

HUN SEN'S SOCIOPATHY

“Crazy like a fox or just crazy?”. This question has surrounded Hun Sen since his ascend to power in 1983 when he took Pen Sovan to prison by the order of VN. And then after he was being a co-PM in in 1993. The question is whether a person who is repetitively immoral – who cons others, lies, cheats, and manipulate to get what he wants, doesn’t care whom he hurts just as long as he is gratifying himself – whether such a person’s indifference to the feelings of others for personal gain is just being clever crazy like a fox. Or are these actions a signal of something much more serious? Could they be expressions of significant mental derangement?

The answer to that question is empathetically, “Yes”. To understand why, it’s is necessary to understand the psychological condition called “sociopathy”, and why a sociopathy is such a severe disturbance.

Caring for others and trying not to harm them is fundamental quality is not just humans, but many mammals. Normal people, as well as normal wolves, dolphins, and elephants, appreciate when another of their species is in pain or danger and, unless fighting over territory or sexual partners, react to protect one another. Such caring and cooperation has major survival value for any species, and its clear evolutionary advantages have made these qualities basic across much of animal kingdom. In humans, the ability to sense the feelings of one another, and try to avoid harming one another even to the extent of placing ourselves at a disadvantage (think of animals that will stand all together to protect against a threat) is called empathy. It is a characteristic of all people no matter what individual emotional conflicts and issues they have. Unless they are sociopaths.

The failure of normal empathy is central to sociopathy, which is marked by an absence of guilt, intentional manipulation, and controlling or even sadistically harming others for personal power or gratification. People with sociopathic traits have a flaw in the basic nature of human beings. Far from being clever like a fox, they are lacking of an essential part of being human. This is why sociopathy is among the most severe mental disturbances.

Yet, we are the culture that admires external success in wealth and power, regardless of it is achieved. People with sociopathic qualities who are able to achieve high status and power precisely because of their manipulations and cheating are, therefore, sometimes seen as not only psychologically healthy, but superior. This contributes to the confusion: “ how crazy can someone be who is so successful?”. It has been said that HS couldn’t possibly have serious mental problems because he got to be a PM.

Indeed, there are generally two life paths for people with severe sociopathy. Those who are unskilled and manipulating and hurting others, who are not careful in choosing their victims, who are unable to act charming well enough to fool people, have lives that often end in failure. They are identified as criminals or lose civil court battles to those they have cheated, or are unable to threaten their way back to positions of power. But those who are good at manipulation, at appearing charming and caring, at concealing their immoral or illegal behavior, and can bully their way to the top, do not end up as outcast or in prison. There is a term for this people: “successful sociopaths”. They are the ones who most fool others into thinking they are “crazy like a fox”. Even their characteristic rages may appear normal. Instead of having a visible tantrum, they may simply fire people, or sue them. As power increases, their ability to disguise their mental disturbance may also increase, concealed behind a wall of underlings (or third

hands) who do the dirty work, or armies of lawyers who threaten those who are currently seen as the enemy. What is important to understand is that their success is on the outside. They are not different from those who are less skilled at concealing their lack of empathy, even if they require an expert to recognize them. They are still severely emotionally ill.

Diagnostic Labels

The word “sociopathy” is sometimes used interchangeably with “psychopathy”, though some have defined the words a bit differently. Sociopathy is also a major aspect of the term, “malignant narcissism”, and roughly synonymous with the official (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, or DSM), psychiatric diagnostic term, “antisocial personality disorder”. All refer to a disturbance in an individual’s entire emotional makeup (hence the term “personality” disorder in the DSM).

