



## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Covering 69,898 square miles (181,035 square kilometers), Cambodia is just smaller than Syria or the U.S. state of Oklahoma. Its fertile soil is fed by the waters of the Tibetan-Himalayan glaciers, which flow to Cambodia by way of the Mekong River. Mountains lie to the north and southwest. The central region is basically flat, with a large lake, the Tonle Sap, roughly in the middle. The lake swells to several times its surface area during the rainy season because excess water from the Mekong River is naturally diverted to it. More than 75 percent of the land was once covered with forests and woodlands; however, rampant logging has reduced that figure to less than 40 percent. Deforestation threatens the fresh fish supply and other natural habitats and has increased the severity of floods.

Cambodia's climate is tropical. Annual temperatures average between 80 and 100°F (26–38°C). The dry season extends from December to April (the hottest month). The rainy season is from May to November, with October as the wettest month.

### History

#### *Origins and Khmer Empire*

The word *Kampuchea* (the Cambodian name for Cambodia) comes from the Kingdom of Kambuja, an empire established more than 1,800 years ago. From the 9th to the 13th centuries, the Khmer Empire flourished and reigned over much of Southeast Asia. In the 12th century, the Khmer built the

*Angkor Wat* (Angkor Temple), which remains the world's largest religious building and is Cambodia's most cherished national symbol.

#### *Independence and the Khmer Rouge*

The region was colonized by France in the 1860s and remained under French control (except during the Japanese occupation in World War II) until 1953, when Cambodia was granted independence. In 1970, the monarchy, under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was overthrown. In 1975, the radical communist organization *Khmer Rouge* (Red Khmer) began a violent, forced restructuring of the entire society. Pol Pot, the leader of the *Khmer Rouge*, wanted to create a completely agrarian, communal society. During the *Khmer Rouge*'s nearly four-year rule, close to two million people were killed or died of starvation and disease. The educated and business classes were all but eliminated, and the economy was completely destroyed.

#### *Occupation by Vietnam*

After invading Cambodia in late 1978, Vietnam forced Pol Pot to flee and replaced the *Khmer Rouge* with a government led by Heng Samrin as president. Hun Sen was later (1985) named prime minister. The invasion, while halting the genocide, was condemned by Western nations. Vietnamese troops fought guerrillas opposed to the Hun Sen government until 1989. During Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, the United Nations recognized a coalition of three guerrilla groups (*Khmer Rouge*, *Khmer People's National Liberation Front*, and *Sihanouk's National United Front*) as a government in exile (the *Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea*). After Vietnam withdrew, the United Nations urged Hun Sen and the opposing groups to engage in peace

talks.

### ***Conflict and Compromise***

In 1991, after the United States and other nations withdrew support for the coalition government, all four parties signed the Paris Peace Accords and created a Supreme National Council (SNC) as an interim government. The United Nations sent 26,000 peacekeepers, police, and civilians to run the administration and organize elections. Prince Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as head of the SNC. Violence between the government, Sihanouk's supporters, and the Khmer Rouge frequently threatened to halt the peace process. Yet Khmer Rouge threats did not deter voters from casting ballots in 1993.

When a royalist coalition (loyal to Sihanouk) won the election, Hun Sen threatened to reject the results. Sihanouk, who was not a candidate, helped create a temporary co-presidency between his son Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen. The newly elected National Assembly then approved a constitution that provided for Sihanouk's return to the throne as king. He lacked executive authority but was greatly revered by nearly all Cambodians. King Sihanouk ratified the constitution and named Prince Ranariddh as first prime minister. Hun Sen became second prime minister.

When UN peacekeepers left after the elections, the Khmer Rouge resumed its civil war. By 1996, however, thousands of rebel soldiers had defected to the government, leaving only Pol Pot and other hard-line leaders in hiding with a few thousand guerrillas. In 1999, the remaining Khmer rebels surrendered after their leaders had died or been captured.

By 1996, the government was paralyzed. Hun Sen launched a de facto coup and drove Ranariddh from the country in 1997. Fighting broke out in some rural areas as Hun Sen moved against royalist supporters to consolidate his power. Intense international pressure and negotiations led Hun Sen to agree to new elections and to allow Prince Ranariddh to return in 1998 and run for office. When Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won, Ranariddh and others protested the vote count and refused to take their seats in parliament. A compromise was reached that allowed the opposing leaders to form a functioning government.

