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*International Political Science Review* 2011 32: 546

DOI: 10.1177/0192512111417120

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# Cambodia: Moving away from democracy?

International Political Science Review  
32(5) 546–562  
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DOI: 10.1177/0192512111417120  
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**Kheang Un**

## Abstract

This article examines the quality of democracy in Cambodia, arguing that Cambodian democracy since its inception in 1993 has evolved from unstructured competitive authoritarianism toward an authoritarianism characterized by the presence of a stable hegemonic party system wherein the minimum criteria for democracy have been severely curtailed. Although the quality of democracy has declined, the regime's legitimacy has risen, due mainly to sustained economic growth and political stability, and increased patronage-based development. Economic performance-based legitimacy has become path-dependent; without growth the ruling party's legitimacy might be called into question. Given the current political, social, economic and international contexts that favor economic growth with political stability, Cambodia will sustain a dominant party authoritarian regime with limited quality of democracy.

## Keywords

quality of democracy, Cambodia, patronage politics, competitive authoritarianism, hegemonic electoral authoritarianism

## Introduction

Democratic transition in Cambodia was neither a product of a gradual process, wherein the authoritarian regime slowly opened up the system to democratic competition as the result of a division within the state elites, nor an abrupt change resulting from the sudden collapse of an authoritarian regime under immense societal pressure, in the form of a vibrant civil society. Rather, Cambodian democracy was imposed by foreign powers on the Cambodian warring factions in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) whose objective was to impose a liberal constitutional democracy (Doyle, 1995; Marks, 1994). Over the past two decades, democratic development in Cambodia has defied the original intention of the PPA framework. The overall quality of democracy in Cambodia has declined, evolving from unstructured competitive authoritarianism toward an authoritarianism characterized by the presence of a stable hegemonic party system (Sartori, 1976; Diamond, 2008). From 1993 to 2003, a number of elements of unstructured competitive authoritarianism were

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present, including competitive elections, civic space for public protests and relative freedom of the press. Since 2003, Cambodia has evolved into hegemonic party authoritarianism wherein the minimum criteria for democracy – freedom of expression, freedom of assembly – have been severely curtailed while periodic elections have been maintained. It should be noted that the high level of political violence witnessed under unstructured competitive authoritarianism has declined. Although political suppression persists, it has become subtle. Instead of using physical violence, the ruling CPP has employed the subordinate judiciary to suppress the media from criticizing the government, to prevent civil society organizations from protecting the poor and articulating alternative discourses, and opposition parties from voicing their criticisms. These developments, coupled with the CPP's use of patronage-based material inducements, prevent opposition parties from winning future elections.

The Cambodian case is fascinating and very relevant for the analysis of the quality of democracy for a number of reasons. First, Morlino's framework on the qualities of democracy (2009) argues that the level of a democratic regime's legitimacy corresponds to the quality of democracy measured by three dimensions – procedure, process, and outcome (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). However, the Cambodian case shows that while the overall quality of democracy has declined at aggregate level, that is in terms of the three dimensions identified by Morlino (2009), it experienced some improvements in some specific sub-dimensions (government effectiveness, physical integrity), and the legitimacy of the ruling party has risen as measured in terms of positive approval ratings the general public has shown toward the ruling party (International Republican Institute, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). Does that mean adherence to the procedure and process of democracy matters less in building political legitimacy? Second, despite the façade of democracy, Cambodia has continued to be influenced by historically entrenched patrimonial practices that undermine formal democratic institutions. Third, since democracy was introduced by the international community in the early 1990s, the international community has been continuously involved in Cambodia, creating a strong linkage between Cambodia and major bilateral and multilateral donors. Given the predominance of informal processes, to what extent can international institutions and donor countries compensate for the absence of functioning domestic accountability institutions?

In light of the above questions, this article analyzes the quality of democracy within two broad propositions. First, given the externally imposed nature of Cambodia's democratization, even though the existing social and political conditions were irrelevant to the democratic transition, they matter greatly in determining the quality of democracy at later stages. Patrimonialism constitutes an important element of Cambodia's social and political conditions. Though historically rooted, patrimonialism has shaped and been shaped by political elites and electorates to promote their legitimacy and extract government responses to their demands. In that process, patrimonialism undermines the development and working of democratic institutions and principles. Second, the international community, though rhetorically claiming to promote the quality of democracy (see Huntington, 1991), has in reality settled on granting the Cambodian government its international legitimacy based on economic performance and political stability.

In the final analysis, given that Cambodia's current regime relies on economic development – though with a high degree of inequality – for its legitimacy, in the foreseeable future it will likely adopt the ideology of a developmental state, stressing social order, stability, and economic growth, but not liberal democracy. Given the failure of many dimensions of the quality of democracy, the ruling party must face the challenge of maintaining the current rate of economic growth while also allowing for greater downward flow of development benefits to the poor. If not, then opposition to the ruling Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) monopoly on power may strengthen over time and

**Table 1.** Procedure

Rule of law	Government's regulatory capability and effectiveness increased over time. Law has been used as political weapon against government opponents. Law has been used as a tool to advance economic interests.
Electoral accountability	Extra-judicial killings of journalists have decreased, with none in recent years. Television and radio stations are either owned by or affiliated with the government. Press freedom is limited as journalists exercise self-censorship for fear of legal prosecution.
Inter-institutional accountability	Oversight capacity of government institutions is weak and ineffective. Effectiveness of constraints on the executive power is low as parliament is not equipped, technically and politically, to oversee the executive.
Political participation	Voter turnout has consistently been high, though declined in the last two general elections.
Political competition and competitiveness	Number of political parties has increased but many parties are small and irrelevant. Difference in number of parliamentary seats between the largest and the second largest party has widened. Development toward a hegemonic party system.

potentially cause the CPP to limit the possibility of rising opposition through repression. If this trajectory were to occur, then the CPP would lose both national and international legitimacy. Given the current political, social, economic and international contexts that favor economic growth with political stability, Cambodia will sustain a dominant party authoritarian regime with limited quality of democracy.

