

1 Introduction

Cambodia was the site of a Cold War proxy conflict beginning as a “side show” to the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s (Shawcross, 1981) and subsequently as a zone for Sino–Soviet and US–Soviet rivalry that prolonged a civil war in Cambodia until the 1990s (Chanda, 1986; Chandler, 2008). The end of the Cold War paved the way for a comprehensive political settlement known as the Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) that had the twin objectives of rebuilding Cambodia’s economy and inaugurating a liberal democratic political system. Under the terms of the PPA, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) oversaw a democratic transition through multi-party elections and the drafting of a liberal constitution in 1992–1993 (Heder and Legerwood, 1996).

Since elections in 1993, the international community – through overseas development assistance (ODA) – has continued to promote Cambodia’s economy and democracy. Despite these international efforts, Cambodia’s democracy has gained little traction. For the most part since 1993, Cambodia’s democracy could be characterized as electoral authoritarianism,¹ wherein multi-party elections occurred but the elections were neither free nor fair, and civil and political liberties were curtailed. It is important to note that electoral authoritarian regimes are not static. The level of competition in authoritarian regimes can vary contingent on the levels of popular political awareness and the unity of opposition camps and Western leverage and linkages (Levitsky and Way, 2010). By 2017, Cambodia’s electoral authoritarianism regressed into hegemonic electoral authoritarianism;² in 2018, the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) orchestrated an election with its main opponent – the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) – outlawed.

Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism draws on multiple sources of data including longitudinal field research that includes interviews with multiple stakeholders, such as party apparatchik, leaders of civil society organizations, farmers, and representatives of bilateral and multilateral institutions operating in Cambodia to trace the social and political changes that account for political dynamics in post-UNTAC Cambodia. First, it argues that despite Western efforts at promoting a rational-legal state that would help strengthen democracy, the CPP perpetuated a state dominated by clientelism and rent-seeking, producing a government with weak administrative capacity but strong in coercive capability. Second, as a means to gain access to international assistance and trade, the CPP permitted the presence of some semblance of

¹ For discussion of the concept see Schedler (2006).

² For discussion of the concept see Diamond (2002).

democracy while using its control over a patronage-based state to coopt and coerce opposition parties and civil society organizations and to influence voters. Third, socio-economic changes galvanized popular political awareness, uniting the opposition to rally for leadership change. Sensing that a counter-movement might be unstoppable under electoral authoritarianism, the CPP returned Cambodia to authoritarianism, the return made partly possible by China's pivot to Cambodia, which provides the CPP with a cushion against Western pressure.

The analysis begins by tracing the development of the Cambodian state, arguing that despite formal trappings of democracy and a modern bureaucratic system, the state is dominated by informal elements of patron-clientelism. These conditions result in a weak state in terms of administrative capacity, service provision, and ability to curb corruption. However, the Cambodian state is strong in terms of coercive capacity, as Cambodian leaders politicized the security forces. The ruling party employs units supposedly designed for inter-institutional accountability namely the judiciary, the Constitutional Council, and the National Assembly as tools to suppress democratic forces and popular democratic aspirations. One of the apparent weaknesses of the Cambodian state is manifested by its hobbled and politicized judiciary. The logic of authoritarianism is that the ruling party does not allow the judiciary to serve as an effective institution of horizontal accountability that can check potential abuses of power by the ruling elite. Consequently, any judicial reform tends to promote "rule by law" or "weaponizing laws" rather than rule of law. The networks of political and economic elites selectively deploy a politicized judiciary to suppress political opposition and civil society groups and to promote their interests.

The book then addresses how weak state capacity associated with entrenched neo-patrimonialism limits the government's ability to control corruption and mobilize resources for the public good. The next section analyzes political parties, elections, and civil society under electoral authoritarianism. It argues that, as elections are the source of domestic and international legitimacy, the ruling party allows multi-party elections and civil society to be present; however, it uses both threats and material inducements to ensure electoral victory. The extent of the ruling party's use of each element depends on the scope of the challenge posed by the opposition and civil society. Cambodia's weak state means that public service provisions in terms of education, healthcare, and infrastructure, such as rural roads and bridges, are poor. With these conditions in play, the ruling party utilizes patronage resources mobilized from business tycoons and government-cum party officials to project itself as an indispensable force for Cambodia.