In July 2003, Hun Sen's CPP again won general elections, but it failed to win the majority required to govern alone. A year of political deadlock followed. It was not until July 2004 that the CPP and the royalists reached an agreement that secured Hun Sen's reelection as prime minister. Citing health reasons, King Sihanouk abdicated in October 2004, and his son Norodom Sihamoni took the throne.

### ***Tribunal and Current Challenges***

In 2007, UN-backed tribunals convened to try several former Khmer Rouge members of crimes against humanity, with the first conviction made in 2010; subsequent trials began in mid-2011. Tensions flared between Cambodia and Thailand in 2008, when both countries deployed troops near the disputed Preah Vihear temple location, and again in 2011, when Cambodia arrested two Thai citizens after they crossed the disputed border. Although Cambodia's progress has been hindered by political upheavals and disputes with Thailand, the country remains focused on improving its social and economic institutions and overcoming the legacy of its long

civil war.

## **THE PEOPLE**

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### **Population**

Cambodia's population of nearly 15 million is growing by about 1.7 percent annually. The largest ethnic group is the Khmer, estimated to comprise more than 90 percent of the population. The remaining 10 percent is made up of Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, and others. Some people use the terms *Khmer* and *Cambodian* interchangeably even though minority Cambodians are not ethnic Khmer. In the past, the Chinese were powerful traders in Cambodia, and many settled in the country. The Chams are descendants of the Champa Kingdom (eighth century AD), which was centered in present-day Vietnam and contained people of Malaysian origin. These people converted to Islam and are still Muslim today. There are also many Vietnamese settlers. The Khmer and Vietnamese are historical enemies, and the Vietnamese minority has been subjected to prejudice and, occasionally, violence.

Roughly 80 percent of the population lives in rural areas as a result of forced agrarian socialism by the Khmer Rouge. Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot ordered most of the urban population to relocate to rural areas, where they were put to work on communal farms.

### **Language**

Cambodians speak the Khmer language, which has 26 vowels and 33 consonants. The closest languages to modern Khmer are Thai (Thailand) and Lao (Laos), both of which share several common words (though not necessarily equivalent meanings). Even though it is related to Thai, Khmer is not a tonal language. French is sometimes used to communicate with older officials, as it was the language of government before independence. English is now the second language of choice, particularly among younger officials and urban shopkeepers.

### **Religion**

About 96 percent of Cambodians are Buddhists. Most Buddhist records, libraries, monasteries, temples, and shrines were destroyed and the monks killed by the Khmer Rouge. When, in 1989, the government again recognized Buddhism as the state religion, only memories and a few books from educated survivors remained to restore Buddhist practices. People overwhelmingly favored rebuilding pagodas (places of worship and religious education), and they took up collections on holy days to accomplish this. Local private businesses made Buddha sculptures and paintings, as well as other ornaments associated with worship, to help people regain their heritage.

Previously, becoming a monk was one way that young men could become literate and learn vocational skills like carpentry. It was a general belief that a man should become a novice monk for at least three months, if not several years. Today, fewer young men become monks, preferring instead to attend modern schools and prepare themselves for more

professional employment.

The Cham minority practices Islam. Cambodia also has a small Christian population, most of which consists of newer converts to Protestant groups. Older Christians are generally Catholics.

### General Attitudes

Although Pol Pot destroyed the outer vestiges of Buddhism in Cambodia, the religion continued to shape people's perspectives. Many believe that Buddhist teachings helped people survive the years of war and poverty. Cambodians are traditionally known as optimists. Optimism was hard to find between 1975 and 1990, but the return of King Sihanouk and the chance for peace encouraged people's hopes for a better life. Citizens worked to clear land mines, build schools, reform social institutions, and revive traditions.

Even with peace restored, Cambodian society still suffers from the effects of years without education and social order. Corruption and banditry make people fearful, and many individuals display a survival mentality that prevents them from worrying about ethics, future consequences of current actions, and the needs of others. As the political situation remains stable, traditional community and cooperative values are returning as pillars of society.

### Personal Appearance

Western-style clothing is fairly common in Phnom Penh, although the clothing is simple and not always modern. The *sarong soet* (for men) and the *sampot* and *sarong* (for women) are common pieces of traditional clothing. Each is a large rectangular piece of colored cloth that is wrapped around the hips like a skirt or kilt down to the ankles. A *krama* is a large scarf that is used as a hat, a small blanket, or even a baby carrier. In some towns, young women may wear small colored (red, pink, or bright yellow) hats.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Cambodians greet by placing both hands together in a prayer position at chest level without touching the body. The higher the hands are held, the greater the sign of respect, although they are not generally held above the level of the nose. This gesture is accompanied by a slight bow to show respect for persons of higher status or age. Shaking hands is not common in Cambodia; it often embarrasses women if attempted. Although there are many greeting phrases, one common greeting is *Sok sabbay?* (How are you?).