## Procedure

Prior to the discussion of dimensions of the quality of democracy, it is imperative to discuss the patron–client concept, for it is a critical variable in understanding political development and thus quality of democracy in Cambodia. Cambodia, like many developing countries, is dominated by neopatrimonialism, which manifests itself in two realms: the realm of legally based and transparent policies that the government rhetorically claims to promote, and the more common realm of informal, un-codified and un-policed policies which are more prominent, serving as the basis on which power is built, perpetuated and legitimized (Bratton and van de Walle, 2001; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; O'Donnel, 1996). Patronage bonds are the key element of neopatrimonialism, wherein patrons are obligated to accommodate their clients' requests, tolerate their behavior, and protect their interests in exchange for support in the form of votes, materials, and political power. Prime Minister Hun Sen and the CPP have ruled Cambodia via this strategy, which over time has become path-dependent. However, Hun Sen/ CPP have transformed patron–client ties by linking state/party elites to economic elites and then to voters to bolster their electoral victories and legitimacy and thus further strengthen their control of the country. Consequently, these linkages have permeated a system that has limited or no representation or vertical or inter-institutional accountability, and also undermined any demands by domestic and international actors for democratic deepening.

## Rule of law

The rule of law, a major component of the procedure dimension, is assessed on the basis of three distinct sub-dimensions: individual security and civil order, institutional and administrative capacity, and effectiveness in fighting corruption. Based on Cingranelli's PHYSINT data – with a range from 0 to 8, where 0 indicates that there is no respect for physical integrity and 8 represents full government respect for physical integrity – Cambodia has experienced a drastic decline from 5 in 2002 to 2 in 2007 with respect for the physical integrity of her citizens. Institutional and administrative capacity is measured on the basis of the World Bank's Governance Effectiveness variable, which ranges from  $-2.5$  (very low governance) to  $+2.5$  (very high governance). Analysis of these data indicates that institutional and administrative capacity has been generally quite bad, failing to gain a positive score in any given year. Although it remains in negative territory, government effectiveness showed signs of improvement, moving closer to positive territory by reaching  $-0.27$  in 2008. The data reveal an interesting development among the three sub-dimensions; while the governance quality has improved, the level of government success fighting against corruption has decreased. An effective fight against corruption is measured on the basis of Transparency International's (2009) Corruption Perception Index (TICPI), which ranges from 0 (high level of corruption) to a maximum of 10 (no corruption). TICPI indicated that Cambodia scored 2.3 out of 10 in 2005, 2.1 in 2006, 2.0 in 2007, 1.8 in 2008, and 2.0 in 2009. The data analysis reveals that, while corruption has generally been regarded as widespread in Cambodia, this perception worsened from 2005 to 2008.

As far as individual security and social order are concerned, Cambodia made significant improvements at the dawn of the 21st century due to two major developments. The first was the end of the civil war in 1998 and the consolidation of power by the CPP since the early 2000s. As the result of government efforts to control access to firearms, more than 200,000 guns have been destroyed, resulting in a low homicide rate between 3.7 and 18.5 per 100,000 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009).

However, the Cambodian government's respect for the physical integrity of its citizens has remained poor, due to occurrences of extra-judicial killings, torture, politically related killings, and political imprisonment. Although the number of political killings has declined, extra-judicial killings and torture remain common, while political imprisonment has risen. Political killings peaked in 1997, when alleged government security personnel attacked a peaceful demonstration led by opposition leader, Sam Rainsy, killing 16 people and wounding 100 more, and the political violence surrounding the 1997 coup orchestrated by Hun Sen to topple Prince Norodom Ranariddh, which killed more than 40 top FUNCINPEC military and political officers (Amnesty International, 1997). These events were followed by political violence leading up to and immediately following the 1998 general elections. In the early 2000s, incidents of alleged political killings and confirmed political killings declined between 2003 and 2005, with no instance in 2005.

While political killings have declined, political imprisonments have increased. This phenomenon is the result of the ruling party's confidence in its dealings with its opponents. Up until the early 2000s, during the period of unstructured competitive authoritarianism, the CPP was concerned with potential loss of power via electoral contests, and thus resorted to violence. As discussed below, following its mastering of the use of patronage to win votes, the CPP changed tactics to use the politically dependent courts to suppress its critics (Un, 2005). Furthermore, as a large number of Cambodians lost their land through land grabbing following the rapid rise in land values accompanying Cambodia's economic transformation in the late 1990s, protests over illegal land dispossession increased (USAID-Cambodia, 2005; Amnesty International, 2008). The

government responded by arresting human rights and community activists who helped the affected poor (Pahna, 2011).

Extra-judicial killings continued, many of which were committed by military and police officers. Others were the result of mob violence due to low public confidence in the security forces and the criminal justice system. Extra-judicial killings committed by state agents are the product of widespread impunity and an absence of political will to address the government's failure to adhere to the rule of law.