Despite the party's initial success in attracting voters, the CPP's patronage politics produces contradictions. On the one hand, while permitting the party to dispense resources to build local infrastructure, CPP's patronage politics has spawned corruption and expropriation of the country's resources by politically well-connected groups resulting in increased inequality and social injustice.

Over time, as the next section highlights, Cambodia's social and economic changes, such as a bulge in the youth population, the availability of social media, and migration to urban areas by employment seekers, have broadened popular awareness of the adverse effects of the CPP's patronage politics. These developments led to the growth of counter-movements challenging the status quo. The most significant recent push-back was the merger of the two major opposition parties – the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and the Human Rights Party (HRP) – into a united Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2012. The rise of counter-movements also emerged from increased political activism within Cambodian civil society. The United Nations' intervention in 1993 gave birth to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which grew with ongoing international political and financial support.

These NGOs were initially seen as synonymous with civil society, yet were largely devoid of linkages with the masses. However, by the early 2000s, Cambodia's socio-economic transformation had heightened popular awareness of social and political injustice arising from the ravages of crony-capitalism and electoral authoritarianism. These socio-economic changes, compounded by NGOs adapting strategies linking them to people at the community level, gave birth to a new genre of civil society groups: community-based organizations (CBOs). In the meantime, key progressive trade unions became more vocal over the years in their demands for higher wages and better working conditions. To achieve their objectives these unions rallied behind the opposition parties. They organized strikes and participated in demonstrations against electoral irregularities. In short, unified opposition forces coupled with greater political awareness resulted in counter-movements that called for state institutional reform, social justice, and deeper democracy.

Following the 2013 national elections, the CPP was aware of increased popular discontent toward the government and attempted some reforms. However, given entrenched patronage and corruption, any drastic and meaningful reforms were impossible. By 2017, the ruling party believed that the opposition might be unstoppable if the CPP allowed the continuation of electoral authoritarianism with the presence of a united opposition party, press freedom (albeit limited), and the rather open operation of civil society organizations. Consequently, as the final section discusses, the CPP used the

legislature it controls to pass laws restricting the operation of civil society organizations and political parties. The ruling party eventually deployed the constrained and politicized judiciary to dismantle the CNRP. The ruling party also closed down independent media outlets. The CPP's decisions to increase its authoritarian tendencies can be attributed partly to global geo-political shifts. The mirage of Cambodia's democracy since its inception had persisted in part due to Western pressure. Over time, Western leverage declined, further precipitated by President Donald Trump's America First Doctrine. Amidst this declining Western leverage, China pivoted to Cambodia, providing the latter with financial assistance, sources of foreign investment, and market access. The trend in Cambodia toward hegemonic electoral authoritarianism emerged following an election in July 2018 without the presence of the main opposition party – the CNRP.

KEY POLITICAL PARTIES IN CAMBODIA

CPP: Cambodian People's Party

The then ruling People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea in 1989 changed its name to the Cambodian People's Party to dissociate the party from its communist past and affiliation with the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia (1979–1989). Although the CPP no longer adheres to Marxist-Leninism, its administrative structure contains key characteristics of a communist party i.e., the affinity between the party and the state. The CPP, headed by Hun Sen, has maintained control over Cambodia since 1993; the basis for their support is claiming credit for victory over the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, and economic growth and stability. By banning its main rival – the CNRP – the CPP captured all of the 125 National Assembly seats, transforming Cambodia from electoral authoritarianism to hegemonic electoral authoritarianism in 2018.

FUNCINPEC: National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia

A royalist party emerging from an armed movement against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Led by Prince Norodom Rannaridh, son of former King Norodom Sihanouk, FUNCINPEC won the most seats in the UN-sponsored elections in 1993. Serving nominally as senior partner from 1993–1997, it became a junior coalition partner in the CPP-led government from 1998 to early 2005. Renewed internal conflicts led to the ousting of Prince Ranariddh as its president in 2006. With the help of Hun Sen, Ranariddh became once again president of

FUNCINPEC in 2015. Lack of a concrete policy platform and ineffective leadership meant FUNCINPEC became politically irrelevant.