### Gestures

Rules governing gestures come from Buddhism. While sitting, one should not point the soles of the feet toward a Buddha image or any person. To Buddhists, the head is the most sacred part of the body. One does not touch another person's head (even a child's), and one generally avoids sitting or standing on a level more elevated than that of an older person. Raising the voice reflects negatively on one's personality. It is very improper to embarrass another person in

public. Waving the hand is a friendly gesture, as is an "open" or friendly face, good eye contact, or a smile.

### Visiting

Among friends and relatives, visiting is frequent and usually unannounced. People remove shoes when entering a home or pagoda. Houseguests may be greeted with a bouquet of jasmine flowers placed on the desk or table. Cambodians are extremely hospitable and friendly in general, although they may be cautious about inviting strangers into the home. Guests usually are offered something to drink and sometimes other refreshments. If a meal is provided, guests are given the best place to sit and the best portion of food.

### Eating

Cambodians eat with spoons, forks, chopsticks, and their fingers—depending on the food and family custom. Eating with spoons is more common among Khmer, while chopsticks are more common among Cambodians of Chinese descent. Fewer people today use their fingers to eat. In rural homes, family members gather around a mat and eat from a common platter. Rice is eaten in balls with the right hand. Meat and vegetables are already cut into bite-sized pieces. People enjoy dishes that have been influenced by Indian, Chinese, and European cuisine. In general, Cambodian food is less spicy and consists of more fish and gravies than foods in Thailand or other neighboring countries.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

#### Structure

Family is important to the Cambodian people. The average family has four children and is often willing to adopt orphans or care for children of another family in need. Though adoptions are commonly informal, bonds formed through adoption are just as important as blood ties. In families without parents or where the parents do not earn enough to support the family, the responsibility to provide for the whole family falls to the eldest (but not necessarily adult) brother or sister, who may find employment on a plantation or in the city as a construction worker. In such families, the parents find their authority somewhat lessened.

#### Parents and Children

In rural areas, multiple generations usually live together or near one another. For example, families tend to be gathered in the same compound, though in different houses. Urban families are generally nuclear. Single adult children live with their parents until they get married, regardless of their age. Even after marriage, many couples stay with parents until they are financially able to move into a place of their own. The elderly are cared for by their children. In some cases, elderly parents living with their children assume the role of housekeeper or tend the grandchildren so their children can work.

#### Gender Roles

The head of most families is the father. Men tend to make major family decisions, while women take care of the

household finances, look after children, and tend to household chores as their primary responsibilities. Recently, more women have entered the formal economy. Although some women run small businesses, women are mainly employed in the garment industry. Despite their increased participation in the work force, women have largely retained the responsibility for household chores, except among some urban couples who share the responsibilities. Women's representation in elected positions at the local and national levels has increased. While women are well represented in deputy positions, they are underrepresented in decision-making positions such as provincial governors, secretaries of state, and ministers.

## Housing

For the 80 percent of people who live in rural areas, the most common type of housing is the traditional stilt house. Stilts provide refuge from floodwaters in the rainy season and allow air circulation to keep the house cool in the dry season. These houses are typically made of wood and have a roof of clay tiles, wood, or thatched leaves. The family sleeps in one large communal room. Woven mats cover sleeping and seating areas. Chairs and tables are not found in most homes. Most daytime activities take place beneath the home. Here, a low bamboo structure resembling a large bed frame seats everyone when sharing meals or visiting with friends. The kitchen is often a small hut located away from the home. Food is prepared over hot coals in clay pots. Electricity is widely available in urban areas and expanding in rural areas, but refrigerators and other large appliances are rare. If electricity is not available in a rural area, smaller appliances may be run on battery power.

City dwellings include colonial mansions for the wealthy, small apartments for the middle class, and slum areas for the urban poor and homeless migrants. Home ownership is highly valued in Khmer culture, and many families see it as a necessary precursor to other life events such as getting married and having children.