A label can never capture everything about a person, though. This may create diagnostic confusion if laypersons expect any individual to fit exactly into their conception of the problem. Cold-blooded murderers and cruel, sadistic rulers may treat their pet kindly, for instance. Consequently, it is the traits of sociopathy that are important to recognize in order to evaluate anyone or assess his fitness to hold a position of power. This is, in fact, the way the DSM does it. Each label has a set of observable behaviors that define it, and these groupings change often. We are now in the fifth version of the DSM, and there will be many more to come as knowledge, understanding, and even diagnostic fads change. Traits, however, are fixed. Therefore, in assessing whether a person is “sociopathic”, what we really need to know is whether he has the observable, definitive traits that indicate the condition. Without being concerned about a formal diagnostic label, it’s useful to consider the traits of antisocial personality disorder as defined in the DSM:

A pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others, occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

1. Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors;
2. Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying...or conning others for personal profits or pleasure;
3. Impulsivity or failure to plan ahead;
4. Irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults;
5. Reckless disregard for safety of self or others;
6. Consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations;
7. Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing, having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another; and
8. Evidence of conduct disorder [impulsive, aggressive, callous, or deceitful behavior that is persistent and difficult to deter with threat or punishment] with onset before age 15 years.

Other systems of diagnosis use different words for the essential sociopathic traits: sadistic, unempathic, cruel, devaluing, immoral, primitive, callous, predatory, bullying, dehumanizing.

The term “primitive” as a descriptor of sociopathic traits deserves special attention. The word derives not from ancient historical times: the early years of life. It helps to explain why there is a multiplicity of defects in these people.

In each development, everything is happening at once. Major emotional capacity. Children must develop ways to manage emotional distress: anxiety, confusion, disappointment, loss, fear, all while they are growing in their capacity to think, and sorting out what is real and what is their imagination. We all develop system to do this, for tolerate and control our emotions, understand and emphasize with the people around us, and tell the different between reality and wishes or fears.

But not people with the early, primitive emotional problems seen in sociopathy. They do not tolerate disappointment, instead they fly into rages and claim that the upsetting reality isn't real. They make up the alternative reality and insist that it is true. This is the definition of delusion. When it is told to others, it is basically a lie. As described early, successful sociopaths may not look very “crazy”, but this capacity to lose touch with reality shows up when they are stressed by criticism and disappointment. Later, when they are less stressed, they explain their loss of reality with rationalizations or simply more lies.

The primitive nature of people with sociopathic traits can also be seen through the findings of brain research. In early life, along with psychological developments, the brain is developing physically. It is notable that people with sociopathic traits have been found to have abnormalities in the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala regions of their brains, areas closely associated with essential cognitive and emotional functions.

Psychological Mechanisms in Sociopathy

People with sociopathic traits employ specific abnormal emotional mechanisms. Primary among these is “projective identification”. “Projection” by itself refer to a belief that others have feelings or thoughts which are actually in the mind of individual doing the projecting. Commonly, these are aggressive and dangerous feelings, which are managed by being projected to others, who are then seen as aggressive and dangerous. When this process occurs regularly, it is simply called paranoia. “Projective identification” is the most serious version of paranoia. The “identification” part of the term refers to seeing others not just as having threatening characteristics, but as entirely dangerous people-people who have to be attacked or destroyed.

This psychological mechanism contributes to loss of reality, rage outbursts, and attacks on others. When it is combined with a lack of empathy and its corresponding lack of guilt for harming others, the danger from such people is enormous.

Projective identification is not only defective psychological mechanism in sociopaths. Because of incapacity to realistically appraise (or care for), others are alternatively seen as evil or good, according to the projection in use at the moment. The sociopaths may treat people as though they are great friends, charmingly complimenting them on how wonderful they are, then abruptly turn on them as the enemy. Loyalty is highly prized by sociopaths because it serves their personal ends, but there is no real relationship. Dividing the word into good and bad in an unstable, fluctuating way is called “splitting”.

Although sociopathy always means a lack of empathy, there is one way in which severe sociopaths do have a certain, frightening type of empathy. It is the empathy of the predator. A tiger stalking his prey must have an ability to sense the prey's fear, or at least to be aware of the small signs of that fear (Malancharuvi 2012). The tiger is "empathic" with its prey, but not sympathetic or caring. Successful sociopaths are like that. They are closely attuned to their victim's emotional state. Does the victim buy what the sociopath is selling? Does he need false reassurance, a compliment on his intelligence or appearance, a lying promise, or a friendly gesture to keep him thinking the sociopath is honorable? The successful sociopath's predatory "empathy" reflects a definite perceptive acumen, making him a genius at manipulation. When this works, it produces a disastrous trust in him. Yet, like the tiger, he is unconcerned about the welfare of his target.

