



EK SONN CHAN

In 1995, Ek Sonn Chan was trying to convince the World Bank to fund Phnom Penh's waterworks system. As Municipal Water Supply director for Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, the electrical engineer and civil servant faced the Herculean task of turning a decrepit system that served only a fourth of the city's residents for ten hours a day into a modern operation for all of Phnom Penh's two million people. The bank effectively turned him down, saying the time was not right because the security situation was so bad. Mike Gan, a World Bank veteran of thirty years, also expressed doubts about the capability of a municipal body to reform.

Ek was persistent. He showed Gan and the other bank representatives around the city, showing them what the Municipal Water Supply had already done. "We kept telling them we could do it," he recalls. Apparently impressed by Ek's energy, the World Bank relented and decided to help, with the proviso that the percentage of water use that could not be accounted for should not be more than 35 percent by 2002. The chain-smoking Gan told Ek: "If you succeed, I'll stop smoking." The two men met again in 2002, when Ek and his team had far exceeded the bank's condition, keeping the proportion of unaccounted water to just 20 percent. Gan told the Cambodian that he would stop smoking the next time they met. Says Ek, laughing: "I never saw him again after that."

It's a small victory for a broken country that just three decades ago saw more than a million of its citizens perish because of the murderous Khmer Rouge, the extremist movement that sought to rebuild Cambodia into a communist country. Members of Ek's family were among the dead. A poor farmer's son who beat the odds to complete his university studies, he spent the three years of Khmer Rouge hell laboring in a work camp as a blacksmith. When the Khmer Rouge was toppled by Vietnam, he worked as a butcher in a government abattoir, rising up the ranks to become director of the Municipal Department of Commerce and director general of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority.

IN telling the story of Ek's life, one also tells the modern history of his country. In 1992 a United Nations peacekeeping force arrived to oversee national elections, stimulating business activities. Ek tried his hand at property development and made a small fortune. He returned to public service with the formation of a coalition government between the communist Cambodian People's Party and the royalist Funcinpec. For the past thirteen years (1993–2006) he has been running Phnom Penh's water system, winning praise for the system's efficiency and profitability. The nation, too, has been making economic progress, with GDP growth at 10 percent in 2004, 13.4 percent in 2005 and 10.5 percent in 2006. "This is really the only time in my life [when] we have peace," Ek says of Cambodia's new stability. "We never had this 100 percent peace for a very long time."

Ek was born in 1950 in the waning days of French colonial rule. Three years later, Cambodia officially gained independence from France, with King Norodom Sihanouk having tenuous control of the unstable country. The change meant nothing to Ek and his family who, like most of their compatriots, remained mired in poverty. Ek's father, Ek Suong, owned a small plot of land and rented other properties to grow rice, but he barely made enough to support his wife and four children. "At that time, we only had one season of rice-

growing a year,” recalls his son. “After the rainy season, we would look for jobs in other places to earn more.”

Ek Suong was a tall, slim, and dark-skinned man who was respected in the village of Kompong Thmar in the province of Kompong Thom. “For me, he is the symbol of courage,” says his son. “He spoke very little, but he was really a very firm and very strong man.” The elder Ek expected his children to contribute to the family finances, even Ek Sonn Chan, who was the youngest child. “Even when I was very small, I had to work very hard,” says Ek. He adds that his father’s example made him strive “to build a very strong body, to build a very strong mind.” While not highly educated, Ek Suong possessed the analytical bent to examine his own poverty, and came to the conclusion that it was because the ruling elites cared for no one but themselves. “When the communist movement was started,” says his son, “he joined that.”

The young Ek learned about communist ideals from his father. “What I learned from him was that communists will bring democracy to the country,” he recalls. “The country was ruled by members of a class that was corrupt and unjust, and we should fight them to bring justice to the people. According to my father’s teachings, we must always help people who are weaker than we are.” Ek would discover later in life that these ideals could be corrupted—the Khmer Rouge was made up of communists.

Ek’s mother, Neang Lorn, was a great influence, too. “My father was really lucky to have married her,” says Ek. “She was very fair, very patient, and helped in the paddy field.” Ek’s mother was a devout Buddhist, as were most of the people in Cambodia. “She would always go to the pagoda,” recalls her youngest son. “Even if we were not rich, she always shared things with poorer families.” Educating by example, she would tell her children to love people, especially the destitute. “Even if you were poor yourself and you cannot do things, you can still extend moral support,” Ek continues. “Her teaching really influenced me.”

