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Understanding Hybrid Democracy in Cambodia: The Nexus Between Liberal Democracy, the State, Civil Society, and a “Politics of Presence”

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This article analyzes the gap between globally promoted definitions of liberal democracy and the different ways in which the concept is interpreted by individual politicians and civil society representatives in Cambodia. By taking as our point of departure the gap between “hegemonic” views of democracy and locally lived democracy experiences and strategies, we argue that one of the basic concepts of liberal democracy—the concept of the “politics of ideas”—does not easily match local facets of democracy. Followers of liberal democracy give priority to the representation of ideas and ideologies over the question of who represents them. This priority, however, seems to correspond poorly to the situation in present-day Cambodia. Based on extensive field material, the article demonstrates how Cambodian interpretations of the Western understanding of “liberal democracy” try to bridge the gap between the praxis of the “politics of ideas” and the “politics of presence.”

Key words: Cambodia, civil society, democracy, hybridity, politics of ideas, politics of presence

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the concept of “liberal democracy”—that is, “a historically specific form of democracy . . . defined and structured within the limits set by liberalism” (Parekh, 1992, pp. 160–161)—has become a catchphrase on the agenda and in the rhetoric of different international organizations in current “globalized international society.”¹ In this spirit, the United Nations (UN) in 1993 took the lead by seeking to transform Cambodia into a liberal democracy. The process that followed, however, created various local interpretations of what democracy actually is and how it should be understood. Now, two decades after

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the UN-“implemented” democracy was put in place, Cambodians have gradually started to realize that there is more to democracy than voter registration, voting, and ballots. In this regard it becomes crucial to understand what this “more” is all about.

Responding to this challenge, this article seeks to bring into focus the perspectives and life experiences of national politicians and various civil society representatives who live and work in Cambodia.² Looking into the Cambodian case can give us valuable information about what happened in a country that was subjected to “The Liberal Project” of the 1990s, a decade when, it was argued, “the capitalist democracies [had] vanquished their twentieth century antagonist, communism, . . . and with this victory [making] the liberal democratic . . . ascendant” (Burbach, Nunez, & Kagarlitsky, 1997, p. 35 quoted in Roberts, 2001, p. x).

The concept of liberal democracy originates from the core of international society but is, by different means and with various results, spread to and also adopted by the states in the periphery, creating different hybrid forms of democracy in different countries. Moreover, mainly as an effect of “globalization,” it has today become more appropriate to speak about an “international society of globalized states” or even a “global society” (Clark, 2011, pp. 554–555). The latter concept implies, *inter alia*, that the state is not the only appropriate agent when it comes to defining and implementing democracy. Other important agents include nongovernmental organizations, social movements as well as other civil society agents.

The intervention in Cambodia does not only help us to understand the struggles of transition under the UN but also the continued challenges to this “new democracy” (Roberts, 2001, p. xiv). A more straightforward question is: what happens at the local level in the aftermath of various intangible theorizing and policymaking ventures imposed from the outside?

This article aims to provide an understanding of the encounters between a Western liberal understanding of democracy and various local traditions in Cambodia. In this process, a particular “hybrid” form of democracy,³ which differs in important ways from the original vision outlined by the UN, is constructed. Through this, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of current Cambodian politics, but it also more generally adds to the important literature on “democracy’s third wave” and “new democracies” in Asia and beyond (Bunce, 2003; Carothers, 2002, 2006; Diamond, 2002; Huntington, 1991; Linde, Ekman, & Uhlin, 2006; Lipset & Lakin, 2004).