Furthermore, torture of suspected criminals remains widespread and persistent. A 2002 survey of prisoners revealed that approximately 10 percent of inmates allegedly experienced torture by police and military police (US State Department, 2002). Widespread and persistent torture is the product of 'weak implementation of legal safeguards against torture' (US State Department, 2004) and the absence of successful prosecution of alleged torturers due to a lack of political will (Amnesty International, 2008; US State Department, 2008). Cambodia is also considered internationally as a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking. Although some progress has occurred in combating severe forms of trafficking, such as conviction of traffickers and officials involved in trafficking, the problem remains significant (US State Department, 2005).

*Institutional and administrative capacity.* Government's ability to collect revenue is a common indicator used to measure state capacity. Arguably, through this indicator, government capacity has improved as evidenced by an increase in tax revenue as a percentage of GDP. Since 2006, government revenue has increased steadily from 11.4 in 2006 to 12.1 in 2007 and 13.3 in 2008. This corresponds to an increase in overall government effectiveness as captured by the World Bank's governance indicators, which show that the level of government capacity improved since 2004. For instance, the percentile rank of the Cambodian government's effectiveness rose from between the 10th–25th percentile in 2004 to the 50th–75th percentile in 2009 (World Bank, 2010). This improvement resulted from the changing nature of the government; from 1993 to 2003, Cambodia was ruled by a coalition government consisting of two former enemies – the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and the CPP. During this period, because of mistrust within and among the parties, coupled with political leaders' determination to consolidate their power, little effort was made toward strengthening government institutional and administrative capacity. In 2006 there was a shift from a CPP–FUNCINPEC coalition government to a sole CPP government following the amending of the constitution to change from requiring a two-thirds majority of votes to a simple majority in the National Assembly for the formation of a government. As previous government failure was blamed by government leaders on the gridlock caused by coalition governments, the end of the coalition could shift accountability to the CPP, whose claim to legitimacy relies on better government performance. In fact, Prime Minister Hun Sen declared 2004 as the beginning of a reform era.

Another development that has contributed to an increase in government capacity is the increase in professional expertise, which was lacking in the 1990s and early 2000s, as a new generation of educated young professionals enters public service. Therefore, currently, the ineffectiveness of some Cambodian state institutions is not so much a matter of technical incapacity as it is a matter of political calculation. In areas such as health which are not fundamental to the maintenance and operation of neopatrimonial networks, the government allows active participation of national and international civil society organizations, generating more effective, responsive, and transparent management. However, the government has consistently resisted any move which might lead to greater institutional independence for agencies that are closely related to the property management regime and rule of law for they could undermine the existing power configuration (Hughes and Un, forthcoming).

*Effective fight against corruption.* Major indicators show that corruption in Cambodia has been high in global and regional comparison. Surveys show that 45 percent and 39 percent of citizens in 2007 and 2008, respectively – who held the view that Cambodia is moving in the wrong direction – cited corruption as their main concern (International Republican Institute, 2007, 2008). Public perceptions toward state institutions, as far as corruption is concerned, are also negative. On a scale from 1 (not honest at all) to 7 (very honest), the courts received a ranking of 1.8, tax and customs service 1.9, public health service 2.5 and the police 2.8. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2007, 72 percent of the public reported paying a bribe to obtain services, while over 61 percent of firms surveyed said that they expected 'to make informal payment to get things done' (U4 Expert Answer, 2009: 2).

Generally, although corruption remains widespread, the nature of corruption has changed from being decentralized to become institutionalized, with a level of reliability and predictability (Hughes and Un, 2007: 44). Since 2005, Cambodia's economy has entered an era of transformation following the country's integration into the regional and global economy. This process has led to increased demand for natural resources such as land, forests, minerals, and oil. Consequently, due to the lack of inter-institutional checks, weak law enforcement and entrenched patronage politics, there have been reports of rent seeking in the natural resource sector by powerful state and non-state actors through a process of collusion between businesses, powerful individuals, and state institutions (Un and Sokbunthoeun, 2010, 2011). Consequently, government capacity to control corruption has been low, with an average of  $-1.081$  within the range of  $-2.5$  to  $2.5$  ( $2.5$  means the highest level of effectiveness) (Kaufman et al., 2009).

International donors and government critics related widespread corruption to the lack of anti-corruption legislation and institutions, and consistently demanded that the government adopt anti-corruption laws. But institutions exist for fighting corruption, including the Ministry of National Assembly–Senate Relations and Inspection, the Anti-Corruption Unit of the Council of Ministers, and the National Audit Authority with legal power to oversee government decisions related to state budgets through annual auditing. Furthermore, by law, the courts can investigate government ministries' activities, based on charges filed by individuals. In reality, these institutions have neither the technical capacity nor the political will to conduct investigations or take action (Transparency International, 2006: 19–27) because key members of these institutions are parts of the neopatrimonial system that channel resources and labor into the CPP's election campaigns.

The long awaited anti-corruption law, first drafted in 1994, was finally passed in early 2010. However, the government's effectiveness and willingness to fight corruption remains doubtful. Anti-corruption work requires not only a good anti-corruption law, but also an effective anti-corruption unit backed by strong and impartial enforcement agencies including the courts. Judicial independence (as previously discussed) is absent in Cambodia, undermined in a context of widespread patron–clientelism and interference in judicial affairs.