## Dating and Marriage

### *Dating and Engagement*

Khmer girls are taught from a young age that their worth is enhanced with marriage, and boys are taught the importance of being a good provider. Both are taught to work for and value marriage. Some young people complete school and secure a career before getting married. Cambodians tend to marry between the ages of 16 (more common in rural areas) and 25. In the past, Khmer men married women of Chinese descent (who are still desirable for their beauty) and neighboring Cham women. Today, Khmer do not often intermarry with other ethnic groups.

Young people may meet at school or through acquaintances and are free to form relationships with individuals of their choosing, which is becoming easier as mobile phones are more common. Parents are often involved in finding a potential match for their children from among family and acquaintances, but children are free to reject these parental suggestions. On traditional dates, a couple should not be alone, so the girl might bring along a friend or relative,

such as a niece or a nephew, as a chaperone.

When a couple decides to get engaged, the man discusses his intentions with his parents. He then consults a fortune teller to determine the most auspicious date for his wedding. His parents and immediate family members then visit the woman's family to propose the marriage of the couple. After her family gives their approval, an engagement ceremony is held at the bride's home, with parents, monks, and local elders in attendance. This ceremony can include as many as a few hundred people, or it may be a smaller gathering limited to family members. The future bride and groom wear traditional silk clothing and exchange rings. Engagements last from three months to a year; engagements lasting longer than a year are discouraged by older generations, who feel that the couple's commitment may change over that long an engagement.

### *Marriage*

Cambodian weddings are large celebrations, in many cases lasting three days. Traditionally, the bride's family was responsible for arranging the wedding ceremony; however, today both families may share responsibility. Some couples organize their own weddings after receiving consent from both families.

Traditional religious marriage ceremonies are preferred, and couples usually register for their legal marriage certificate after the religious ceremony has taken place. Weddings often take place at the bride's home, which is decorated with gold and pink silks on the walls or as furniture coverings. At dawn on the wedding day, the groom and his relatives walk in a procession from his home (or the home of a neighbor of the bride) to the bride's home. Members of the procession carry gold or pink umbrellas and present gifts of fruit, vegetables, cakes (made of sticky rice and beans or bananas), and money to the bride's parents. Seated monks pray over the kneeling couple while an elder gives the couple and their parents advice on how to live together in peace, harmony, and happiness. The bride and groom exchange offerings of fruit. The couple uses scissors (which are supposed to come from heaven) to symbolically cut locks from each other's hair, a tradition said to bring wealth. The couple also has cotton thread that has been soaked in holy water tied around their wrists. Many guests are invited to observe the ceremony and take part in the celebratory feast. The number of guests at the wedding feast can range from a few hundred to a thousand or more, depending on the ability of the family to afford a large party. Traditional music is performed, and jokes and humorous stories may be broadcast over a sound system for everyone to hear.

### *Marriage in Society*

A growing number of couples choose to live together before marriage, though the practice is still not very common. Despite some degree of tolerance by society, this type of relationship is largely discouraged, though laws governing common-law marriage have been in place since 1993. Although polygamy is illegal (a law dictating monogamy was instituted in 2007) and uncommon, Khmer tradition allows a man to take more than one wife.

Most Cambodians hope to remarry after the loss of a spouse. Men tend to remarry more quickly and easily than women, especially women who have children. Divorce carries

a social stigma, so divorcées try to remarry quickly. Young widows with children often look to remarriage or to their extended family as a means of security for them and their children. Older women often do not remarry but instead move in with their grown children.

## Life Cycle

### Birth

There are many traditions associated with pregnancy that are believed to ensure a safe and easy delivery. For example, pregnant women avoid showering at night (which is said to affect the shape of the baby's head) and wearing restrictive clothing (which is believed to prevent the baby from growing). Similar traditions dictate that they should also wake up before their husbands.

Giving birth in Cambodia is referred to in Khmer as *chhlornng tonle* (crossing the stormy river); it is a dangerous time for women. Cambodia's maternal mortality rate is high partially because most rural women give birth at home, where they may lack clean water, a sanitary environment, and emergency transport to a medical facility if necessary. Although many deliveries are attended by a *chhmob buran* (traditional birth attendant), most of these attendants are not trained to address birthing complications. The family normally prays to gods, ancestors, or village spirits for help at this time. For one week after the delivery, rural mothers warm themselves in front of a fire and sleep on an elevated bed with warming fires underneath. Mothers also drink rice wine mixed with herbs, which is thought to prevent health problems later on. Within a week after the birth, the family invites an *acha* (Cambodian priest) to pray that ghosts stay away from the baby. In urban areas, traditional recovery customs are less common, as most deliveries are performed at a hospital.