Ek was especially close to his second brother, Ek Bun Chung, with whom he would walk around the paddy fields in the evening. “Of course, I loved all my brothers and sister, but he was the one who loved me the most,” says Ek. The family lived in a small wooden house with one room for the parents and a common sleeping area for the children. Of the four, Ek was the most interested in school. His parents and elder siblings contributed money to educate him, first in primary and secondary school in Tuol Kork near his home, then in Phnom Penh where he studied electrical engineering at the Institute of Technology of Cambodia.

There were lessons inside and outside the classroom. The rich-poor divide was a constant theme. Ek befriended a boy from a wealthy family whom he helped fight off the beatings of another boy. “We had four years together,” recalls Ek. “Without his help, maybe I would not have been able to continue my studies because at the time my family was so very poor.” In return, Ek would help his friend with his homework, although in hindsight, he wonders whether he was more of a hindrance. “Maybe I was a bad teacher, because he learned nothing,” he muses. “I usually did his homework, so the result of his study is actually mine. That’s not the best way to help friends.”

In secondary school, Ek was a prefect and student leader. “Most students supported the idea of communism,” he says. “And many of the teachers joined the communist movement. The government at that time had become worse and worse. That’s why the country was headed [for] civil war.” Once, he overheard a teacher telling the institute director that Khmer language lecturer Khek Pin, a Communist Party member, would be arrested the next day. Ek told Khek about it, and that night the teacher escaped. Ek saw Khek again once during the Khmer Rouge regime, when Khek had become a provincial head.

The curriculum included French and geography, but it was mathematics and especially physics that interested Ek the most. He was a good enough student to pass the requisite examinations and enroll in the university in Phnom Penh, where he won a scholarship. But it was a difficult time for the young man. In the city, he lived for a while with his mother’s brother, Seam An, and his family. “He was educated in France and worked as a general manager in government supermarkets,” Ek recalls. “His wife was a professor of the Khmer language.” Even though he served the Khmer Rouge as ambassador to Vietnam, this uncle, his wife and two of their four children were executed in the notorious Tuol Sleng concentration camp in Phnom Penh.

IN 1970 Prime Minister Lon Nol staged a coup against Sihanouk, who was traveling abroad. Civil war erupted. The new government aligned Cambodia with the United States-backed regime in South Vietnam, while the exiled Sihanouk had the support of China, North Vietnam, and Laos. The communist Khmer Rouge, then just beginning to become a cohesive force, also backed Sihanouk. Despite the troubles, Ek could not leave Phnom Penh to rejoin his family, who had by then moved to Kampong Thom province north of the capital. “I was all alone,” Ek recounts. “Then my uncle had to flee the country and his house was confiscated.” Like Ek Suong, Seam An was a member of the communist forces, the enemy of Lon Nol’s pro-American, right-wing administration.

The young man—Ek was barely twenty at the time—found refuge in his school, the Institute of Technology of Cambodia. Unknown to university authorities, he moved into a utility room filled with gas pipes and odds and ends. Some other students later joined him, including his good friend Vong Heng. The group was eventually chased away from their makeshift home. The troubles affected Ek’s studies, but he got back some measure of stability in 1972, when he found a job tutoring the daughter of the head of the Cambodian air force. In 1973, he started teaching physics to high school seniors at his old school in Tuol Kork. Ek got serious with his university studies and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering that year.

Cambodia by this time had become embroiled in the Vietnam War. Under Sihanouk, the country had remained neutral in the battle next door, where United States and South Vietnamese troops sought to defeat the Vietcong guerillas backed by North Vietnam. With Lon Nol in charge, American intrusions into Cambodian territory became more frequent. U.S. planes dropped napalm and cluster bombs on suspected Vietcong supply lines in Cambodia, killing tens of thousands of civilians. Fueled by anger and despair, many Cambodians joined the Khmer Rouge. The country’s civil war got worse every day. Ek managed to stay out of the fight. “I could not understand at that time why I was quite reluctant to join the activities of the Communist Party,” he says now. “Maybe I was too busy [with] my education.”

