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Peace Review
A Journal of Social Justice

ISSN: 1040-2659 (Print) 1469-9982 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cper20

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To cite this article: Savina Sirik (2026) The Politics of Win-Win Memorialization in Cambodia, Peace Review, 38:1, 101-113, DOI: 10.1080/10402659.2026.2638252

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2026.2638252

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Published online: 05 Mar 2026.

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Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice, 38:101–113, 2026
ISSN: 1040-2659 print / 1469-9982 online
DOI: 10.1080/10402659.2026.2638252

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

The Politics of Win-Win Memorialization in Cambodia

Savina Sirik

This essay critically examines the commemorations of the Win-Win policy, a strategy developed by former Prime Minister Hun Sen in the 1990s to bring an end to Cambodia's civil war through the dissolution of the Khmer Rouge movement and reintegration of its members into society. Through the construction of Win-Win memorials, museums, slogan campaigns, and curated media naratives the Cambodian government, led by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), has institutionalized a narrative that casts Hun Sen as the architect of peace, stability, and development. This essay analyzes how these commemorative practices are used as instruments of political legitimation, embedding selective memories into public space while obscuring the alternative narratives and the lived experiences of those directly affected by decades of conflict and mass violence. In doing so, the Win-Win commemorations reveal less about Cambodia's transition from war to peace and more about the politics of memory, in which the past is selectively reshaped to consolidate political power, maintain legitimacy, and suppress alternative voices or contested histories.

INTRODUCTION

On a hot July day in 2024, two busloads of Cambodian high school students on a study tour made a stop at the Win-Win Monument (*Vimean Chhneah Chhneah*), located in Chroy Changvar district of Phnom Penh, about 16 kilometers northeast of the city. This national memorial commemorates the Win-Win policy, a strategy developed by the former Prime Minister Hun Sen in the 1990s, widely credited with ending Cambodia's prolonged civil war. Launched in February 1996, the policy encouraged Khmer Rouge members to defect and reintegrate into society. This strategy ultimately led to

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the final dissolution of the movement in December 1998 by guaranteeing that the remaining members could live safely while retaining their military positions and private property. Accompanied by their teachers, the students spent approximately an hour exploring the site, taking photographs of the 54-meter-tall stone monument and its bas-relief sculptures, reading the concrete inscriptions that outlined the Win-Win strategy, and strolling through the surrounding Techo Peace Park. After posing for pictures at the monument, they entered the adjacent museum to view a photo exhibition depicting Hun Sen's role and achievements in bringing peace to Cambodia. Following a brief tour, the group returned to their buses, leaving behind the sun-drenched memorial site.

This visit is just one example of the broader government efforts to introduce and promote the Win-Win narrative to the Cambodian public—a narrative that emphasizes Hun Sen's pivotal role in achieving peace and national reconciliation (see Kent 2022). Over the past two decades, this policy has been celebrated and institutionalized through various commemorative projects, including the Win-Win monuments, Techo Peace Parks, the public slogan "Thank You, Peace," Koh Thmar memorial site, and a wide range of media and publications. Collectively, these commemorative practices reinforce a dominant narrative of peace championed by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and its leader, Hun Sen.

This essay critically examines the construction and implementation of the narrative of peace stemming from Hun Sen's Win-Win memorialization policy. Using semi-structured interviews with former Khmer Rouge members and site observations I conducted in Cambodia in 2018–2019 and 2024, as well as available secondary sources related to the Win-Win memorialization, the essay analyzes how the Cambodian government and the CPP use commemorative culture to cement Hun Sen's image as both the liberator from Khmer Rouge atrocities and the architect of peace, while obscuring the complex political processes that preceded the Khmer Rouge's final dissolution and the uneven realities of reintegration and reconciliation experienced by low-level Khmer Rouge members. While the Khmer Rouge genocide remains central to Cambodia's national history, contemporary commemorations highlight the CPP's role—and Hun Sen's leadership in particular—in delivering peace, stability, and development. I argue that the Win-Win commemorations reveal less about Cambodia's transition from war to peace than about the politics of memorialization, through which the past is selectively reshaped to consolidate political power, maintain legitimacy, and suppress alternative or contested histories.