### Milestones

When a baby is one month old, the family holds a party at which relatives give gifts or a small amount of money. Couples throw larger parties and invite more guests for the birth of their first child. The child traditionally takes a grandfather's first name as his or her family name. Recently, however, people are keeping a single family name. Many Cambodian names are taken from the child's date of birth, based on either days of the week or months of the year. Another celebration is held when the child reaches the age of one. After these initial celebrations, Cambodians do not traditionally celebrate birthdays and instead count themselves one year older only at the Khmer New Year, in mid-April.

A traditional rite of passage for young men about 15 years old is to spend time—anywhere from weeks to years, depending on their families' beliefs and financial situation—as novice monks. It is believed that by becoming a novice monk, a young man shows gratitude to his parents and gains the cultural and religious experience necessary to become a valuable member of society. According to traditions in regions like Siem Reap and Angkor, a young woman (generally between 14 and 15 years old) is supposed to stay in her room for three months without leaving. The family brings her food and attends to her other needs. After that three-month period, she is considered a woman and generally

marries shortly thereafter. At 18, a person is legally considered an adult, and they gain the right to vote, drive a car, and receive an ID card. In traditional Cambodian families, a person is considered an adult only after marriage.

### Death

On one's deathbed, a person is given incense and lotus flowers while a monk offers prayers until death. A white flag called a "crocodile flag" (a pennant-shaped flag) is hung outside of the house, indicating that someone has died. After the death, it is the responsibility of the family to bless the body and to have it cremated or buried in a grave or *stupa* (a mound-like structure for Buddhist remains). During a small ceremony on the day of the death, family members wash the forehead and feet of the deceased as a form of asking forgiveness for any wrongdoings they may have committed toward the person. An *acha* (priest) chants, offers blessings, and assists with the funeral. After the ritual washing, a procession of many people, including monks, carries the body to a pagoda, where it is cremated (preferred by the Khmer) or buried (common among the Chinese). Pieces of the deceased's bones are kept in an urn at home or in the family's local pagoda, which the family can visit to pay their respects. On the seventh day after the death, the family holds a ceremony that includes sermons from local monks. Traditional funeral music is an integral part of the event. Cambodians do not limit guests, and anyone who knew the deceased is welcome to attend. Guests typically offer money in small envelopes or general assistance to the grieving family. Ceremonies may also be held 49 and 100 days after the death. The anniversary of a death is commemorated annually to show respect for the deceased.

### Diet

There are two basic dishes in Cambodia: soup and rice. A bowl of soup may have any combination of fish, eggs, vegetables, meat, and spicy broth. Rice is the staple food. It is prepared in many ways and is eaten at every meal. Bowls of rice may differ in flavor depending on which region the rice is from. Cambodia was once known as "the cradle of rice" for the volume and different varieties it grew. Today, Cambodia is striving to return to its pre-1970 rice export levels. In addition to soup and rice, Cambodians enjoy vegetables and a wide variety of fruits throughout the year. Seafood and fish dishes are also commonly prepared.

### Recreation

#### Sports

Sports tend to be played primarily by men, who also enjoy boxing or watching boxing or soccer on television. People enjoy table tennis and badminton, but the most popular sports in both rural and urban areas are soccer and volleyball. In rural areas, people play soccer anywhere they can, including on fields without proper goals or lines. Volleyball is commonly played under similar circumstances, with a string alone functioning as a net. It is now becoming more popular for people to participate in aerobic exercises in public parks in urban areas. Most theaters and sports facilities were destroyed or fell into decay during the 1980s (during the Khmer Rouge regime), and many have not been rebuilt. Some facilities now

exist in Phnom Penh for roller-skating and bowling.

### **Leisure**

Karaoke parlors can be found throughout Cambodia. In villages, TVs and VCRs or DVD players are used to create small theaters, which charge a small admission fee. Chinese, Korean, and Thai movies and television soap operas are extremely popular in both urban and rural areas. Computer and video games are increasing in popularity with children in both rural and urban areas.