But no one in Cambodia could escape the conflict. In 1975, the Vietcong overran Saigon, South Vietnam’s capital. That same year, the Khmer Rouge routed Lon Nol’s forces. Ek had been on a study tour in Thailand and had returned to Cambodia via the border town of Pailin, a Khmer Rouge stronghold. There, he contracted malaria and had to be confined in a hospital when he returned back to Phnom Penh. “One morning there was a general alert,” Ek recounts. “Everybody was told to go home.” Still weak but able to move, he managed to leave the hospital and return to the refuge in his school. But the Khmer Rouge was marching to the capital. Residents began leaving Phnom Penh and the city was emptied in days.

“I had to leave too,” Ek recalls. A family he knew had a car, and he rode with them to the city’s outskirts. The Khmer Rouge was already there, and everything the family owned was confiscated, including the vehicle. Everyone had to walk. Coming upon a village, Ek decided to stay while his friends opted to travel on. Ek stayed in the village until the rainy season, when Khmer Rouge soldiers ordered the inhabitants to relocate to Battambang far in the west, near Pailin. Ek was interned in a commune and put to work in the rice fields, once again becoming a farmer. But this time the work was far harder, involving very long hours and almost nothing to eat.

It was part of Pol Pot’s grand plan to turn the country, which he renamed Kampuchea, into a Maoist communist state. Children were taken from their parents and reeducated in labor camps, where they were taught communist and Khmer Rouge ideology. Teachers, lawyers, doctors and other educated people were killed, along with their extended families, because as intellectuals they were the sworn enemy of the proletariat. All other citizens were ordered from their homes into communes, deliberately located far from their original villages, to labor for the collective good. In the later years of their reign, paranoia seized Khmer Rouge leaders, making them suspect colleagues of treachery. This was the time Ek’s uncle, recalled as Kampuchea’s envoy to Vietnam, was executed.

Careful not to betray the fact that he was a university graduate and that he spoke French, Ek kept a low profile. “You must act really polite,” he says. “You must pretend to be blind, to see nothing. You pretend to be deaf, you hear nothing. That was the way to remain alive.” He even kept quiet about his family’s background, that his father and uncle were members of the Communist Party, for example. Members of the Khmer Rouge “kill among themselves,” Ek explains. “You don’t know who is who.” His routine was to sleep, wake up, work, eat, sleep, “exactly like an animal.” He says, “We had no ambitions, no dreams.”

He resisted the urge to escape across the border to Thailand, as some in the commune did and died trying. Ek felt somehow that he was responsible in a way for the rise of the Khmer Rouge. He and his friends had been so disgusted with Lon Nol’s government that they wanted change at any cost. “We just preferred something new,” Ek recalls. “We didn’t know whether it was good or bad; we just wanted to try it.” And so they supported the Khmer Rouge, if not financially then morally. They never imagined the hell Pol Pot would unleash. “I think we’ve learned our lesson,” says Ek now. “Instead of supporting the enemy of our partner [government], we should try to change the mind of our partner.” Perhaps things would have turned out differently if the student movement had engaged the government and persuaded it to change.

IN Battambang, Ek counted himself relatively lucky because, after some time, he was assigned to the camp’s smithy, where he helped make knives, picks, and other farming implements. He never did that kind of work before but he proved a quick study. “I just watched what other people did and I followed them,” he says. “After a few days, I could do it. That is my talent.” The work at the smithy was hard, but it was a bit better than working the land. Those on the farming detail had to wake up at 3:00 a.m., walk a long way to the paddy fields, work there until dark, and then make the trek back to the commune. “Many of them died,” says Ek somberly. At the smithy, he and his colleagues reported for work at 7:00 a.m. Like the rest of the commune, though, they barely had anything to eat.

In a way, the commune was run more humanely than others were in Cambodia because it was overseen by the head of the village, not by the so-called Special Red Guards—children and teenagers—as in the other camps. “The Khmer Rouge had this doctrine that says children are innocent and therefore will just follow orders,” Ek explains. “These kids will kill their own father, their parents, if they were ordered to do so.” The Red Guards ran their communes ruthlessly. In Ek’s camp, the head would at least ask the people whom they want to marry, for example. The Khmer Rouge wanted every eligible person to get married, and most were simply told who their partners would be.

In 1978, Ek married Than Tibpiry, who was from a well-born family in Phnom Penh. Although she was never married before, she told the camp leaders that she was widowed and was given the less strenuous job of raising vegetables. Ek met Than when she asked him to help her make shoes out of a rubber tire. Ek knew of her family because a friend of his lived in the same neighborhood as Than’s. Of the two, Than was the one who did not give up hope. “I always told her that I do not believe we can ever be liberated from this regime,” Ek recalls. “She said that one day we will be liberated.”

