



Letter from Phnom Penh from Our Own Correspondent

FOX HUNTING is now all the rage in the pastures and woodland of Cambodia, our tiny, war-ravaged nation which is preparing for next year's long-awaited genocide trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders while still managing to be one of the world's hottest holiday destinations.

The hunting horn is sounding for a wily kind of fox, however; our strongman Prime Minister Hun Sen having been busy flushing out government officials' mistresses, blasting them "evil foxes". John Prescott take note.

These vixens, usually actresses or karaoke singers, are wielding too much influence in political appointments, says the PM, who wants to introduce a law to prosecute galling government officials. The officials' woes worsened when the PM also announced plans for an investigation into how mistresses got their spending money.

As the hunt gathered pace, there were those who recalled allegations that the Prime Minister, a former Khmer Rouge foot soldier, himself had an affair with actress Piseth Pilika: a charge Hun Sen denied. The French weekly *L'Express* exposed the alleged romance in 1999 after publishing references to it from the actress's diary following her death. Pilika was gunned down in a market in a crime that has not been solved.

Many also wondered what lay behind this new campaign for morality in a country where taking a mistress or making regular visits to a prostitute is as common as, well, brokering political appointments for family and friends. The true motive soon became apparent - especially for the married Prince Norodom Ranariddh, leader of FUNCINPEC, Cambodia's royalist party, when the media began reporting his involvement with a young actress and another relationship with a classical dancer. As the prince, also head of Cambodia's lower house, the National Assembly, came under attack, the prime minister posed in loving photographs with his wife of 30 years, Bun Rany. In one picture he pecked her on the cheek and in another he presented her with a bouquet of flowers. The message was clear.

The damage inflicted on the prince's reputation was part of a grander plan to strengthen the prime minister's power. In the first week of March, our parliament approved changes to the constitution that reduced the number of lawmakers required to form a government from two thirds to 50 percent-plus-one. This eliminated the need for a coalition, which had existed between Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party and FUNCINPEC, on and off, since the UN-supervised elections in 1993.

The change in the law and the prince's poor public image (his travel expenses are also being examined and there were rumours that he was shipping his bullet-proof Porsche to Paris) left FUNCINPEC beleaguered. The PM then began sacking its officials - in all more than 300 were axed. The prince also quit as head of the National Assembly, triggering the firing of his 104 advisers. Many of the prince's followers then defected to Hun Sen.

The prince's father, King Norodom Sihanouk, 83, refused to come to the aid of FUNCINPEC, the political party he founded. Instead, while holidaying at his residence in North Korea in April, he became involved in making a 12-minute film with two of his royal offspring. The film poses the question: "Who doesn't have a mistress?" The storyline is simple: extramarital affairs should not be used as a pretext to persecute Cambodia's royalist officials. Unfortunately, it is often the mistresses rather than the officials who are persecuted. Many wives, unhappy their husbands keep sweethearts, instigate acid attacks or order killings of the mistresses.

Few mourn the fall from grace of Prince Ranariddh, who did little to check the abuse of power and corruption by our ever more authoritarian government. But what remains of our opposition, the Sam Rainsy Party? Once so critical of Hun Sen, the SRP began to cosy up with the PM just before FUNCINPEC's demise! Tally-ho!

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH

“Flag burning does not overly concern me,” flagmaker Robin Ashburner told reporters in Swansea, “because it’s just an expression of opinion. Flags are emotive, but it’s better to take your feelings out on one than indulge in violence. When those cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad appeared in a Danish newspaper, orders for our Danish national red-and-white flag began flooding in. They’re still selling well, but our customers should be warned. Modern flags are made largely of polyester, and when they burn, they melt. That means if they are whirled around by a protestor, his or her fellow protestors could be splashed by flying pieces of burning material. If it got into the eye, it could do serious damage, and we are about to issue a warning to this effect on our website.”

The owner of the Mr Flag company continued: “A lot of flag burners make their own out of strips of cloth. But there is a trend among shop owners in certain parts of the world to order in large amounts in advance, to sell to protestors. Scandinavian flags are now even more popular with flag burners in Gaza City, Beirut, and Damascus than the Star of David or the Stars and Stripes, which used to be the best sellers over there. Nowadays, we get almost as many orders from Europe as we do from the Middle East, so this is very much a global phenomenon. I even had one call this week from an American guy who was fed up with seeing the American flag being burned on news TV. He wanted me to supply him with the official Hamas colours, so he could be the first American to be shown on CNN burning a Hamas flag. But sadly, I had to turn him down, because Hamas is still a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK.” (*South Wales Evening Post*, 15/2/06. Spotter: David Hansel)

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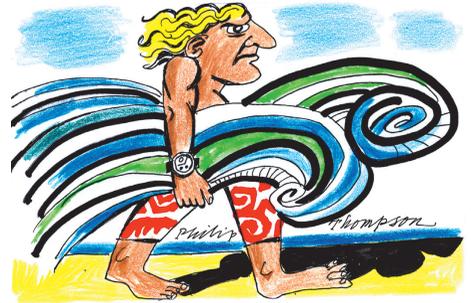
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“John Dunne is guilty of surf rage,” magistrates were told in Manley Local Court, New South Wales, “and he has gone way beyond the boundaries of acceptable surfing etiquette. So obsessed was he with keeping all the best waves for himself that he began a campaign of intimidation against other surfers,



smashing their surf boards, hurling abuse, and threatening them with physical violence. His known victims include an Anglican minister, a schoolboy, and a local lifeguard, and we have had complaints from at least seven others. For the sake of the sport, he should be banned from all beaches in New South Wales immediately.”

Passing judgement against thirty-four-year-old Dunne, Magistrate Andrew George said “Surf rage is becoming a serious problem, because of the increasing number of surfers on beaches, all searching for quality waves. But the waves exist for everybody, and no one surfer has the right to claim them as his own. We are living in a changing coastal community, where the issue of crowds is going to become ever more important, and it’s unacceptable to threaten other surfers. I think that a decision to ban you from going to any of the beaches in the entire state would be a bit beyond the pale, but I am banning you from going within 100 metres of all nine of the Sydney-area beaches, until further notice.” (*Surfer magazine*, 9/2/06. Spotter: Brendan Joseph O’Byrne)

BY MIKE BARFIELD

POLITICAL DRINKS: A SORT OF "BEVERAGE REPORT"

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