SRP: Sam Rainsy Party

An opposition party founded by Sam Rainsy as an offshoot of the Khmer Nation Party (KNP) which he also founded following his dismissal from FUNCINPEC and the National Assembly in 1995. Victim of CPP's divide and rule tactics, the KNP split into a pro-CPP faction and the Sam Rainsy faction. Following a protracted legal fight in the CPP controlled courts, Sam Rainsy founded the SRP in 1998. SRP supported liberal democracy and Western style capitalism. Its initial base came from textile workers and urban merchants; drawn by the SRP's fierce attacks on government corruption and social injustice.

HRP: Human Rights Party

An opposition party founded by Kem Sokha, former Director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR). While at CCHR, Kem organized village meetings and public forums to promote democracy, human rights, social justice, and the fight against corruption. Gaining name recognition from these campaigns, Kem founded HRP in 2007 based on the principles of liberal democracy.

CNRP: Cambodia National Rescue Party

Formed from the merger in 2012 between SRP and HRP, CNRP was the largest, most popular, and best organized opposition party. CNRP built strength from HRP's rural base and SRP's urban base. CNRP's political platform was based on liberal democracy and capitalism, populism, and nationalism. CNRP's electoral strength rivaled that of the CPP in 2013 national elections and 2017 local elections; the CPP dissolved it ahead of the 2018 national elections. Its leader, Kem Sokha, was arrested in 2017 and imprisoned for a year. In September 2018, the government released him from jail but continues to hold him under house arrest.

GDP: Grassroots Democracy Party

The party was founded by rural development specialist Yang Saing Koma and social commentator Kem Ley. Kem's assassination in 2016 was broadly believed to be linked to his outspokenness against the government. GDP's core political platform seeks term limits for public office holders and effective resource management. It first contested the 2017 local elections when it won the majority of seats in five out of 11,572 commune councils.

2 Patronage, Power, and the State

The international community through the Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) attempted to implant a rational legal state in Cambodia. However, the presence of a neo-patrimonial system at the time of the introduction of democracy overshadowed such efforts at state building. Cambodia's neo-patrimonial state possesses two elements: (1) formal political institutions such as a constitution, government institutions, political parties, and security forces; and (2) informal networks of patron-clientelism. Formal state institutions serve as focal points for external relations, including government contacts with bilateral and multi-lateral institutions and mechanisms for the ruling elites/party to exercise control over both coercive and economic resources that, in John Sidel's words (1997: 961), are made possible by "state-based derivative and discretionary power." Behind the façade of formal state institutions lay networks of patron-clientelism that constitute, to use Chabal and Daloz's phrase (1999: xix) a "realm of the informal, uncodified and unpoliced" politics which are predominant, serving as the true foundation for political and economic powers. The ruling CPP had used a neo-patrimonial state since 1993 to project electoral authoritarianism and when that order appeared unsustainable, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) then returned Cambodia to hegemonic electoral authoritarianism.

Although patron-clientelism is embedded in a polity's social, economic, and political structure, it is a dynamic institution, transforming itself in response to changes in domestic and international economics and politics. In the era of globalization, patronage resources and networks are increasingly and intricately tied to external economic actors. Through patron-clientelism native entrepreneurs connect government institutions and officials to foreign capitalists in web-like networks. These multi-faceted and multi-layered forms of interactions offer patronage networks new opportunities for collusion, producing new patterns of resource extraction and political and economic domination. Furthermore, neo-patrimonial networks also undergo transformation when countries embark on democratization, either through exogenous or endogenous pressures. Public and private spheres are blurred, and state officials, in many cases, consider state assets or resources as their own. Under these conditions, to use Chabal and Daloz's phrase (1999: 2-5), "the substance of politics is to be found in the myriad networks" that connect various layers of power.

2.1 The Evolution of Patron-clientelism

State structure and capacity in contemporary Cambodia are understandably intertwined with the country's historical, political, and economic developments.