Children turn their responsibilities, such as household chores or looking after younger children or the family's animals, into games. For example, they might race the cows or water buffalo they are tending. In the rainy season, children make animal figures or pottery out of mud. Girls in rural areas play games using rubber bands; two girls stand opposite each other and stretch the band around their ankles, while a third girl jumps in and out of the band. People play cards during holidays (card playing at other times can be perceived as gambling), and older men like playing chess. During Khmer New Year, people play traditional Khmer games, including *teang prut* (tug-of-war), *leak konsaeng* ("hiding the scarf," the object of which is to run around a circle of seated players and return to one's original seat before being caught by a scarf-wielding player), and *bos ongkunj* (a game played by teams, which throw the seed of the ongkunj fruit at target seeds of the opposing team). Often male and female groups compete against each other; those who win sing traditional songs for the losers, who must dance along.

Other popular leisure activities include picnics and Sunday rides on bicycles (popular among rural youth) or motorcycles (preferred among urban youth). Women like to visit friends and neighbors.

### **Vacations**

During vacations, students return home to visit their families. Other Cambodians may spend their time off relaxing at home or visiting relatives. They may take day trips to a nearby tourist site, such as the mountains or a waterfall, where they picnic. For longer trips, the beach is a preferred destination. International travel for vacation is not common.

### **The Arts**

Religious stories are woven into Cambodian literature, architecture, music, and dance. *Chpabs* (moral proverbs) are passed down through oral recitations. The *Reamker* (the Cambodian version of the Hindu *Ramayana*) and *Jatakas* (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) are important literary works. *Reamker* stories are carved on the walls of the Angkor Wat temple complex. They are acted out in *nang sbek* (shadow plays), with black leather puppets as characters. Cambodians use these stories as the basis for performing special dances. Traditional Cambodian dance has been influenced heavily by Indian court dances. Folk dances and music are popular in rural areas, and the music and steps are often improvised. The music begins with the sound of the xylophone, and then oboes, wooden flutes, violins, and drums join in.

### **Holidays**

Cambodia's official holidays include International New

Year's Day (1 Jan.), Victory Day (7 Jan.), International Women's Day (8 Mar.), International Labor Day (1 May), Cambodian Children's Day (1 June), Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen Mother (18 June), Constitution Day (24 Sept.), Coronation Day of His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni (29 Oct.), Birthday of His Majesty the King Father (31 Oct.), Independence Day (9 Nov.), and International Human Rights Day (10 Dec.). Additional official holidays are set according to the lunar calendar: Meaka Bochea Day, Khmer New Year's, Visaka Bochea Day, Royal Plowing Ceremony, Pchum Ben, and the Water Festival. In addition to the official holidays, Chinese-Cambodians also celebrate Chinese New Year—normally in January or February, according to the lunar calendar.

### **Khmer New Year**

Khmer New Year is the most important and widely celebrated holiday. New Year's is celebrated for three days in mid-April. The holiday is celebrated at the time of year when farmers (the majority of the population) rest from working in the rice fields. In the religious Pali language (the language of early Buddhist texts), the first day of the New Year is called *Moha Sangkran* ("welcoming their new angels," referring to the angels associated with each of the year's 12 animal signs). People clean and decorate their homes and prepare fruit and drinks to welcome the "new angels." On the morning of *Moha Sangkran*, people visit a pagoda to offer food to the monks and to receive blessings. The second day of New Year is called *Wanabot*, and people commonly offer charity to the less fortunate. In the evening, people go to the temple to have the monks give them a blessing of happiness and peace and build a *phnom khsach* (mountain of sand) to remember those ancestors who have passed away. The third day is called *Leung Sakk*. In the morning, people go to the pagoda to build another *phnom khsach*, which symbolizes the prosperity that person will receive that year. During *Leung Sakk*, Buddhists perform a ceremony called *Pithi Srang Preah*, during which monks, elders, parents, or grandparents clean Buddha statues to seek forgiveness for past wrongdoing and to seek blessings. New Year's celebrations include playing traditional games and dancing in the pagoda. Relatives often gather at the eldest member's house to eat, play games, and catch up with relatives they may not have seen for a while. Families celebrate together or go to tourist sites together. Children receive gifts from their parents or relatives.

### **Pchum Ben**

Lasting 15 days, Pchum Ben is one of the most important holidays for Cambodia's majority Buddhist population. It is a time to remember ancestors and bring food offerings to Buddhist monks, who are thought to be able to convey the offering to the dead. Pchum Ben also marks the period when the spirits of the dead in hell are allowed to leave and visit the pagoda to seek food. Before the festival begins, a person is supposed to accomplish a "seven pagodas" duty, in which one offers food to monks in seven different pagodas. During Pchum Ben, people return to their home villages to honor their ancestors. The holiday is marked by a feeling of homecoming centered on the family. Six weeks after Pchum Ben, large or wealthy families raise money to pay for the living expenses of the monks.