### *Electoral accountability*

Electoral accountability is assessed on the basis of a free press and CIRI ELECTSD. The data concerning the freedom of the press are taken from Freedom House. The scores range from 0 (best) to a 100 (worst). The press is free when a country is assigned a score between 0 and 30; it is partially free when the country is given a score of between 31 and 60; the press is not free when a country is given a score between 61 and 100. The data suggest that in general the Cambodian press has enjoyed limited freedom. In a period of eight years from 2002 to 2009, with the exception of 2007 during which the press is considered to have been partially free, Cambodia was in general

not free. The CIRI ELECSO is a trichotomous variable taking the value 0 for those countries where the right to electoral self-determination does not exist or is not enforced, value 1 for those countries in which the right to electoral self-determination exists but is subject to limitations, and value 2 in countries where political participation is very free and very open. The CIRI data show that there have been variations in terms of electoral self-determination, though the data indicate that Cambodians have always enjoyed, at least to some limited extent, the right to electoral self-determination.

Press freedom is severely constrained in Cambodia (McCargo, 2011). Freedom House consistently ranks Cambodia's press as mostly non-free or only occasionally partially free. The government denies access to government documents on grounds of public security. The media has faced many challenges, some of which are internal, including lack of professionalism leading to distorted coverage 'beyond the reach of reason' (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2005), while others are the outcome of the government's restrictive policies. Overall, print media faces less government restriction than broadcast media due to its limited coverage. Due to low literacy rates and affordability, only 2 percent of Cambodians, mostly in urban areas, read newspapers (USAID-Cambodia, 2008: 49). Newspapers affiliated with opposition parties continue to publish articles criticizing the government and specific government officials. However, journalists' freedom and personal safety remain major concerns as those who probe corruption among high officials faced death threats, intimidation, arrest, or assassination. Since 1993, eight journalists have been killed; in 71 percent of these cases, the alleged shooters were government officials and in 29 percent of the cases, they were military officers. Alleged suspects in these cases enjoyed 'complete impunity' (Reporters without Borders, 2010).

Furthermore, the press laws contain vague language creating loopholes allowing for legal charges and convictions of journalists. For example, the 1995 Press Law provided some safeguards for journalists – confidentiality of sources and a ban on censorship. However, the law contains provisions that censor the publication of false information that negatively affects the 'honor or dignity' of an individual, and/or 'national security and political stability.' Over the years these provisions have been used to file criminal charges against journalists. Although the 2007 amended press law has decriminalized defamation, this law is undermined by the 2009 criminal codes that, through its permissible liberal interpretation of 'defamation,' allow for penalization of publication of 'false information,' and 'public insult' (Freedom House, 2010). As a consequence, in 2009 alone the government took legal action in ten cases against opposition newspapers and independent journalists (Reporters without Borders, 2010).

Since the majority of Cambodians receive information via television and radio broadcasting, the government has maintained tight control over the broadcast media. Most television stations are either owned by or affiliated with the ruling CPP, and opposition parties have been denied licenses. There are two independent radio stations currently in operation: Beehive Radio and FM 93.5. However, they have faced frequent government harassment and intimidation. Moreover, the government also employs indirect pressure on independent media by punishing businesses that run advertisements in opposition newspapers, creating a 'pervasive atmosphere of self-censorship' (USAID-Cambodia, 2008: 49).

During election seasons, opposition parties have access only to limited airtime on state-run and controlled media allocated for the election campaign, which severely restricts their exposure to voters. A 2008 IRI survey of the Cambodian public revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents (73 percent) think that it is important that 'all political parties appear equally on TV and Radio' (p. 36). The government has not imposed restrictions on privately owned satellite dishes



receiving foreign news, or censorship on internet usage. However, due to problems of connectivity and cost, Cambodia has very few internet users.

Arguably, despite the above problems, since 1993 Cambodia has enjoyed limited rights to electoral self-determination. For instance, the 1998 elections occurred during a time of political violence against opposition parties. However, CPP intimidation did not deter many people from voting for the opposition parties. The combination of vote totals that FUNCINPEC and SRP received (49.7 percent of the total vote) was higher than the percentage the CPP obtained (42.4 percent). As such, it was the division of the opposition parties rather than exclusively intimidation and violence that contributed to the victory of the CPP. It should, however, be noted that because of the adoption of the 'highest average' formula, also known as Jefferson or d'Hondt formula, in the 1997 Election Law, the election result gave the CPP (the largest party) a disproportionate number of seats at the expense of FUNCINPEC and the SRP (Gallup, n.d.). However, the result is consistent with CIRI data, which shows that Cambodians enjoy, at least to some limited extent, the right to electoral self-determination.

### *Inter-institutional accountability*

Inter-institutional accountability is measured on the basis of two variables. One is Polity IV's Executive Constraints. This variable is a 7-point scale where 1 indicates that executive power is unlimited while 7 signifies that executive power is effectively constrained. Overall, executive power in Cambodia was consistently unconstrained, with a score of 1 from 2002 to 2008.

