
Caroline Hughes teaches political science at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, specializing in the politics of post-colonial/post-conflict nation building in Southeast Asia and the dynamics of reconstruction vis-à-vis recent international development policies. She has a depth of knowledge and experience in Cambodia that puts her in good company with that small cadre of outstanding scholars who have studied in some depth the history and politics of that beleaguered country over the past two decades. She has also carried out groundbreaking research in Timor Leste (East Timor) since its independence from Indonesia in 2002, especially during an intensive two-month period of fieldwork in 2005.

In this impressively compact monograph, Hughes joins a broader debate over the objectives of the developed “Northern” world in intervening in post-conflict developing nations. In doing so, she employs studies of two “extreme cases”: Cambodia since 1991 and Timor Leste since 1999. She argues the view that the UN, the World Bank and major donor countries (perhaps excluding Cambodia’s new best friend China) have accommodated a “neo-liberal” doctrine of global governance at considerable cost to the national sovereignty of countries of the “South.”

The comparative analysis between Cambodia and Timor Leste is unique and revealing in many ways, but the two countries have markedly different histories and political imperatives. In retrospect also, the approach taken by the international players to their respective post-conflict situations has differed: the external force that monitored and steered the peace process in Cambodia employed a massive civil administration and a classic peacekeeping force. The intervention (intrusion?) in Timor Leste was, and probably needed to be, more muscular, with “peace building” forces prepared to use force when necessary.

A striking feature of this work is the objectivity with which it approaches the internal political, economic and security challenges facing both countries. Hughes plays no favourites: in Cambodia, the relative success of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), the ruling party since the 1980s, is mitigated by a combination of unchallenged coercive power and corruption. The opposition royalists and, particularly, the “neo-liberal” Sam Rainsy Party, are far too dependent on outside players, such as powerful US legislators, and not sufficiently engaged at the grass roots. This, more than anything else, has resulted in their failure to gain electoral support outside of urban centres. In Timor Leste, ruling and opposition forces have engaged in mutual recrimination and violence, calmed only by the intervention, again, of foreign (read mainly Australian) forces.
In spite of a number of terminological abstractions, this work is well structured and readable; the empirical analysis is based on meticulous research and local knowledge. Hughes states her main conclusions up front: briefly stated, (a) international intervention appears to the people of war-torn, aid-dependent societies as remote, unfathomable and coercive; (b) aid donors promote a politics that is confining and atomizing, prioritizing the individual over the collective, draining the national sphere of heroism and import; and (c) the state’s legitimacy deficit leads to demands for a more intimate dependence upon those who clearly control the power and the money: the donor community. Hughes does not, however, finish up with explicit recommendations for changing this situation, characterizing the study as “critical,” rather than policy-oriented.

She explicitly denies that her study is a normatively charged effort to pit an innocent local sphere against a rapacious “international community,” but that often seems to be where we are being led. The tendency of the donor community in the ’90s to emphasize institution building, with state actors relegated to being local administrators of global governance initiatives, is seen to sideline local elites who arguably possess the competence to govern in a culturally appropriate way. Cambodia and Timor have reacted in disparate ways: in the former, the experienced politico-military network associated with the long-ruling CPP makes all the correct rhetorical responses to the international community, then quietly goes its way in building the state according to its own lights. By contrast, in Timor, the post-independence governing authorities bends over backward to please the donors at the expense of building broad internal support, a situation that has led eventually to violent rifts, attempted assassinations and renewed armed international intervention.

Not a major criticism, but I would have liked a more thorough bibliography. I missed, for example, an entry for Sorpong Peou’s seminal work on the influence of the international community in Cambodia’s postwar recovery, but he does pop up in the footnotes. In sum, this is a well-written, clearly structured work that should be required reading for students of international development theory and practice, especially in post-conflict situations.