BUILDING THE WIN-WIN MEMORIAL LANDSCAPE

The origins of the Win-Win policy can be traced to King Sihanouk's unsuccessful attempts in the early 1990s to negotiate directly with the Khmer Rouge. Aiming to promote national reconciliation, the King proposed offering Khmer Rouge leaders positions within the government in exchange for their defections—an initiative strongly opposed by the co-premiers Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen (see Bultmann 2018, 5–6; Strangio 2020, 66). After outlawing the Khmer Rouge in July 1994, the co-premiers continued pursuing a strategy of pardons to former Khmer Rouge members who submitted confessions. This approach led to some defections as Khmer Rouge factions sought to align with the newly elected royal government (Bultmann 2019). Against this backdrop, Hun Sen consolidated and expanded these efforts into the Win-Win policy. According to government literature, the policy's implementation rested on three core principles: encouraging Khmer Rouge defections, guaranteeing safety and security for those who defected, and granting amnesty (Nem 2011, 288). This strategy was presented as a key element in achieving peace and reconciliation by assuring former cadres that they could protect their lives (as well as those of their family members), retain their positions, protect their assets, and assume community leadership roles (Ly 2017, 166). As the late Deputy Prime Minister Sok An emphasized in his opening remarks at the 4th Regional Forum on the Prevention of Genocide in Phnom Penh on February 28, 2013, the policy guaranteed former cadres "their lives, their livelihood, and their assets," including amnesty for crimes committed under Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (quoted in Ly 2017, 166–167). For many former low-level Khmer Rouge members, these promises offered both security and an opportunity to rebuild their lives. As a female former Khmer Rouge recalled, "I was worried about standing trial or being executed … but when I think of Samdech Hun Sen's win-win policy, I feel relieved" (Interview 2, pers. comm., November 13, 2018). Others described the policy as the moment when "life could finally begin again" after years of displacement and hardship (Interview 1, pers. comm., November 13, 2018, and Interview 55, pers. comm., July 9, 2019).

Twenty years after the success of the Win-Win strategy, the first national memorial dedicated to it was built on an eight-hectare site on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Rising 54 meters above a 17-meter base, the Win-Win Monument combines Khmer modernist and traditional architectural styles, symbolizing both cultural continuity and Cambodia's aspirations for modernity. Its bas-reliefs depict scenes from Hun Sen's life and milestones in his political career, including his journey to overthrow the

Khmer Rouge regime, his roles in the peace negotiations, and his achievements in nation-building. Completed under the supervision of the Ministry of Defense, the $12 million stone monument was officially inaugurated by Hun Sen on December 29, 2018. Since then, this day has been observed as a national holiday, and the monument has become a site for national remembrance, marking the end of the long civil war and the victory over the Khmer Rouge movement.

The Win-Win monument in Phnom Penh was quickly followed by plans to install additional Win-Win memorials in other locations, including Koh Kong, Oddar Meanchey, and Pailin (Samban 2024). The Koh Kong memorial was finished in April 2023, while construction is underway on sites in Anlong Veng and Pailin, both former Khmer Rouge strongholds along the Thai-Cambodian border (Yin 2022a). The government plans to build memorials in other former Khmer Rouge stronghold areas, such as Kampong Speu's Aural district, Banteay Meanchey's Malai district, and Kampot's Koh Sla area (Sun 2020), although at the time of this writing, the plans and dates for these memorials have not yet been announced. Managed by the Sena Decho Unit of the Ministry of Defense, these projects expand the physical and symbolic presence of the Win-Win story nationwide (Norén-Nilsson 2023, 77).

The memorials do more than mark the end of the decades-long conflict. They explicitly honor Hun Sen as both the liberator and the architect of peace who sacrificed to save the Cambodian people from the Khmer Rouge genocide and bring lasting peace to the nation. In his 2018 speech at the inauguration of the memorial in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen recounted his "sacrifice" in leaving for Vietnam to save the nation from Pol Pot, dedicating the achievements of the Win-Win policy to the Cambodian people.

> I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for including a description of my role regarding my journey [to Vietnam], whereby I sacrificed my own life to save the nation from the genocidal Pol Pot regime … I want to dedicate the achievements of the win-win policy, the end of civil war, and peace, to all Cambodian people who have benefited from the policy, regardless of their political affiliations […] (Hun Sen's speech in Khmer, translated by the author, December 29, 2018)

The President of the Win-Win Monument Foundation and former Defense Minister, Tea Banh, has emphasized the importance of memorials in honoring Hun Sen's heroic contributions. When announcing plans to build a Win-Win memorial in Anlong Veng, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold, Tea Banh said: "We plan to build the monument to show the

culture of gratitude and remembrance of the heroism, achievements, and ingenuity of the leaders in the pursuit of peace, who sacrificed their lives for the cause of peace"(Yin 2022b). These messages emphasize Hun Sen's personal role above broader structural or collective efforts, reinforcing his image as the key figure in securing peace.