French colonial rule established a “modern state” in Cambodia, which was strong in terms of its extractive capacity but weak in other areas. Upon gaining independence from France in 1953, the Cambodian state continued to be weak. Reliant on his personal charisma and the notion of semi-divinity, King (and after 1955 Prince) Norodom Sihanouk embodied the nation and therefore effectively blocked any institutionalization of the state (Osborne, 1994; Leifer, 1968). The effects of the Vietnam War and the ensuing civil war in the 1970s further weakened the Cambodian state (Shawcross, 1981; Chandler, 2008). More devastating were the near total destruction of state institutions and society, the massacre of educated Cambodians by Pol Pot’s ultra-Maoist regime (1975–1979) (Chandler, 1991; Kiernan, 2002), and the subsequent civil war and international embargo of the Vietnam-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK, 1979–1989) (Gottesman, 2003). It has taken an entire generation for Cambodian society to recover from the ghastly legacy of war and genocide. Fear of a return to violence haunts the generation who survived this horrific period.

It should be noted that the contemporary Cambodian state’s structure and capacity evolved, for the most part, from the period of the PRK and the State of Cambodia (SoC, 1989–1993). Despite the promulgation of a new liberal constitution and a coalition government following the United Nations’ intervention in 1993, the CPP – which has its roots in the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea that controlled Cambodia from 1979 to 1989 – continued to dominate the state thereafter. The CPP domination of the Cambodian state is anchored on the party’s “interlocking pyramids of patron-client networks” (Heder, 1995: 425).

These networks, which Cambodians call *ksae* or “string,” are in constant competition for supremacy, or cooperate at a minimum, to maintain the status quo. These networks are linked to two other elements: corruption and the use of force in a mutually reinforcing triangular mechanism. This mechanism impacts various dimensions of state capacity and democratic development through their reinforcement of “interminable vicious circles” (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti, 1994).

Through these *ksae*, officials at local, provincial, and national levels exercise personal control over the state apparatus, through which they and their clients monopolize a variety of economic activities through the non-transparent issuance of licenses, contracts, and permits in addition to siphoning resources from the state budget. In contemporary Cambodia, the networks that have a high impact on political and economic transformations are found within the ruling CPP. Within the CPP, up until the early 2000s, there existed two competing

supra-networks: the Chea Sim/Sar Kheng network and the Hun Sen network, both of which originated in the 1980s and evolved throughout the years of civil war. Chea Sim, from 1979 until his death in 2015, held powerful portfolios within the government and party including Minister of Interior, President of the CPP, President of the National Assembly, and President of the Senate. In the 1980s, due to his skillful manipulation of patronage politics, Chea Sim was able to extend his power from the center into the provinces through the appointment of his clients to various important party and government positions (Gottesman, 2003: 105–106). Through this informal personal network, Chea Sim was able to wield enormous power, allowing him to overstep state institutions in carrying out his orders and protecting the interests of his clients (Gottesman, 2003: 217, 332–333).

Aware of the significance of patronage politics for political survival initially and for political domination eventually, Hun Sen by the middle of the 1980s began to build his own networks. By carefully avoiding confrontation with Chea Sim, Hun Sen played Chea Sim's game, cultivating his own network of loyalists in the provinces. By using his power inside the central government to maintain a secure space for the protection of provincial officials' interests and power bases, Hun Sen was able to co-opt many influential and at times violent figures. These networks became increasingly salient in the early 1990s because of intra-party rivalry within the CPP and inter-party rivalry between the CPP and the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC). Efforts at consolidating networks fueled, Gottesman (2003: 211) points out, "a sprawling and heterogeneous network of ministries, agencies, and provincial and local administrations whose members adhered to the rules of patronage."

Hun Sen's political astuteness and oratorical talent placed him at the helm of the CPP during the peace negotiation process of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Hun Sen capitalized on this advantage to bolster his power within the CPP and thus the government at the further expense of Chea Sim's network. By the time of the 1993 elections, as Michael Vickery (1994: 114) points out, "If there was a split within the CPP, power within the party seems effectively to have passed from Chea Sim's group to that of Hun Sen." As Cambodia opened to the global political and economic system, Hun Sen gradually expanded his network to encompass not only key individuals in the security forces, but also business tycoons and intellectuals (Heder, 2005) and the CPP's powerful Central Committee. By the early 2000s, Hun Sen had become Cambodia's singular "strongman."