Despite the constitutionally mandated democratic system based on a foundation of checks and balances, power in Cambodia rests in the hands of the executive. Chief executive power lies with the Prime Minister, who is elected by a majority of votes in the National Assembly. The 1993 Constitution, drafted after the UN sponsored elections, was a conciliatory document which required a two-thirds majority of votes in the National Assembly to choose a Prime Minister. Since no party won a two-thirds majority in 1993, the CPP threatened to use force to demand new elections. A compromise was struck wherein the government was headed by two prime ministers – Hun Sen and Ranariddh – who both strove to consolidate power under the executive branch and ultimately under their own networks, which undermined the principles of inter-institutional accountability. Following the defeat of FUNCINPEC in 1997 and his subsequent skillful manipulation of patronage politics, Hun Sen has subdued his rivals within and outside of his party to become the dominant figure in Cambodia. While remaining a part of the CPP, he built his own independent power base which affords him a position above party control, with personalized networks that permeate and supersede state institutions.

The power of Prime Minister Hun Sen has been enforced by the Prime Minister's well equipped and funded bodyguard unit numbering between 2000 to 3000 soldiers and a reserve unit known as Unit 70 (Global Witness, 2009). Prime Minister Hun Sen's Bodyguard Unit was created to protect him and his government and is answerable only to him. The unit played a leading role in the July 1997 violence that toppled Prince Norodom Ranariddh (Adams, 2007). The role of Hun Sen's Bodyguard Unit was expanded and by 2009 the unit's role for engagement transformed from responsibility for the Prime Minister's security to national defense. The current power configuration and institutional developments mean that executive constraint is non-existent.

Per constitutional mandate the legislature is an independent and equal branch of the government vested with legislative and oversight power. In addition to the right to initiate legislation, the parliament also has 'investigative' and 'quasi-judicial' functions through which it can file charges against government officials who commit serious crimes and call on government officials to testify on

matters of importance to the nation (Peou, 2001: 47–48). In reality the parliament plays a reactive and subordinate role. Four factors underpin this legislative subordination:

1. The historical absence of a strong legislature. Since its independence from France in 1954, the Cambodian parliament has served as an arena for political legitimization rather than an oversight institution or a forum for democratic debate.
2. Party leaders of FUNCINPEC (when it was part of the coalition government) and CPP maintained tight control over their members. Having strong party discipline is normal in parliamentary democracies; however, such control – when it occurs within the context of patronage politics, widespread corruption, political mistrust and the continuation of an authoritarian tradition – becomes an impediment to inter-institutional accountability.
3. Because members of parliament lack legislative capacity, they always defer the right to draft legislation to the executive. Since its inception in 1993, the legislature has initiated no legislation. A USAID report notes that ‘legislation is proposed by the government and almost always moves through the Parliament quickly with little opposition, debate or even discussion’ (USAID-Cambodia, 2008: 39). The consequence is that ‘... parliament’s legislative power has become undermined as the government delivers sub-decrees without the approval of the National Assembly, which are subsequently applied as law’ (Transparency International, 2006: 20). A weak National Assembly runs counter to the wishes of the overwhelming majority of voters, who think that it is important to make the National Assembly ‘more powerful to watch the Prime Minister and government’ (International Republican Institute, 2008: 35).
4. The lack of executive constraint is further exacerbated by a weak Constitutional Council (CC). The CC has the mandate to safeguard respect for the constitution, and to interpret the constitution and laws passed by the National Assembly. Furthermore, the CC also has review power over the issue of constitutionality of already promulgated laws and administrative decisions. In essence, the CC has veto and review power over legislation it deems unconstitutional and thus has the potential to influence policy formulation and implementation. Because of a lack of political independence, despite clear constitutional mandate the CC has not thus far ‘made any decision that could affect the policy of the government or protect the constitutional rights of the people’ (Lao, 2006).

### *Political participation*

Political participation is measured on the basis of turnout in parliamentary elections. The data on electoral turnout indicate a major drop in electoral participation from 83.2 percent in 2003 to 75.2 percent in 2008. Although the level of popular participation in elections has been high, it has recently declined from 86.75 percent in 1993 to 93.75 in 1998, to 83.22 percent in 2003, and to 75.2 in 2008. During the last three general elections, opposition parties led by the SRP have rejected the results, citing political intimidation and violence as well as biased electoral machinery. They also alleged that the National Election Committee was colluding with pro-CPP local authorities to delete potential opposition supporter names from voting lists, changing polling stations shortly before the voting to confuse opposition supporters, and issuing fraudulent forms that allowed persons not on the lists to vote. Surveys by election monitoring NGOs confirmed some of these allegations. In the 2008 elections, approximately 2.1 million of 8.2 million registered voters failed to cast their ballot on election day; 440,000 voters or 21.3 percent of the total registered voters attempted to vote but were unable to do so for one of three reasons: (1) the inability to find their

names on voter lists; (2) the inability to find a polling station; and (3) lack of proper identification (COMFREL, 2009: 8). The remaining 1,660,000 voters did not go to vote for a number of reasons including moving residence, sickness, the travelling distance to polling stations, and loss of identity documents (COMFREL, 2009: 12, 13).

The quality of political participation in Cambodia beyond elections remains low. World Bank Governance Indicators show a consistently low level of voice and accountability with an average, for a period from 1996 to 2008, of  $-0.77$  out of a range of  $-2.5$  to  $2.5$  (Kaufman et al., 2009). Participation in policy-making is generally lacking. NGOs, which form a large part of Cambodia's civil society, and which have helped resolve many cases of human rights violations, also have their own internal problems. Cambodian NGOs did not gradually develop out of a society with densely formed social capital and civil society organizations. Rather, the rise of Cambodian NGOs was the product of the sudden availability of international funding, and the political space created by the PPA and the continuation of international political engagement. Under these circumstances, prominent NGOs, particularly democracy and human rights NGOs, are urban based with little or no grassroots membership. These problems have been exacerbated by government intimidation and restriction, particularly in the countryside when they attempt to establish links with people. In sum, there is an absence of a strong and active civil society with mobilization ability that can politicize certain issues, and generate public awareness and participation which would in turn theoretically place pressure on political elites, and indirectly on political institutions, to behave democratically (Un, 2006).

