Purloined Lintel: The Politics of a Khmer Shrine as a Thai National Treasure," in Craig J. Reynolds, ed., *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, revised edition, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books 2002, pp. 212-237.

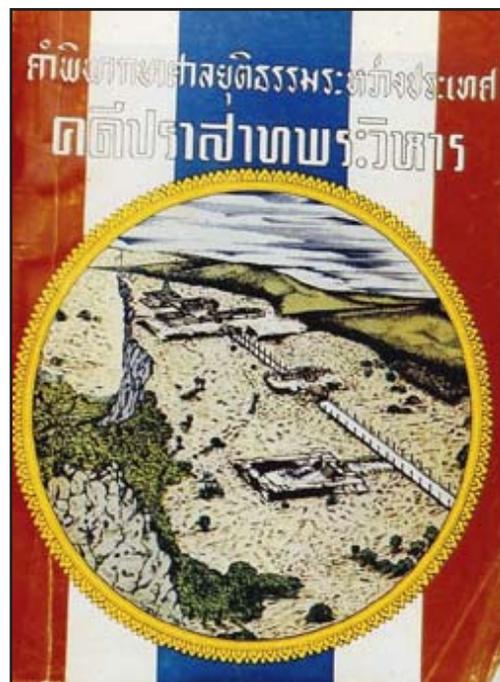
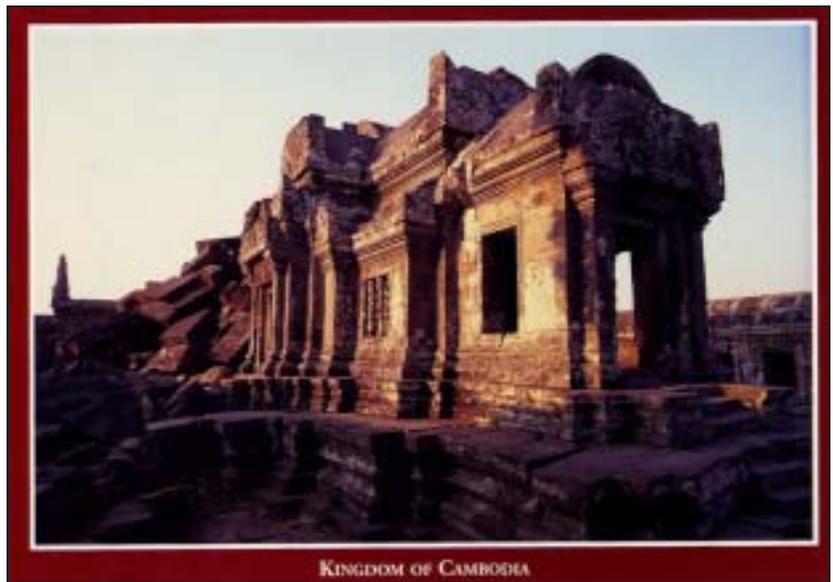
Penh governor Chea Sophara from his post after the anti-Thai riot.<sup>37</sup> Chea has been very active in efforts to develop Preah Vihear as a Cambodian tourist site. Among other things, Chea helped establish a Khmer-language radio station near the temple with the aim of giving Khmer speakers on both sides of the border an alternative to Thai radio. Indeed, Chea was at Preah Vihear on the day of the riot. Although Chea's removal was interpreted as a shrewd move by Hun Sen to sideline a popular potential challenger, might it have been a concession to Thai authorities irritated by Chea's Preah Vihear activism?<sup>38</sup>

### In Lieu of a Conclusion

Even as the riot was going on, I recognized that the incident resonated at many levels with my purpose here, that is, to examine the centrifugal and centripetal forces at play among states and peoples in mainland Southeast Asia. In my proposal to ICWA, I mentioned that regional integration involves, "a very difficult process of reconciling the national interests of six countries that share a recent history of antipathy and conflict and which today suffer from great disparities in wealth and power." I proposed to consider, among other questions, whether greater contact between governments and peoples in the region is, "fostering common identities or sharpening the awareness of difference?" The way history shapes and is shaped by contemporary events is a particular interest. As the foregoing suggests, the riot in Cambodia offers much food for thought to the historically minded.