**Bun Om Thouk**

The Water Festival, also called Bun Om Thouk, celebrates the end of the rainy season and takes place each November with the coming of the full moon. On the first day of the full moon, up to a million people from all over the country come to the banks of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers in Phnom Penh to watch more than 2,500 paddlers take part in traditional boat races. Boat racing dates back to ancient times and commemorates the strength of the powerful Khmer marine forces during the Khmer Empire. In addition to boat racing, the Water Festival also includes three other ceremonies: *Bandet Pratip* ("illuminated float," a procession of boats bearing the logos of their sponsors lit with electric lights), *Sampeas Preah Khe* ("salutations to the moon," when thanks and prayers are offered for the coming harvest), and *Ork Ambok* ("eating of the rice flakes," a gathering at midnight to eat *ambok*, flattened rice with banana and coconut juice).

**SOCIETY****Government****Structure**

Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy with multiparty elections. King Norodom Sihamoni is head of state. The prime minister (currently Hun Sen) is head of government. Cambodia's bicameral legislature consists of the National Assembly and the Senate. The National Assembly has 123 members, which are elected through a proportional representation system. Fifty-seven members of the 61-seat Senate are elected by local and provincial councils, two members are elected by the National Assembly, and two are appointed by the king. All members of the legislature serve five-year terms. While the National Assembly passes legislation, the Senate can add amendments and return bills to the Assembly for further consideration. The leader of the Senate acts as head of state when the king is out of the country.

**Political Landscape**

Conflicts between royalists who supported the king and socialist and communist forces have defined the major political battle lines in Cambodia since independence. Cambodia's king has traditionally commanded great respect and exercised considerable influence but has had no significant official powers since the 1993 constitution was adopted. Since the abdication of King Sihanouk in 2004, many speculate that the influence of the monarch will decline. Though several political parties operate in Cambodia, only the Cambodian People's Party (CCP) has any real power. With its socialist ideology, the CCP has existed under other names since the 1950s, becoming the CCP in 1993. CCP member Hun Sen has been in power for nearly 30 years and has not hinted at a desire to step down anytime soon. Land disputes, caused in part by the abolition of private land ownership during the Khmer Rouge era, are a serious political and social issue. Cambodia is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

**Government and the People**

The government's respect for freedoms of speech, assembly,

and the press is low in Cambodia. Opposition leaders and human-rights advocates are often exiled, persecuted, or killed. Corruption is a significant concern in the country. State security forces operate with little oversight, and many claim that police are heavily involved in illicit activities, such as human and drug trafficking. Elections are not generally free and fair because of CCP intimidation. The voting age is 18, and voter turnout is rather high, with 75 percent or more since multiparty elections began in 1993.

**Economy**

Cambodia's economy has not recovered the strength it had in the years following independence. Most Cambodians do not earn a cash income but are subsistence farmers. Wealth is still confined to a small elite class. A majority of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, food processing, or forestry (logging and rubber processing). In addition, many people take extra jobs in town or work on roads to help make a living. Wages are low. Social and economic opportunities are found only in urban areas. Villagers lack access to clean water, resources, jobs, and food. Food shortages are common in rural areas. The international community provides a substantial amount of aid each year, and many nongovernmental organizations exist to help various segments of the population.

New garment factories established since 1995 have rapidly expanded. Cambodia saw a period of strong economic growth in the mid-2000s due to increases in the garment industry, tourism, mining, and construction. Although the 2008 global economic crisis led to a sharp decline in exports, in 2010 growth continued, but at a slower rate. Rubber is an important export in addition to fish, rice, and pepper. Foreign investment is low, and infrastructure generally poor. The currency is the *riel* (KHR).

**Transportation and Communications**

Several national highways radiate from Phnom Penh and provide the basis for a good transportation network. These roads received extensive damage during the civil war, but most have been repaired. Japan funded Cambodia's first bridge across the Mekong River at Kampong Cham. Secondary roads may be impassable due to poor conditions, rain, or other factors, but aid agencies are working to improve the road system. Cambodians often travel short distances by bike or motorcycle. Many people rely on riding buffalo-drawn carts or walking as primary forms of transportation. Boats provide transport on some rivers. *Ko yun* (engine-powered carts) are increasingly popular forms of transportation for agricultural produce.

