

1. Issue

The Paris Accords helped end Cambodia's isolation, first under the Khmer Rouge, and then under the Vietnamese-sponsored regime. However, Cambodia's integration received a setback in July 1997, when ASEAN decided to defer its membership. If elections go ahead as planned, and seem reasonably free and fair, ASEAN is likely to let Cambodia join the club. In contrast, cooperation among the Mekong River Commission (MRC) countries, including Cambodia, is continuing: the secretariat will move to Cambodia in July 1998.

The importance of regional integration for peacebuilding is threefold: the immediate neighbours (now, except for Laos, all ASEAN members) have the greatest and most sustainable interest of international players in the stability and growth of Cambodia. Vietnam and Thailand in particular have for centuries been involved in the fate of Cambodia. Long after the elections that western donors and UN agencies are focused on now, ASEAN countries will still be paying keen attention to Cambodia. Regional integration is also likely to produce more lasting economic benefits for Cambodia than its present "cowboy", high-risk capitalism can hope to offer. Without that more stable growth, the government will be unable to find adequate revenues to sustain the public institutions that international support is attempting to build up. Integration will also lead to the reinforcement of Cambodian business and other groups' interest in long-term stability. Finally, integration promises lasting exposure of Cambodians to alternative and more peaceful methods of governance.

2. Support for Regional Initiatives

a) Cambodian Government

There are mixed views on how the Cambodian government sees integration into ASEAN and AFTA. Since 70% of Cambodia's government revenues are from external tariffs, AFTA has the potential for reducing the major source of government income while adding pressure to tax those involved in practices such as illegal logging, many of whom are allegedly well-connected. Thus, some think that the government has limited interest in moving quickly (after elections) to enter ASEAN. On the other hand, ASEAN itself promises lengthy phase-ins of tariff reductions for poorer members, potentially making the transition relatively painless.

ASEAN countries appear to have a fairly strong interest in bringing Cambodia into the association. Since the 1980s, ASEAN has been trying to bring peace and stability to the last war-torn country of the region. A number of large infrastructure projects (roads, railways) are planned to link Vietnam and Thailand. These must cross Cambodia (or, with more difficulty) Laos. However, the "Asian meltdown" of 1997/98 may mean that ASEAN members will be more preoccupied, in the immediate future, with their internal economic affairs than with the admission of Cambodia.

The countries of the Mekong River basin (Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos) began