His wife’s prediction came true in 1979 when Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh. Vietnam and Cambodia have a long history of border skirmishes and these had intensified under the Khmer Rouge, which suspected its neighbor of planning to annex Cambodia into a larger Indochina federation. The simmering tension came out in the open when Pol Pot cut diplomatic ties with Hanoi in 1977. The next year, the Vietnamese invaded parts of Cambodia’s Kracheh province, which became the headquarters of a new political movement known as the Khmer National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS). Vietnam launched a full-scale attack on Christmas Day in 1978 and took control of Phnom Penh the next month.

Battambang was freed of the Khmer Rouge in April 1979. Ek and his wife had had enough. They decided to leave Cambodia and started walking to the border with Thailand. They joined up with many other

refugees and managed to cross over, only to be chased back by Thai soldiers to Prea Vihear on the Cambodian side—into land that was strewn with landmines. Ek and Than were not hurt but about a hundred people in their party died. After two months of walking, they arrived in Kampong Thom, the province where Ek's family had relocated years earlier. He never met them again. Ek believes they were killed by the Khmer Rouge in 1978. For her part, Than lost her brother, a brother-in-law, a niece, and a nephew.

After resting for several days, the couple proceeded to Phnom Penh. They found a ghost city of many empty houses. "You could go and stay wherever you like," recalls Ek. For security reasons, he and his wife stayed in a house in Boeung Keng Kang, near the Independence Monument, with Than's sister and her family and two other families. Then Ek set out to find a job. Here, he considers himself lucky again. Ek met Taing Sarin, who was a colleague of his father in the communist movement. Taing had been appointed Minister of Commerce in the Vietnam-backed KNUFNS government. With Taing's help, Ek and Than were given jobs in the Phnom Penh Abattoir. They moved out from Boeung Keng Kang into small rooms in the facility, where they lived until 1982.

Ek learned how to be a butcher on the job. Than worked in the distribution of the meat which was given to government employees, as part of their salary of rice and vegetables, and to government-run canteens. There were no machines and so everything had to be done by hand, and some two hundred tons of meat needed to be processed and distributed across the city. "It was difficult work," says Ek, especially when the animal to be killed was a buffalo. "I had to wake up very early in the morning at about 1:00 a.m." But it was still a much better life than under the Khmer Rouge. "We just got back from the Pol Pot regime," says Ek. "We didn't think about luxury. You didn't need anything more than to be alive."

Life outside the abattoir was difficult, too. Money was not allowed and rice became a de facto currency. People would lug milk cans full of the grain—four cans come up to one kilogram of rice—to pay for food, clothes, and other necessities. There were moments of panic when rumors circulated that Pol Pot, who had retreated into the jungle with his fighters, was about to retake Phnom Penh. In 1982, Than's sister and her family managed to cross the border into Thailand, and from there migrated to France. "Many of our neighbors, many of the workers around us, also went," recalls Ek. "My wife always thought that we should go, too." What held them back was the memory of their failed attempt to cross the border in 1979.

Ek was also worried about his two daughters, Ek Erika, who was born in 1980, and Ek Chanika, born in 1982. (A third daughter Ek Khantey was born in 1988 and youngest daughter Ek Thanpheakdey in 1989.) "After we had our second daughter, we decided not to go anymore," says Ek. "To get to the border, you have to walk around twenty kilometers through the jungle and you face the risk of being killed by the border guards of Thailand." Armed robbers, perhaps even remnants of the Khmer Rouge, could waylay the unwary as well. Fortunately for them, Than's mother, who died in 1987, helped take care of the children while the couple were at work.

By then Ek's circumstances were slowly improving. He had allied himself politically with the new government. "The Minister of Commerce knew us very well," he says. "But it was not easy. If you want to join the party, you need to go through extensive investigation by various organizations [for the party] to make sure of your loyalty." But because of his and his father's political background, Ek was accepted into the pro-Vietnamese Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party fairly quickly.

IN 1981, he was moved from the abattoir to a staff post in the Municipal Department of Commerce. Two years later, he was promoted to deputy director, and then became the director in 1986. Ek was appointed director of Municipal Electricity in 1991. He left government service briefly, and then became director of the Municipal Water Supply in 1993.