### *Political competition*

Political competition is measured on the basis of two indicators: the number of parties that were able to win at least one seat in parliament and the difference in the strength of the first and the second largest parties. This variable is computed by subtracting the number of seats won by the second largest party from the number of seats won by the largest party and dividing this result by the total number of parliamentary seats.

The political system's level of competitiveness has fluctuated but it has appeared to become more competitive. The number of parties that were able to win a parliamentary seat was four in 1993 then dropped to three in the 1998 and 2003 elections but later increased to five in 2008. The gap between the first and the second party has widened over time from 5.7 percent in 1993 to 17.2 percent in 1998 to 38.2 in 2003 to 52 percent in the 2008 elections. Data from the 2003 and 2008 general elections show that the political system has become more competitive as the number of political parties winning at least one parliamentary seat increased from three to five. However, the level of competitiveness among political parties has substantially declined over time. Therefore, the sheer number of parliamentary parties may not provide an indication of the increase in competitiveness in the political system as, to use Sartori's words, 'some parties, though present in the parliament, are irrelevant to the function of the political system' (Sartori, 1976: 10). These trends suggest that in Cambodia the level of political competition has declined and the political system has become a hegemonic party system dominated by the CPP.

The decline in political competition derives from the weakness of the CPP's opponents, and a change in CPP's strategy made possible by its domination of the state and skillful manipulation of patronage politics. During the 1993 UN-sponsored elections, the CPP relied on two strategies. The first was the moral claim to be the party that liberated Cambodians from the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. The second was the use of violence and intimidation against opposition parties and their supporters. The CPP would expect that a population – economically distressed, politically oppressed and psychologically traumatized by years of economic hardship, civil war

and dictatorial rule – would not cast protest votes against the well-armed ruling party. Surprisingly, the majority of voters (61 percent) defied CPP's threats and resisted its propaganda, and voted against the CPP.

Despite an atmosphere of violence and intimidation following the 1997 violent ouster of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the combined number of votes won by opposition parties (49.7 percent) remained higher than that of the CPP (42.4 percent). Following the 1998 elections, political competitiveness began to favor the CPP after the Hun Sen/CPP's reconsideration of their strategy for legitimate power consolidation and maintenance (Un, 2005; Hughes, 2006). The consequence has been the CPP's fundamental shift away from the use of violence towards material inducements to win the 'hearts and minds' of rural voters. This was the beginning of the development of mass patronage politics, through which the CPP organized central government officials, state institutions, and national and provincial businesses to do the work of machine politics.

Since 1998, the CPP has retooled the working groups – known as the Party Working Groups (PWG) – transforming them into development agents hierarchically and systematically linked to the CPP's networks of patronage and the state structure. These working groups systematically permeate, supersede and in some cases operate parallel to state institutions to channel centrally controlled resources to local communities for rural infrastructure development, building schools, roads, and irrigation systems on top of small gifts. This strategy has generated much popularity and legitimacy for the CPP. In the 2003 parliamentary elections, the CPP captured 73 seats while FUNCINPEC, the second largest party, won only 26 seats, widening the difference between the 1st and 2nd largest parties to 38.2 percent.

By the last general elections of 2008 the political system had evolved into a hegemonic party system dominated by the CPP. Continued political stability coupled with sustained economic growth in the past 10 years has engendered great legitimacy for the CPP. In those elections, the CPP won 90 seats while the second largest party, the SRP, captured only 26 seats, making the difference between the 1st and 2nd parties 52 percent.

In the meantime, the number of political parties which won seats in the National Assembly increased from three to five. This increase does not reflect an increase in political competitiveness, but rather the fragility of the opposition parties. Due to its inability to transform itself from an armed resistance movement to a political party, poor leadership and internal division, FUNCINPEC has disintegrated. Two of the parties that occupied seats at the National Assembly – the Norodom Ranariddh Party and the Human Rights Party – are FUNCINPEC splinters. Like FUNCINPEC, they face an uncertain future.

## **Content**

### *Freedom*

Freedom is measured on the basis of two variables: Freedom House's Political Rights Scores and CIRI's Civil Rights/Empowerment Rights Index. Freedom House's Political Rights scores range from 1 (highest level of freedom) to 7 (lowest level of freedom). The Cambodian data reveal that Cambodians enjoy almost no political rights, consistently scoring 6 from 2002 to 2008. CIRI's Civil Rights/Empowerment Rights Index is an additive index constructed from freedom of movement, freedom of speech, workers' rights, political participation, and freedom of religion indicators. Its values range from 0 (these rights are not respected) to 10 (these rights are fully respected). The data reveal that there was a progressive worsening in such rights up to 2005, then fluctuation from 7 in 2002 to 2 in 2003, down to 1 in 2005, before improving markedly to 6 in 2006. In general

terms, limited freedom of association and assembly are respected by the government due partly to international scrutiny. However, such space has become increasingly narrowed. From 1993–2003, despite incidents of political violence against opposition party activists and government critics, political space was open. Political activism in the form of public protests engineered by opposition parties engendered a political space that subsequently served as an arena ‘for individuals and groups to press their own substantive concerns over government policies,’ whether land rights, democracy, corruption, rule of law, or decent wages (Hughes, 2002: 167).

