



PHOTO: Early morning in Angkor Archeological Park, Siem Reap, Cambodia

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Rolls-Royces and rats in the 'kingdom of wonder'

There is still plenty to love in Cambodia, despite political uncertainties

Cambodia's tourism ministry likes to describe the country as the "kingdom of wonder." As a resident, living and experiencing Cambodia daily, it is a slogan that resonates with more meaning than the ministry might suspect.

There are many Cambodian "wonders" with which the world is familiar -- the awe-inspiring temples of Angkor, for instance: the remnants of a once great empire that flourished while the West stumbled through its dark age. At the other extreme lies a bleaker wonder -- Cambodia's own dark age -- the Khmer Rouge years in the 1970s, of which one ponders how such a catastrophe could have happened.

Then there is the wonder of modern day Cambodia, a country of breakneck economic growth, with the burgeoning

skyline of its capital shooting upward in a cloud of construction dust and scaffolding -- one of many extraordinary contrasts between old and new. (Pedaling down one of Phnom Penh's more cosmopolitan streets recently I was passed in quick succession by a shiny Rolls-Royce, driven by a very young woman, and then by a truckload of caged rats, likely destined for sale in Vietnam as edible "paddy rats.")

Recent political events, however, have seen the kingdom living up to its "wonder" catchphrase in more troubling ways. In July 2016, the murder of the prominent social commentator Kem Ley inspired an outpouring of public feeling on the streets of Phnom Penh and in the country's vibrant social media. Kem Ley had been a strong critic of Prime Minister Hun Sen, and had commented publicly on the immense wealth of Hun Sen and his family.

Since then, there has been sustained pressure on the country's press, culminating in the closure last September of a leading English language newspaper, the Cambodia Daily. Two months later, a court ruling dissolved the main political opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party. Its leaders have been imprisoned or have scattered to the winds.

CHOREOGRAPHED UNCERTAINTY But the news is not all negative. Beneath the political power plays lie everyday wonders that remind me why I chose to reside here. I remembered this recently when, with 3,000 others, I found myself jogging around the temples of Angkor in the park's annual half-marathon.

There, I marveled at the joy on the faces of Khmer children standing along the early morning race route, their outstretched hands seeking high fives from passing runners. In places, wild macaque monkeys perched on tree stumps, indifferent to the parade of sweaty run-

ners, and perhaps contemplating how fortunate they were that evolution had shown them a more sedate way to spend a Sunday morning.

A mere 500 meters away at Angkor Wat, the mightiest temple of all, another wonder was unfolding as political leaders greeted 5,000 Buddhist monks, assembled at Hun Sen's instructions, in a choreographed ceremony of peace and reconciliation.

In this very Cambodian way the stage was set for another of the peculiar cultural collisions endemic to the country -- leaving the park, I was engulfed in a wave of saffron, a sea of monks encircling me as I tried to exit through a narrow gate. Around me a mass of bald monks laughed and smiled while, dazed and weary, I could only nod and grin weakly.

These episodes offered a welcome respite from the anxieties generated by Cambodia's political situation. But the ambiguity that hangs around the impending national election, due on July 29, and the loss of the CNRP as a pressure valve for domestic unease, means that uncertainty will intensify in the lead-up to the poll.

Efforts to appease public displeasure, including pay increases for garment workers and public servants, may offer some relief. Other domestic issues -- the appropriation of natural resources by the rich, the growing gap between haves and have-nots, and the rising expectations of an internet savvy younger generation -- ensure that tensions continue to rumble beneath the surface.

Clichéd, perhaps, but it's fair to say that Cambodia is at a crossroads, with the democratic developments of the last 25 years threatening to flounder under waves of authoritarian imperatives. It remains to be seen whether the nation's leaders have miscalculated the public mood. That leaves the most tantalizing wonder of all: What will 2018 bring for Cambodia? **N**

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