The pathological emotional problems in sociopathy make one another worse. An inability to have a consistent realistic view of the world, or to maintain emotionally genuine relationships, leads to more paranoia. The weakness in impulse control which arises from enraged reactions to imagined slights and produces reckless, destructive behavior, leads to a greater need to deny criticism which more lies to tell oneself and everyone else, and increasing distance from reality. The more a sociopath needs to scapegoat others the more he genuinely hates them, making him even more aggressive and sadistic. Life is devoted to endless destruction in the service of endless quest for power and admiration, unmitigated by basic empathy or guilt.

Hun Sen

Because Hun Sen has been a very public figure since 1983, and because we have been able to see and hear from TV and news, and from many who have known him for a long time, we are in excellent position to know his behaviors-his speech and actions-which are precisely the basis for making an assessment of his dangerousness, whether we assess him using the official DSM criteria for antisocial personality disorder (APD), as below, or whether we apply our knowledge of malignant narcissism, both of which include the signs and symptoms of sociopathy. Let us consider this in turn.

Lack of Empathy for Others; Lack of Remorse; Lying and Cheating

Hun Sen's unlawful abolished of the opposing party (CNRP), sexually raping and killing, killing of activists, verbally attacking everyone who is not in his side, unwilling submission of opposing parties' leaders and followers by threatening and bribes. And many more onerous acts against opponents.

Loss of Reality

HS's insistence on the truth of matters proven to be untrue ("alternative facts") is well known. His insistence has occurred both repeatedly and over a long time, even such denial is not in his interest and it would be better for him to acknowledge that he spoke in error. He falsifies claimed that Sam Rainsy and his father are traitors although they never signed any treaties detrimental to the sovereignty of the country. These show a persistent loss of reality.

Rage Reactions and Impulsivity

HS's rages have been reported on myriad occasions in the press, leading to sudden decisions and actions. He intimidated and threatened to destroy the opposing party's leaders and followers by monopolizing the country's legislative branch for his behalf. Recently, he blasted his party's opponent SR who wants to enter the country by using rocket to kill him.

Conclusion

Hun Sen's speech and behavior show that he has severe sociopathic traits. The significance of this cannot be overstated. While there have surely been head of state and PMs who could be said to be narcissistic, none have shown sociopathic qualities to the degree seen in HS. Correspondingly, none have been so definitively and so obviously dangerous.

Democracy requires respect and protection for multiple points of view, concepts that are incompatible with sociopathy. The need to be seen as superior, when couple with lack of empathy or remorse for harming other people, are in fact the signature characteristics of tyrants, who seek the control and destruction of all who oppose them, as well as loyalty to themselves instead of the country they lead.

The paranoia of severe sociopathy creates a profound risk of country's destruction, even to the state of disappearance, since Khmer people and opposition leaders will inevitably disagree with or challenge the sociopathic leader, who are experience the disagreement as a personal attack, leading to rage reactions and impulsive action to destroy this "enemy". A common historical example is the creation, by sociopathic leaders, of international incident to have an excuse to seize more power (suspend constitutional rights, impose martial law, and discriminate against opposition party supporters). Because such leaders will lie to others in government and to their citizens, those who would check the sociopath's power find it difficult to contradict hi claims and action with facts. Would-be tyrants also typically devalue a free press, undermining journalists' ability to inform and resist the more toward and away from democracy.

HS's sociopath characteristics are undeniable. They create a profound danger for Cambodia's democracy and safety. Overtime these characteristics will only become worse, either because HS will succeed in gaining more power and more grandiosity with less grasp on reality, or because he will engender more criticism producing more paranoia, more lies, and more enraged destruction.

This is an adaptation of the article "Sociopathy" of Donald Trump by Lance Dodes, M.D. in the book of "The Dangerous Cases of Donald Trump" by Bandy Lee, M.D., M.Div. 2017, 2019 p.78-87

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