However, available information about the riot leads me to believe that "traditional antipathy" as a factor is easily overstated. Certainly, to fully appreciate the reasons behind the anti-Thai riot, one must take into account the legacy of the Khmer Rouge genocide, 30 years of war and Cambodia's weak social and political institutions. My sparse knowledge of contemporary Cambodia precludes that effort for the time being. Nonetheless, as a provisional assessment, I'll venture that the riot had more to do with Cambodian politics than anti-Thai sentiment in Cambodia. It is useful to consider how few Cambodians were involved—just a thousand, by most estimates. It is useful also to consider the help extended to

many Thais by Cambodian friends, neighbors and colleagues. The Thai Embassy staff, for example, escaped with the help of slum dwellers living next door.<sup>39</sup> It may also be useful to consider the work of political scientist John Mueller, who argues that ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere owes less to, "convulsive surging of ancient hatreds," than to, "the ministrations of small—sometimes very small—bands of opportunistic marauders recruited by political leaders and operating under their general guidance."<sup>40</sup> While ethnic war is a far cry from a riot with nationalist overtones, the roots of each may be similarly banal. □



(Left) "Judgment of the International Court of Justice: The Case of Phra Vihan." The cover of a Thai book from 1962, with an image of the Khmer temple superimposed on the Thai flag. (Above) A contemporary Cambodian postcard with an image of Preah Vihear.

<sup>37</sup> It was announced at first that Chea would be posted to Burma as ambassador. Later, Hun Sen appointed the governor to be a personal advisor.

<sup>38</sup> Tom Fawthrop, "Anger in Phnom Penh Over Governor's Sacking," *The Straits Times*, February 12, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Sartidet Marukat, "Shantytown Neighbours Sprang to Rescue Fleeing Diplomats," *Bangkok Post*, February 7, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War'," *International Security*, 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 42.

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Images  
from the  
Protest at  
the Cam-  
bodian  
Embassy,  
January  
30, 2003.

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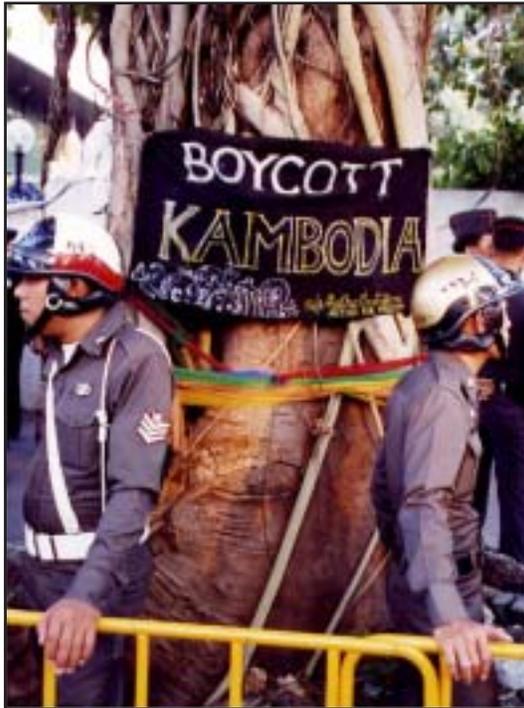


*(Above) A Thai police officer stands before the Cambodian Embassy wall on Ratchadamri Road, Bangkok. Protestors had torn the letters and Embassy seal from the wall before I arrived. (Below) A popular sentiment. About a thousand people showed up to vent their anger at Cambodia.*



*Protestors set fire to a Cambodian flag.*





(Top, Right) His Majesty the King's picture was ubiquitous. The crowd sang the national anthem and the royal anthem several times per hour. (Top, Left) Now and then the crowd surged toward the line of policemen guarding the Embassy. The police tried their best to calm the hotheads. One protestor asked me where I was from. When I told him, he said, "So, you understand why we must burn their Embassy, right? I mean, you're going to do the same thing in Iraq."



(Above, right) Thais were enraged by images of Cambodian rioters stepping on a picture of the Thai king. Photocopies like this one circulated through the crowd. (Left) Late in the afternoon national police chief General Sant Sarutanond arrived and made his way through the crowd. He read a brief statement from His Majesty King Bhumiphol. "I am worried about the people. I am worried about the country. Now, we are the heroes in the eyes of the world. We are in the right. Don't be like them. Be peaceful. Don't do anything violent. Thank you for your loyalty. I heard that you have twice sung the royal anthem, for which I am grateful." The crowd was pacified and soon went home. This statement represents the first time the King has directly intervened in a political crisis since the army gunned down pro-democracy demonstrators in 1992.

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## Fellows and their Activities

### INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

#### **Martha Farnelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

#### **Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

#### **Andrew Rice** (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

#### **Matthew Z. Wheeler** (October 2002-2004) • **THAILAND**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

#### **James G. Workman** (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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