Ek's fifteen hundred–strong agency, the Municipal Department of Commerce, was tasked with running government-owned companies in Phnom Penh and regulating the small private businesses that were allowed to operate in the capital. “In theory, there should be no private companies in a communist regime,” says Ek. “But during the transitory period, some private businesses were allowed, but not on a big scale.” His department issued licenses and made sure private enterprises remained small and operated only in approved sectors, such as tourism, hotels, and restaurants. Other areas, including imports and exports, were exclusively the domain of government corporations, which Ek's department managed and operated.

It was a planned economy copied from other communist countries and one that Ek gradually felt was flawed. Government enterprises had to make and sell everything according to a pre-set plan. The Ministry of Industry tells government companies what to manufacture and in what quantities. The goods are sent to other state enterprises to sell, mostly to government entities and state employees. “This isn't really commerce,” says Ek. “This is more like distribution.” Instead of selling the goods directly to the end-users, the system effectively passes them to middlemen, that is, to state employees, who take products that they don't need and sell them at a higher price to consumers.

“This promotes a lot of corruption,” says Ek. The government rationed cigarettes, for example, with each state worker granted the right to buy a certain number of packs at a low price. Even those who did not smoke bought the cigarettes, then turned around and sold them at higher prices in the private market. Ek got requests from workers to be allowed to buy certain goods because they were getting married or had some other special occasion coming to them. In reality, they wanted to sell the goods for profit. Efficiency was also impaired. While the employees made it appear that they were busy working, they were in fact spending more time selling their rations on the market.

At meetings, Ek would propose scrapping the system. The agency should sell the items at the black market rate to the end-users, cutting out the middlemen, and then share the profits made with employees by raising their salaries, for example. “The operation would be simple, easy to control, and no corruption can happen easily,” he adds. The suggestion was not adopted. A key reason was the unwieldy structure of Cambodian decision making. Very few of the new administrators knew how to run an organization, so everyone had to rely on a Vietnamese expert, who was assigned to each government agency to help with practical problems and also ensure Vietnamese influence in Cambodia. Lower-level bureaucrats like Ek thus needed to go through three channels to get policy changed—their immediate boss, the Vietnamese expert, and finally the administrators on top.

For Ek, the presence of Vietnamese advisers was generally a good thing. “It wasn't really a case of control, but some kind of help,” he says. In some instances, however, lower-level Cambodian bureaucrats were afraid of the Vietnamese because they had no way of presenting their side to the top people if there was a dispute. This was what happened in 1986 in Siem Reap province, when many Cambodian government officers were arrested at the instigation of the Vietnamese. The issue eventually reached the top echelon and it was found that the Vietnamese advisers had made a mistake. “There was strong punishment on the Vietnamese side,” Ek recalls.

For the most part, though, the relationship depended on the persons involved. “If you're lucky, you get a good expert,” says Ek. “But if the Cambodian side is a bad guy, then very little good can happen.” His own dealings with his department's advisers were sometimes rocky. “I was very frank with them,” he recounts. “We fought a lot of times. I'm really very frank; if I'm not happy, I say I'm not happy.” He cannot help comparing the Vietnamese consultants with consultants from multilateral agencies that he deals with today. “Some consultants really do nothing,” says Ek. When there is disagreement, the standard procedure is for both sides to write a report. But many Cambodians find it difficult to write in English. Such was also the case during the Vietnamese era since few in Cambodia could write well in Vietnamese.

Ek was one exception. He could communicate with the advisers in Vietnamese, having lived in Vietnam for six months in 1983 to study communist doctrines as practiced by Hanoi's leadership. Some of the advisers

could also speak French (parts of Vietnam and Cambodia were once components of French Indochina). Ek particularly remembers a Mr. Chung, the adviser of the Phnom Penh Abattoir. He used to converse with Mr. Chung in French. It was Mr. Chung who paved the way for Ek to be promoted to the Municipal Department of Commerce. He had also gotten permission for Ek and his family to live in Chung's quarters, a large house in front of the abattoir. When the Vietnamese pulled out of Cambodia in 1989, Ek became the owner because the country had no system of property licenses at the time. "Wherever you stay, that belongs to you," Ek explains.

The house proved to be a big boost to the Ek family's finances. In 1991, Ek sold it to Thai businessman Theng Bunma, who was one of the first to make investments in Cambodia. Ek then used the money to set up his own property business, having by then left government service. The government was shifting policy in favor of private-sector businesses, and that meant the commerce department no longer needed to be staffed so fully. Ek bought a house and lot opposite the Holiday Inn in Phnom Penh, renovated it and then leased it for five years to Japan's Marubeni Corporation for six thousand U.S. dollars a month—and two years' advance payment. Since the total cost of the purchase and renovation came to sixty thousand U.S. dollars, Ek made a 500 percent profit on the transaction.