Rural areas lack landline phones, but landlines connect provincial capitals with Phnom Penh. The communications system is expanding out from the capital through cellular phones. Cellular phones are increasingly popular; almost two-thirds of the population has cellular phones. A free press is expanding, along with access to radio and television.

**Education****Structure and Access**

Traditionally, boys received most of their education in schools on a pagoda compound, where they were taught by

monks about Buddhism and Pali (the language of early Buddhist texts). For many, including those in rural areas, becoming a monk is the only opportunity many young men have to gain basic literacy skills. The educational system during the Khmer Rouge regime was hindered, as many pagodas and adjacent schools were destroyed. After the regime, Cambodia began rebuilding the education system, and as pagodas are rebuilt, the adjacent primary schools also reopen. There is a large gap in the quality of education between urban and rural schools. Literacy is slowly rising, though urban and male rates are significantly higher than rural and female rates.

The school system includes optional preschool for children from ages 3 to 5, primary education from ages 6 to 11 (grades 1 to 6), lower secondary education from ages 12 to 14 (grades 7 to 9), and upper secondary education from ages 15 to 17 (grades 10 to 12). In order to advance to certain levels of education, students must pass exams; after grade 9, there is an exam to enter upper secondary school, and at the end of grade 12, there is an exam to graduate with a diploma (called a *baccalaureate*). Education is free from preschool to grade 12; however, students have to pay some fees, including those for books, uniforms, and other supplies. Books and other materials are in short supply in public schools, especially in rural areas. Students have homework every week (most consistently mathematics and Khmer literature) and a monthly test for all subjects. While in the past, the curriculum relied heavily on memorization, in recent years, there has been a shift toward a student-centered methodology in which teachers encourage more classroom discussion.

Major problems in education include a high dropout rate and classes crowded with students repeating a grade they have failed. Poorer families who are unable to send all their children to school prioritize the education of their sons over their daughters. However, gender disparities in primary and lower-secondary education have been balanced as a result of an aggressive policy of providing scholarships to poor girls.

#### **School Life**

Unable to live on the low wages, teachers sometimes supplement their income with other teaching jobs—often at the expense of class time. Teachers may also leave the field to pursue better-paying jobs. Phnom Penh has private *street schools* that offer instruction in English, French, math, chemistry, and literature to students. Although called *street schools*, several teachers often pool their resources to rent an apartment or small house in which to hold classes. *Street schools* originated with for-fee classes teachers offer outside of normal school hours. Students at *street schools* pay tuition monthly or per class. Since 2000, there has been an increase in the number of private schools, especially at the secondary and higher education levels.

Cambodia has a culture of respect toward older people or teachers. Students address their teachers politely and respectfully, and normally teachers keep a distance from students so as to maintain their students' respect. There are no parent-teacher associations, but parents do get involved when called on to mobilize resources for an event or to build a new facility.

#### **Higher Education**

Students can choose to study at either a public or private university. Entrance into a university used to require an entrance exam. However, some public universities now allow students to pre-select a preferred university during their last year in high school; students with high scores in certain areas can directly enter these universities after high school. Those who do not pursue university education can apply to vocational training centers.

#### **Health**

Sanitation is poor. Water- and mosquito-borne illnesses are endemic. Running water is available in hotels and a growing number of urban homes; increasing the water supply to urban areas is a top concern for international aid agencies. Otherwise, most people draw water from rivers or wells. Intestinal parasites, hepatitis, dengue fever, tuberculosis, and malaria are all common ailments. Cambodia has one of Asia's highest HIV infection rates, and AIDS is threatening to overburden medical resources. Thousands of people suffer from wounds they received by stepping on hidden mines left over from the years of fighting. Adequate medical care is not available to many people, but the government has tried to establish a basic healthcare system.

## **AT A GLANCE**

### **Contact Information**

Embassy of Cambodia, 4530 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20011; phone (202) 726-7742; web site [www.embassyofcambodia.org](http://www.embassyofcambodia.org).

### **POPULATION & AREA**

Population	14,952,665 (rank=68)
Area, sq. mi.	69,898 (rank=90)
Area, sq. km.	181,035

### **DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank	139 of 187 countries
Gender inequality rank	99 of 146 countries
Adult literacy rate	85% (male); 64% (female)
Life expectancy	61 (male); 64 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2012 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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