Given Hun Sen's domination over Cambodian politics, some analysts suggest that Cambodia is a personalist dictatorship.³ Although Hun Sen wields decisive power on many issues, there are key signs suggesting that the current regime in Cambodia is not a personalist dictatorship. First, Hun Sen continues to work through the CPP structure in appointing senior government officials and adopting electoral strategies and mobilizing voters. Second, Hun Sen remains cautious in managing factions and frictions within his ruling party. The absence of concrete punitive actions against corruption and abuse of power by government officials following his strong public rhetoric against them suggests Hun Sen's absence of absolute power. Similar to other polities with entrenched patron-clientelism (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984), such lack of concrete punitive actions derives from the fact that Hun Sen's power rests on support of lesser patrons. In the meantime, these lesser patrons rely on him at the top of the pyramid. Such mutual reliance in turn leads Hun Sen to avoid the risk of alienating these lesser patrons. Consequently, Hun Sen shores up these lesser patrons' power and avoids the risk of alienating them by accommodating their requests, tolerating their behavior, and protecting their interests. Sorpong Peou (2001b: 59) cogently explains Cambodia's patronage-based structure:

[T]he Prime Minister's political survival continues to depend on the goodwill of other CPP officials and military leaders who have also reaped the benefits from the CPP's political hegemony. Those who have benefited from Hun Sen's grip on power are those who have helped to keep him in power.

It should be noted that FUNCINPEC under the leadership of Prince Norodom Ranariddh also functioned through patronage. These conditions formed informal networks of entrenched patron-clientelism that affect state institutions, state capacity, and as a consequence undermine the quality of democracy. Under patron-clientelism, state coercive capacity is strong while other dimensions such as voice and accountability, government effectiveness, and regulatory quality are consistently weak (Kaufman and Kraay, 2016).

2.2 Patronage, Security Forces, and Coercion

In Cambodia, patron-clientelism is embedded in all state institutions, including the security forces. Consequently, although they are weak in terms of an absence of professionalism, they are strong in their ability to suppress the ruling party's political opponents, intimidate and threaten voters and protect

³ For further discussion see Morgenbesser (2017).

networks of crony capitalism. In the first several years following the creation of a coalition government in 1993, the Cambodian military was fractious, with some elements aligning themselves behind FUNCINPEC while other supported the CPP. Following the 1997 coup, when forces loyal to then Second Prime Minister Hun Sen deposed then First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the former was able to impose centralized control over the armed forces. However, the military would continue to operate under the covert rules of patronage and corruption. Securing loyalty through promotions has led to a bloated military security sector whose structure resembles a “reverse pyramid” (Far Eastern Economic Review, 1994).

Despite government efforts at military reform, factional politics and the CPP’s goal of maintaining its political domination, this reverse pyramid structure lives on. It was reported in 2014 that the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces had over 2,200 generals of all ranks (some 1,500 more generals than in the entire U.S. military!) (Radio Free Asia, 2014). Heightened political tension following the CPP’s crackdown on the opposition party and civil society groups in 2017 prompted Prime Minister Hun Sen to extend his patronage within the military by promoting an additional 1,250 officers to the rank of general raising the total number of generals to over 3,000 (Mech, 2017). As the military is structured based on patronage and personal loyalty, it is neither professional nor neutral. Research found that the military has been involved in a range of human rights abuses and other illegal activities such as logging and land grabbing (Global Witness, 2007).

The presence of suspicion and fear, both within the CPP and, in the 1990s between FUNCINPEC and the CPP, led Prime Minister Hun Sen to personalize key elements of the security forces. Soon after the 1993 elections, Hun Sen accused unspecified politicians of plotting to take revenge against him when they learned that the CPP would lose the elections. In his statement excerpted by SPK (1993), the official new agency of the State of Cambodia, Hun Sen said:

Great numbers of fellow Cambodians have shown their pain on my behalf because even before the official announcement of the electoral result and complaints of the Cambodian People’s Party [would be resolved] and a number of other political parties, there are people who not only demand to remove me [from power] but also attempt to bring me to trial. The act of revenge has begun like the saying, which states that “when water rises fish eats ants; when water recedes ants eat fish” (*pel teuk laoeng trey si sramaoch pel teuk haoc sramaoch si trey*). What crime did I commit which led me to face such injustice? . . . I have become the victim and this is a sign that revenge will occur in Cambodia in the future . . . If revenge could happen to me what will happen to my subordinates.”