Win-Win memorials are not the only sites established to honor Hun Sen's achievements. Other commemorative practices, such as the nationwide Techo Peace Parks, the Koh Thmar site, the public slogan "Thank You, Peace" (*Arkun Santepheap*) launched in 2020, as well as various media productions and publications, have been developed to further preserve his legacy and underscore his central role in Cambodia's peacemaking narrative. The Techo Peace Parks, announced for construction in every province, are designed not only to commemorate the Win-Win policy but also to instill a sense of gratitude and responsibility for safeguarding the peace Hun Sen is credited with delivering (Torn 2024). As Tea Banh explained: "Each Techo Peace Park will contain features that will encourage us to remember the value of the win-win policy. They will remind people where the peace we all enjoy today originates from, and who was responsible […]"(quoted in Samban 2023).

The commemorative landscape also includes the Koh Thmar site in Tbong Khmum province, near the eastern border, where Hun Sen crossed into Vietnam in June 1977, during the height of Khmer Rouge power. Several structures commemorate this journey, including the "20 June" pavilion, a friendship house, a shrine to Preah Ang Kok Thlok, and the Decho Koh Thmar museum (Norén-Nilsson 2023, 77–78). Astrid Norén-Nilsson (2023) observes that the development of the Koh Thmar site extends the official narrative of peace by connecting the early phases of Hun Sen's political career—including his role in the 1979 Vietnamese-backed liberation and the Win-Win policy of the 1990s—with more recent events such as the dissolution of the opposition party, presenting them as part of a continuous story of peacemaking.

Besides these physical commemorative sites, the dissemination of Hun Sen's life story across multiple media outlets further reinforces this state-sanctioned narrative. His life journey was first featured in the English-language edition of his 1999 biography (Mehta and Mehta 2013 [1999]) and in a widely broadcast 2001 radio drama titled *Son under Moonlight* (Thun 2021, 228). These efforts were later followed by a 30-minute film released in 2022, *Life of a Pagoda Boy,* written by Hun Sen himself, which portrays his impoverished childhood and rise to political power after becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs (Willemyns and R.F.A. Khmer 2022). Some observers reportedly note that the film nevertheless

omits his earlier role as a Khmer Rouge commander to reflect the selective storytelling characteristic of these portrayals (Willemyns and R.F.A. Khmer 2022).

The "Thank You, Peace" campaign complements both the physical sites of memory and media representations by extending commemoration into everyday public and digital spaces. Initiated by Hun Sen in January 2020, the campaign encourages Cambodians to acknowledge the leadership that has secured peace and development, while also promoting a sense of vigilance in protecting it (Taing 2020). The slogan is prominently displayed on banners at the entrances of government offices, schools, and hospitals. For a period, it was widely circulated online as a backdrop for social media profile pictures, particularly among civil servants on Facebook and Telegram. In Prey Veng, for instance, the provincial governor, Phan Chanthul, instructed all public institutions to display the slogan. He emphasized in an interview: "Without the word—Peace, we would not have had a chance to build and develop our nation as it is today. We are thankful for the peace and pledge to maintain it" (quoted in Taing 2020).

Beyond their symbolic significance, the Win-Win memorials are intended to serve as educational spaces for younger generations. At the 2018 inauguration of the Win-Win monument in Phnom Penh, high-ranking government officials announced plans for a museum and archive to document Cambodia's "true" history. During the groundbreaking ceremony of the Pailin memorial, former Defense Minister Tea Banh described the site as a Peace Cultural Centre dedicated to teaching future generations about Hun Sen's sacrifice in securing peace: "The stories will be handed down from generation to generation for study and research, and to maintain peace" (quoted in Nov 2022). These facilities, which were later established, primarily focus on Hun Sen's peacemaking journey, from his role in overthrowing the Khmer Rouge to the implementation of the Win-Win policy.

Current Prime Minister Hun Manet, Hun Sen's eldest son, who assumed power after his father stepped down in 2023, further emphasized the importance of memorials in history education during the fifth anniversary of Phnom Penh's Win-Win Monument and the 25th anniversary of the end of the civil war on December 29, 2023. In his speech, Hun Manet described the monument as "a repository of knowledge and a repository of historical documents which highlight various events in Cambodia, from the stage of progress to destruction and towards progress again" (quoted in Sok 2023). He added that the monument would serve as a reminder to Cambodia's young generations of the peace-seeking process. In this way, both the physical monument and its accompanying museum function not

only as memorial sites but also as educational spaces where the official narrative of peace is preserved, promoted, and transmitted to future generations.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND LIVED REALITIES