There are over 3000 civil society organizations operating in Cambodia, generally belonging to three groups: service delivery non-governmental organizations, advocacy organizations, and community-based organizations. Service delivery non-governmental organizations and community-based service delivery organizations have formed partnerships with international non-governmental organizations and government in the provision of healthcare, education, and other services and have enjoyed freedom of operation. Although the government allows advocacy NGOs such as Human Rights NGOs and legal aid NGOs to investigate and publicize human rights abuses and carry out training, they often face harassment if their actions aim to advance human rights or assist victims of unlawful land grabs that are deemed sensitive to the CPP’s grip on power (Freedom House, 2009). Some community-based organizations have been able to highlight issues critical to local communities such as access to forest resources, thereby forcing loggers and government agencies to enter negotiations with local communities. However, they have not been successful in defending local interests when faced with powerful actors who are part of the ruling party’s neopatrimonial system.

Cambodia’s few independent trade unions are active and frequently stage strikes to protest low wages, forced overtime, and poor and dangerous working conditions. Sometimes protests were broken up by ‘police or pro-government thugs’ and organizers and activists faced dismissal and other harassment at some factories, and sometimes ‘intimidation and physical attacks’ (Freedom House, 2004). A number of union leaders have been killed and the perpetrators have not been found. As of late 2010, labor activists, who are vocal in their disagreement with government-mediated settlements of the conflicts between labor and factory owners, continue to face threats of violence and fear of government legal action (Frontline, 2010).

Freedom House consistently gives Cambodia a ranking of 5 for civil liberty and 6 for political rights. Major concerns are torture, impunity, violence against women – including domestic violence and trafficking – freedom of expression and freedom of association. Cambodia’s Constitution prohibits torture; however, there is no law specifying the nature of the offense of torture or punishment for violators. Illegal detention of suspects beyond legal limits without charges persists.

Harassment, intimidation and violence against opposition parties’ activists continue to exist. However, it should be noted that the level of physical violence against opposition party activists has markedly declined. The numbers of victims associated with politically related violence surrounding each election have declined from 380 in 1993 to 40 in 1998 to 28 in 2003 and to alleged but unconfirmed seven in 2008 (Sok, 2007).

Political freedom worsened in 2005 following the arrests and threats of arrest of opposition members of parliament, and leaders of civil society organizations. These arrests included prominent parliamentarian Sam Rainsy, Mam Sonando, owner and manager of independent popular Radio Beehive, and Kem Sokha, then director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, on charges of defamation for their accusations of territorial concessions to Vietnam by Hun Sen’s government (Freedom House, 2006). CIRI’s Rights/Empowerment Rights Index seems to suggest that ‘there was marked improvement’ on the civil rights index in 2006. This improvement reflected the government’s decision to release jailed human rights activists and drop threats against leaders

**Table 2.** Content

Freedom	Political rights and civil liberties have progressively worsened. Civic space for social protest and mobilization has been constricted.
Equality	Equality has declined with current Gini coefficient dropping from 0.35 in 1994 to 0.40 in 2004. High inequality of land ownership wherein top 10 percent own 64.4 percent of all arable land whereas bottom 40 percent own only 5.4 percent.

of opposition parties. However, this improvement was temporary. By the end of 2007, the government intensified suppression of all forms of criticism. Two new laws – one strips legislators of immunity and the other criminalizes defamation – have been used extensively to silence opponents, democracy activists, and journalists. Currently, there appear to be no external or internal constraints on the government/CPP suppression of civil liberties. Rather than holding the CPP accountable to democratic values, the international community – whose leverage on the Cambodian government lies in its financial assistance amounting to over 8 billion dollars since 1993 – and the majority of Cambodians have awarded the CPP its legitimacy based on its ability to offer economic growth and political stability.

### *Equality*

Equality is based on the Gini coefficient, which ranges from 0 (perfect distribution) to 100 (perfect inequality). Available data indicate that Cambodia has experienced widening inequality. The national Gini coefficient increased from 0.35 in 1994 to 0.40 in 2004. The trends of Cambodia's economic growth for the past 14 years have been consistently high, averaging 7 percent per annum. Despite this consistent growth rate, the level of poverty has fallen slowly, by an average of 1 percent per year, dropping from 47% in 1993 to 35 percent in 2004 (World Bank, 2006: 18–21). In the meantime, inequality grew between urban and rural areas in income, healthcare, infrastructure, and education. While the Gini coefficient in rural areas was 0.27 in 1994 it increased to 0.33 in 2004; the national Gini coefficient increased from 0.35 in 1994 to 0.40 in 2004. Furthermore, there is considerable concentration of land ownership as a consequence of the governmental land concessions and land purchases. This produced a critical situation wherein in 2003 the bottom 40 percent of the socioeconomic strata owned only 5.4 percent of the arable land, whereas the top 20 percent owned 70 percent of the land, 64.4 percent of which was owned by the top 10 percent (Dapice, 2005: 15).

Such inequality will persist as the government continues to focus on economic growth and seeks a trickle-down effect (Chhun, 2007). It should also be noted that those barely out of poverty are still vulnerable given poor social services; when faced with a shock or change such as an illness of a family member or a bad harvest, families can easily fall into financial crisis (World Bank, 2006).