It was a heady time for those with entrepreneurial skills in Cambodia. The United Nations (UN) got involved in the task of reconstruction after the Vietnamese left, and a comprehensive settlement was signed among Cambodia's warring factions and the international community in 1990. "A lot of businesses followed because the UN had two billion U.S. dollars to spend," says Ek. There was a huge demand for good housing and other logistics. Ek got involved in a lucrative contract to supply UNTAC—the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia—and continued with his property projects. "Sometimes you buy [a piece of land] at six o'clock in the evening," he recalls. "By six o'clock the next morning, you would have sold it for a 20 percent or 30 percent profit."

DESPITE the fortune he was minting, however, Ek chose to return to government service. He had campaigned for the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the successor to the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party, in the May 1993 elections that was supervised by the UN. The CPP came second to Funcinpec, the party headed by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, one of Sihanouk's sons. (The Khmer Rouge boycotted the elections.) Ranariddh became first prime minister, and the CPP's Hun Sen the second prime minister in a coalition parliamentary government under a constitutional monarchy that saw Sihanouk restored to the kingship.

Ek's former boss at the commerce department became deputy director of the city of Phnom Penh, and offered him several positions. In September 1993, Ek joined the water agency, which he found very challenging. There were many things that needed fixing. The system produced only sixty-five thousand cubic meters of water per day, enough to cover just 25 percent of the capital's population, and even then for only ten hours daily. Only 12 percent of the connections were metered, and it was estimated that more than three hundred illegal connections were being made every year. Leakage, as measured by the levels of nonrevenue water, was estimated at 72 percent of total water production. Ek believed he could make a difference.

As he expected, it was not an easy job. First, he had to negotiate the delicate problem of the agency's leadership. The Municipal Water Supply already had a director, who was made deputy director to make way for Ek. That was a red flag for Ek because the director had his own circle of managers, and their loyalty to him could hinder the reforms Ek was planning. "In the end I came in and told him: 'Okay, friend'—he was also my friend—'Okay, let's forget the past. I don't want to know anything about the past. But from now on, stop.' But [the anomalies] didn't stop. He never did anything on his own, but he supported his team, which continued to do bad things," says Ek.

Ek's approach was to work with the existing personnel to change the system. He knew that one of the reasons for the corruption and inferior services was the agency's low wages. Managers were paid only twenty U.S. dollars a month while the rank-and-file got five U.S. dollars, "enough to cover only five days' expenses," says Ek. "When people do not have enough to eat, it is difficult [for them] to be honest." To make ends meet, some of the staff not only undertook illegal connections but also stole materials like aluminum sulfide, which was used to treat the raw water pumped from the Mekong and two other rivers. As a result, "the treatment process was not properly operated," says Ek. "The water quality was very bad." The customers knew enough to make sure the water was boiled before using it.

Ek embarked on a series of methodical steps. He went around soliciting ideas about the way forward from the five hundred-strong managerial staff and rank-and-file. One group said things were fine and there was no need for drastic change. Another group said corruption was so bad that the agency needed to start over. The majority, though, had no opinion. "They didn't fight, they didn't know [what was going on]," says Ek. The exercise gave him a basis to assess the water agency's leadership. Those judged inefficient were not fired—they became advisers. "I gave the engineers the opportunity to contribute," says Ek. Based on the outcome, the most effective among them were given training and increased responsibility.

There was a backlash, of course. Media reports attacking Ek began to proliferate. There was a lot of money on the line. One illegal connection could cost one thousand U.S. dollars. "The water staff make the connection but take the money from the customer for their own pocket and never register the customer," says Ek. If you were a water reseller, you could pay five thousand U.S. dollars to tap illegally into the main ninety-millimeter pipes that had a pressure strong enough to allow sub-connections to end-users. These resellers charged the equivalent of one U.S. dollar for one cubic meter of water, compared with the government rate of five U.S. dollars for every twenty cubic meters. For consumers, it made better economic sense to buy from the illegal resellers rather than directly from the water agency.

A general survey of customers uncovered another anomaly. More than half of the twenty-six hundred registered water users never received any water at all. Ek traced this to the previous planned-economy regime when citizens needed permission to do almost anything, from getting married or moving to another province to having someone from another place live in your house. "If you do not pay the water bill, the authorities will not give you the required authorization," says Ek. "You were forced to pay." The survey also revealed that around twelve hundred families received water regularly but never paid the bill. They were the relatives of the water agency's managers and staff.