Cambodia's Win-Win memorialization is not without controversy. While it promotes the legacy of the CPP and Hun Sen, it also reinforces state discourses of peace, stability, and development by framing peace as fragile, hard-won, and guaranteed only through the stewardship of the ruling party and by Hun Sen himself (Im 2025). This framing allows the government to deploy the language of peace and stability as a political tool to justify suppressing dissent and silencing critical voices perceived as threatening to the ruling party. Such dynamics were evident in the 2017 dissolution of the opposition party accused of plotting an alleged "color revolution" with foreign support (Adams 2018, 111; Holmes 2017), the shutdown of independent media outlets, and the introduction of restrictive legislation designed to constrain political opposition and silence civil society (Chheng 2018; Lawrence 2020).

Critics argue that the Win-Win Monument itself symbolizes a distortion of history, as it selectively highlights episodes that elevate Hun Sen's role while sidelining the contributions of other actors involved in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement (Bultmann 2019), thereby presenting a narrative far removed from genuine national unification (Nachemson 2018). Far from being the sole architect of peace, Hun Sen operated within a broader and more complex field of political negotiations (Bultmann 2019). Throughout the early and mid-1990s, various actors engaged in multiple efforts to negotiate with the Khmer Rouge. In 1994, for instance, the late King Norodom Sihanouk proposed temporarily assuming power to facilitate direct negotiations, offering political roles to Khmer Rouge leaders in exchange for a ceasefire, the return of the Khmer Rouge-controlled territories, and the dissolution of their armed forces (Sihanouk 1994). Similarly, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, pursued its own negotiations with several Khmer Rouge factions in 1996–1997, offering political incentives in hopes of securing military and political support from these groups ahead of the 1998 national elections (Bultmann 2018; Dy and Dearing 2014, 117–18; Strangio 2020). These efforts were cut short by violent clashes on 5–6 July 1997—widely described by observers as a coup by Hun Sen, though

he denied it—after which Ranariddh and his allies were removed from the coalition government (Strangio 2020, 82).

Although these efforts did not succeed in bringing the Khmer Rouge into the electoral process or the political transition, they nevertheless formed an important part of the broader and more complex political landscape that preceded the Khmer Rouge movement's final dissolution in 1998. The selective framing of the Win-Win narrative, therefore, not only undermines the spirit of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement but also obscures the roles of other political actors whose negotiation efforts helped shape Cambodia's path toward ending decades of civil war and pursuing national reconciliation.

By framing peace as Hun Sen's personal achievement and equating it with the mere absence of armed conflict, the memorials further conceal the ongoing struggles and deeper wounds caused by decades of war and mass violence. These unresolved scars are evident in the lives of those directly impacted by the war and the legacies of the Win-Win policy. My 2018–2019 field research in former Khmer Rouge strongholds in northwest Cambodia highlights these tensions. While many former cadres welcomed the end of the conflict, some remained cautious about the socio-economic changes and the promises of development that followed their formal integration in 1998. The shift to a market economy and the influx of newcomers from other parts of the country into the former stronghold areas disrupted long-standing social structures, creating new insecurities for the former Khmer Rouge communities. These experiences also contradict key assurances of the Win-Win policy, particularly its promises to protect the property and positions of former Khmer Rouge who defected. One woman, who had joined the Khmer Rouge at the age of fourteen, expressed gratitude for the end of the civil war and the chance to educate her children, yet she struggled with the ongoing lack of trust caused by the presence of newcomers seeking land and economic opportunities in her community (Interview 52, pers. comm., June 28, 2019). A former soldier-turned-teacher voiced his frustration at how low-level cadres like himself, once appointed to local leadership roles, were gradually being replaced by newcomers (Interview 55, pers. comm., July 9, 2019), an outcome that directly undermined the policy's pledge to secure their positions. Another former Khmer Rouge soldier described losing a land dispute in court, attributing the outcome to corruption as well as his neighbor's ties to powerful elites, a perceived injustice that challenged the promise of protected property rights and deepened his resentment (Interview 21, pers. comm., January 8, 2019).