The situation of women has improved but still faces challenges. Over the years, the government has adopted a set of initiatives and legislation to protect and enhance women's rights. Prominent among these are the passage of legislation outlawing domestic violence and the inclusion of gender equity and advancement of women's rights into the national development plan. However, due to an absence of effective and systematic coordination among policies and ministries and inadequate resources, women continue to face numerous constraints such as violence, limited health and economic participation and decision-making, limited political participation, and lack of control over economic resources.

Cambodian women are also underrepresented in politics and government. The numbers of women in elected institutions are as follows: 1662 female councilors among the 11,353 total commune councilors or 14.6 percent; 20 members of the 123 National Assembly members or 16 percent; nine senators out of 61 total members or 14.6 percent. The number of women holding government leadership positions has increased, though the absolute number remains limited. The numbers of women holding the positions of Secretaries of State, Under Secretaries of State, Deputy Provincial Governors, and District Deputy Governors were 16 out of 198, 30 out of 205, 23 out of 202, and 169 out of 550, respectively (USAID-Cambodia, 2008: 44; Kim, 2010).

## **Outcome**

### *Responsiveness*

Responsiveness is measured on the basis of popular support for democracy. Although no direct data are available, the level of popular support for democracy could be gauged through public opinion surveys of support for the regime. Recent surveys show that the level of popular support for the regime has increased from 71 percent in 2007 to 79 percent in 2009 (International Republican Institute, 2008, 2010). Clearly the quality of democracy in Cambodia has receded over time. Many Cambodians have expressed dissatisfaction over weak rule of law and endemic corruption, and a desire to see greater democratization such as more equal access to the media and restraints on executive power. The CPP-controlled government, however, has acquired broad political legitimacy particularly in rural areas, as evidenced by the large percentage of the people who express satisfaction with recent economic progress. A 2009 International Republican Institute (IRI) survey of Cambodian public opinion indicates that 79 percent of the people feel that the country is moving in the right direction. This support for the CPP stems from two key factors: peace and political stability for a decade and high economic growth.

Such satisfaction is reflected in the increasing margins by which the CPP has won electoral victories. This development connotes popular ambiguity toward democracy. On the one hand, there appears to be popular support for democratic values. On the other hand, this demand is subsumed under the need for political stability and economic growth. The final outcome is that the ruling party's legitimacy does not rest on its willingness and ability to deepen democracy but rather on improving living standards. Within the context of exogenously introduced democratization into a post-conflict, poverty-stricken society, although people see the value of democracy, they also understand the broader context of their country's political, social, and economic reality. This reality includes the incumbent's unwillingness to open the political system to genuine democracy. Given Cambodia's recent past, the popular choice is to forego democracy at least for the time being in return for physical security and material gains.

## **Conclusion**

Given its externally imposed nature, Cambodia's quality of democracy is contingent upon exogenous and endogenous factors. Endogenously, the CPP's rising legitimacy is attributed to the Cambodians' subordination of their preference for democracy to sustained peace and economic development. Exogenously, in aid-dependent countries, international institutions can in some cases intervene to compensate for the absence of democratic procedures and institutions. However, their ability to push for deeper democracy is constrained by their geo-strategic interests, which are best served by Cambodia's political stability and economic growth. Consequently, pressure via

**Table 3.** Outcome

Satisfaction with the regime	<p>Popular support for the regime is high, resulting from the regime's ability to provide tangible economic benefits and socio-political stability.</p> <p>Popular perception of other sub-dimensions such as inter-institutional accountability and rule of law is more negative.</p>
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international linkages and leverage has produced only some semblance of democracy – the existence of multi-partism, civil society organizations and periodic elections. It is important to note that the case of Cambodia highlights the fact that a regime might lack democratic qualities but still enjoy legitimacy as long as it can deliver tangible economic benefits to its people.

Although many dimensions of democracy have failed, many democratic ideas – rule of law, accountability, transparency, human rights, equity – which were absent prior to the 1993 PPA have taken root in Cambodia. Therefore, it is imperative for the international community through its continued involvement to ensure the continuing presence of this democratic discourse, however, limited. In the long run, democracy with quality might be feasible as a product of the CPP's strategy to link its legitimacy to economic performance and the maintenance of peace. Cambodia's economic outlook remains strong given East and Southeast Asia's vibrant economic trends. This continued growth will in turn expand and transform the country's currently narrow middle class, who could then aspire to greater personal freedoms and call for democratic deepening. This outlook is, however, uncertain. On the one hand, it is plausible, as in the cases of Singapore and Malaysia, that the middle class in Cambodia which has benefited from an authoritarian regime might have little incentive to challenge the status quo. On the other hand, the rise of the middle class, as seen in South Korea and Taiwan, helped generate bottom-up pressure that eventually led the two countries toward democratic transition and then consolidation. Cambodia's recent economic developments, with high levels of inequality, could lead to popular demands – particularly from urban middle class and urban poor – for political change. In the final analysis, what is certain is that, in the intermediate future, given the current political, social, economic, and international contexts, Cambodia will sustain a dominant party authoritarian regime with a limited quality of democracy.

### Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Griffith Asia Institute and Center for Governance and Public Policy, Griffith University, for their financial support, and participants of the 2010 workshop on the 'Quality of Democracy in Asia Pacific,' for their comments on the initial draft of this article. The author would also like to thank Drs Leonardo Morlino, Riccardo Pelizzo, and Björn Dressel for their helpful comments for revision and improvement.

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