The scams went unchecked because of the lack of water meters. Only around 12 percent of water connections had them, and even then these meters were inaccurate. One of the water agency's most unpopular decisions was its requirement that every household with a connection must install a water meter. "Those were really hard times," recalls Ek. "We had to work late into the night. Sometimes I even slept in my office." He would be awakened by the ringing phone early in the morning. An irate householder would scold him: "We never use water but your stupid water meter is still running!"

But Ek was resolute. "I had a really good team, a very strong team," he says. While he did not fire anyone, he found jobs for young engineers just out of school, whom he describes as "very active." He would sit down with the recruit and lay out his cards. "We are really poor," he would say. "We even have no money to pay for electricity. So if you want the salary first, we have nothing to give to you." But he would promise to share the fruits of the reforms. It's like the chicken-and-egg situation, Ek would say to them. "If you feed the chicken, it will give a lot of eggs, which we can then share. But if you kill the chicken, you'll have meat for one day, but that's it. No more chicken, no more eggs. No more job, no more salary," he says.

Ek motivated everyone to give their best by decentralizing authority and decision making, offering salary increases, bonuses, and training opportunities, and getting rid of the prevailing notion that subordinates are inferior to the boss, who must be shown respect and deference by one's paying for his expenses and

giving him expensive gifts. “I told my staff, ‘This is not my culture. I am richer than you, I am paid more compared to you,’” says Ek, who would periodically treat his people to breakfast or dinner. He believes that the Cambodian notion of the superior-inferior relationship can lead to corruption because the subordinate is tempted to do illegal things to have the means to shower the boss with presents.

The agency also formed a Discipline Committee that was tasked to hear allegations of wrongdoing by staff members. “Cambodians live in the heart,” says Ek. “Bad guys must be punished; good guys must be congratulated. This is what the leader must do to gain support from his subordinates.” The committee gave the accused the chance to present his or her side, but it also had the power to recommend disciplinary action.

THE new director courted aid agencies assiduously. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) lent US\$13 million. The World Bank, after much persuasion, gave a loan of US\$41 million. Former colonial power France funded three projects with US\$20 million, and Japan gave an even bigger US\$60 million for three facilities. Ek made sure the money was well spent, in contrast to some implementing agencies that tended to regard loans and grants as free money that could be spread around liberally. “We consider the loans as our own money,” says Ek. “We handle everything ourselves. We always get very competitive bids [from project contractors].”

But there were circumstances outside his control. Electricity supply in Phnom Penh, for example, could be intermittent. When a blackout happened, water pressure fell and water supply slowed to a trickle or stopped altogether. The power failures affected Ek’s usual fourteen- to sixteen-hour workdays. One 9:00 p.m. meeting he had with ADB representatives had to be held by candlelight.

Looking back, Ek says the most difficult part of the job was not seeing management and operational changes not pushing through, but persuading the authorities to raise water tariffs so the agency can serve more Phnom Penh residents. The initial reaction had been discouraging. “I could not pay if you increase the tariffs too high,” one minister told Ek. That was the refrain in meeting after meeting. Ek got so discouraged that he informed his managers he would resign rather than “continue to stay here for nothing.”

By chance, Ek got to meet Second Prime Minister Hun Sen in the beginning of 1997. The water director took the opportunity to explain to him that the agency’s tariffs were much lower than the operating costs. Without an increase, service coverage will contract from the already low 20 percent down to 10 percent of households in Phnom Penh. With the proposed increase in tariffs phased in over seven years, Ek promised to expand services to the 80 percent of residents who were still not receiving water from the agency. The Cambodian People’s Party, argued Ek, will gain more political support if citizens are given access to basic services like water. In 1993, the CPP garnered 38 percent of the vote to Funcinpec’s 45 percent. It was imperative for the party to do better in the 1998 polls.

In June 1997, the government approved a three-step cross-subsidized tariff increase spread out over seven years, with each step to be implemented only if there had been a corresponding improvement in service coverage and quality.

The next month, Cambodia entered a new period of instability when Hun Sen staged a coup against Ranariddh, at a time when the Thai baht was coming under speculative attack, precipitating the Asian financial crisis. Elections were held as scheduled in 1998, with the CPP officially winning half the seats in the National Assembly. The opposition parties alleged widespread fraud, but Hun Sen went on to govern as prime minister.