Beyond these material challenges, some former Khmer Rouge members continue to be stigmatized and marginalized as a result of their

previous association with the genocidal regime (Sirik 2023). In former Khmer Rouge strongholds, some still struggle with feelings of exclusion and continue to fear rejection from the broader society. These anxieties often resurfaced when visiting relatives in their home villages or encountering newcomers in their communities. Often held collectively responsible for atrocities under DK, they perceive national reintegration policies as insufficient for bridging divides between groups. Their struggles extend beyond surviving wartime violence to enduring mistrust, suspicion, and social exclusion linked to being labeled as perpetrators (Sirik 2023, 111). As a sixty-four-year-old former Khmer Rouge medic and messenger explained: "[…] people do not care where or how the Khmer Rouge came about; they paint every Khmer Rouge one color […] I was just an ordinary person from a small village who was caught in the situation and became a Khmer Rouge. What I did was follow orders from my leaders […] I was just a tool of the [DK] political regime" (Interview 23, pers. comm., January 9, 2019). Another former cadre admitted fearing retaliation in his community because of his past role: " … due to my association with the Khmer Rouge … I can tell you that society does not want to accept me. When I go outside, people do not want to talk to me" (Interview 55, pers. comm., July 9, 2019).

These experiences complicate the state-sanctioned narratives of peace, revealing a post-conflict landscape shaped as much by stigma, anxiety, and inequality as by stability. Former Khmer Rouge members continue to face persistent stigma, social and economic marginalization, and unresolved grievances. Their accounts challenge the government's depiction of post Win-Win policy Cambodia as reconciled and peaceful, revealing how lived experiences often diverge sharply from the state's celebratory narrative of peace, stability and development. While the Win-Win policy succeeded in ending decades of armed conflict, it has not addressed the deeper fractures left by years of violence and social upheaval. Far from healing divisions, the pressure to conform to an overarching narrative of national harmony often silences these alternative voices, masking the persistence of what has been described as "slow violence"—forms of harm that unfold gradually and remain largely invisible (Nixon 2011).

Even as lived experiences and the complex political landscape highlight the contested nature of Cambodia's peace process, these complexities are scarcely reflected in the design or narrative of the Win-Win monument and museum in Phnom Penh. Students and visitors encounter no opportunities for critical engagement with Cambodia's complex past or its ongoing struggles. Instead, the monument and museum presents photographs and artifacts that construct a tidy narrative of Hun Sen's

political career including his journey to Vietnam in June 1977, his role in rally forces in late 1978 to overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime, the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989, peace negotiations in the early 1990s, the promotion of the Win-Win strategy, and subsequent development projects. The story culminates in exhibits that showcase the implementation of the Win-Win strategy in various military regions, featuring maps, photographs, and accompanying texts.

Through these carefully curated materials, the museum reinforces the state narrative by portraying Hun Sen as both the liberator and the sole architect of peace and national reconciliation. In doing so, it renders alternative histories invisible, such as the political negotiations involving multiple actors that shaped the end of the civil war, as well as the unresolved grievances that continue to shape everyday life in former Khmer Rouge communities. By presenting only a single, state-sanctioned interpretation of peace, the museum guides young visitors toward a narrow understanding of Cambodia's past, an approach that reflects a broader pattern among government-sponsored memorials and museums, where official narratives often overshadow more complex or critical perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The Win-Win policy and its associated commemorations occupy a central place in Cambodia's contemporary memory politics. Through monuments, museums, slogan campaigns, and media representations, the ruling party has shaped a narrative of peace that portrays Hun Sen as both the savior from Khmer Rouge atrocities and the main architect and guarantor of peace, stability, and development. These commemorative practices act not only as repositories of selective memory but also as tools of political legitimation, embedding a state-sanctioned version of history into Cambodia's physical and symbolic landscape.

Beneath these grand narratives, however, the actual experiences of those who were directly impacted by the Win-Win policy, particularly former Khmer Rouge members, reveal a more complex picture. Many continue to face economic hardship, social marginalization, and stigma. Their stories not only challenge the government's claim of reconciliation and inclusive development but also point to alternative narratives that sit uneasily alongside the state's celebratory account. Equally sidelined are the complex political processes that shaped the path to the Khmer Rouge's dissolution, which further undermine the idea of a single

architect of peace. The lack of meaningful engagement with these complex histories in commemorative spaces narrows public understanding, reducing Cambodia's history to a single, celebratory version of Hun Sen's leadership. Ultimately, the Win-Win narrative reveals less about the transition from war to peace than about the politics of memory in an authoritarian context—how the past is selectively reshaped to support the current power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am deeply grateful to my research participants for generously sharing their time and insights. I am also thankful to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback on the earlier draft of this essay.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

RESEARCH ETHICS

Data for this research were collected during my PhD fieldwork between 2018 and 2019 and my postdoctoral research in 2024. In adherence to ethical research guidelines, I obtained verbal informed consent from all participants. To protect their identities, the names of individuals and locations have been anonymized.

FUNDING

The research fieldwork was partially supported by the Sederholm scholarship from Uppsala University and by the Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation.

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