It was in 1997 that the Municipal Water Supply became an autonomous agency and was renamed Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA), with Ek as director general. Under the previous system, the agency depended for subsidies from the government, and its financial plans and expenses needed to be approved by the Minister of Finance. All income was remitted to the National Treasury. As an autonomous

body, PPWSA is governed by a seven-person board of directors. While the government still approves yearly financial and operational plans, the agency makes day-to-day decisions. Wages and salaries are outside government pay levels. Except for the director general and accountant, who are civil servants, all 550 employees are private-sector workers.

All these reforms have had impressive results. In 2004, the ADB honored the PPWSA with its Water Prize. “The autonomy granted to the Authority has made it fully accountable for performance,” said Tadao Chino, ADB’s president at the time. “The achievement of full cost recovery has put the Authority in a strong financial position to be able to repay its loans. More significantly, the Authority’s financial strength has enabled it to expand services to poor areas where piped water supplies were previously just a dream.”

In a paper he presented to the Mayors’ Asia-Pacific Environmental Summit in Melbourne, Australia, in 2006, Ek described the progress made by his agency from 1993 to 2005. Coverage has soared to 95 percent of Phnom Penh’s inhabitants as the number of connections jumped more than four-fold to 138,000 households and businesses. The incidence of illegal connections has fallen to less than ten cases a year, from more than three hundred cases in 1993. All customers now have water meters, compared with just 12 percent in 1993. Nonrevenue water has been brought down to 11 percent from 72 percent. As a result, total income in 2005 reached 67.2 billion riel (US\$16.3 million at 2006 exchange rates), while total expenses, including loan repayments, was kept at 52.1 billion riel (US\$12.6).

PPWSA is now expanding beyond Phnom Penh’s seven districts to its outskirts, more than doubling its coverage area from three hundred square kilometers to eight hundred square kilometers. “This is actually something very challenging because the population is less dense, so you spend a lot in investment in terms of pipes,” says Ek. Not only will the cost be higher but the average tariff rate will be lower because most of the users will be small consumers who are charged subsidized rates. At the same time, electricity charges have increased from 500 riel per kilowatt-hour in 2005 to 720 riel in 2006, even as the prices of chlorine and aluminum sulfide have gone up by 20 percent to 30 percent. “It will be difficult,” says Ek, “but we have committed not to change the tariff. You have to try your best until you have no profit at all.”

All profits, which currently equal more than 20 percent of gross income, have been earmarked for a new US\$50 million water treatment plant, which is supported by a loan of \$10 million from the French Agency for Development. “That’s about US\$13 million, so we need to come up with the rest,” says Ek. He is eyeing more challenges. Before taking on the water supply job, he had thought of early retirement “to enjoy my private life. But this work made me change.” Ek wants to improve water supply in Cambodia’s provinces, which he says is “still in very bad condition,” but his mandate at PPWSA is only for Phnom Penh. His bosses have allowed him to advise the provincial agencies, but Ek wishes to be more actively involved because “I’m really better acting than talking.”

Ek is optimistic about his country’s direction. The 2003 national elections handed the CPP 59 percent of the seats in the 123-member assembly, not enough to form a government, so the party once again formed a coalition with Funcinpec, which won 21 percent. In 2004, however, a controversial amendment to the constitution lowered the threshold in forming a government from two-thirds of the seats to a simple majority. In the same year, an ailing Sihanouk abdicated. One of his sons, Prince Norodom Sihamoni, succeeded him as king, in a fairly smooth process seen as an indication that political stability in Cambodia was taking root.

The economy is also being transformed. “The way to survive, the way to progress, is through a market economy,” says Ek. He remembers the Minister of Finance, who studied in France, telling him that Paris was not built in one day. “For me, it’s a little bit different. Of course you can’t build in one day but it should not take 100 years either.” But he wants everyone to share in the prosperity, not just the elites as in the past. He also wants the problem of corruption addressed, though he is realistic about the issue. “There is nowhere in the world where you have no corruption,” Ek says. “We can only reduce corruption.”

The bottom line, both at PPWSA and the country at large, should be advocacy for the poor. “You need to know how to help the weak and how to love the poor,” says Ek. “This will make you always happy.” By that measure, Ek Sonn Chan must be one of Cambodia’s happiest men.

Cesar R. Bacani Jr.

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