It can, of course, be debated at length if Cambodia fulfills the requirements of being a democracy or not. To engage in this discussion is, however, beyond the scope of this article. Having said this, we can conclude that in various democracy indices, Cambodia ends up at roughly the location 100 of 165, which means that the political system is neither fully democratic, nor strictly authoritarian but rather a mix or hybrid form of political system. In the fifth edition of the The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, reflecting the situation at the end of 2012, Cambodia scores 4.96 on a 10-point scale (location 100). By this, the country falls into the hybrid regime category (scores 4 to 5.9). The category is defined as follows:

Elections have substantial irregularities that often prevent them from being both free and fair. Government pressure on opposition parties and candidates may be

common. Serious weaknesses are more prevalent than in flawed democracies—in political culture, functioning of government and political participation. Corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is weak. Civil society is weak. Typically there is harassment of and pressure on journalists, and the judiciary is not independent. (The Economist, 2012)

Only two Asian countries—Japan (8.08) and South Korea (8.13)—qualify as full democracies in 2012. If the score is below 4, then the regime is considered authoritarian. The only category in which Cambodia scores below this number is in the category “political participation” (3.33) (The Economist, 2012). Taking into consideration what has been put forward above, we have chosen to label Cambodia as a “hybrid” or “new” democracy throughout this text (cf, e.g., McCargo [2005] and Un [2011], who prefer to label the country “electoral authoritarianism”).

The amalgamation of “democracy” has not only taken place in the arena of communication and cooperation with international society, global civil society, or their organizations and spokespersons in transnational society, but also in the context of Cambodian politics—historically as well as rhetorically (Lilja, 2010). Today, people’s understanding of “democracy” is intimately linked to their previous historical experiences of various systems of rule within the Cambodian nation (Chandler, 1993; Hinton, 2004; Widyono, 2008). To a certain extent, as will be demonstrated below, local voices also compose counter discourses to the liberal democracy that is imposed from the outside. They constitute discourses of “resistance” to the international and transnational processes as well as the so-called “democratic” output.⁴

Several scholars who work on Cambodian studies have concluded that local discourses of patron–client relations affect the current democratic system in an undesirable direction and are creating a hybrid system of rule. In this article we will, however, try to demonstrate new aspects and possibilities of this hybrid system by using an alternative analytical approach that is grounded in theories of “democratic representation.” In greater detail and beyond examination of the gap between globally promoted definitions of liberal democracy, on the one hand, and local experiences and strategies, on the other, we will show that one of the basic concepts of liberal democracy, namely, the “politics of ideas,” does not match very well with local facets of democracy in Cambodia. Followers of liberal democracy seem to give priority to the representation of ideas and ideologies rather than *who* represents them (Phillips, 2000). This priority, however, corresponds poorly to the reality in Cambodia. “Universal” truths about liberal democracy are, in fact, turned into a “particular” hybrid in Cambodia, in which the matter of *who* represents in many cases becomes the main issue rather than the question of ideas and ideologies; in other words, *who* is given priority over *what*.

The overall research strategy used for this study is “ethnographic” and “discursive”; that is, the study is based on a combination of participant observation and interviews of different stakeholders in Cambodia, with a particular focus on local representations of democracy. The research team visited Cambodia seven times between 1995 and 2007 and conducted 100 semi-structured interviews, mainly with politicians and various civil society representatives. Also included were visits to the Parliament, party headquarters, as well as the offices of different civil society organizations. We will return to the discussion about methodology in more detail below.

This research strategy allows us to present a “contemporaneous people-centered understanding of [Cambodian “democracy”] at the local level” (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 57). Cambodian interpretations of “liberal democracy” help bridge the gap between national and international discourses of decision making in general and, in particular, the gap between the “politics of ideas” and “politics of presence.” This article examines this process and shows the transformative potential of many Cambodian politicians in their desire to negotiate the prevailing political system.

“Liberal Democracy” and the “Politics of Ideas”

The dominant concept of democracy for international and global agents is that of liberal democracy—a particular hybrid of liberalism and democracy often promoted as a universal value (Bunce, 2003; Carothers, 2002; Fatton & Ramazani, 2004; Lilja, 2010).⁵ Today, however, researchers who try to make a distinction between democracy and liberalism challenge this notion. Thus, the Freedom House Index has been accused of “overloading” their vision of democracy by assigning it a bunch of characteristics, which are really facets of political liberalism, although related to democracy (Lilja, 2010; Schneider & Schmitter, 2004). Some of the characteristics of “liberal democracy” may be seen as preconditions for, rather than a part of, democracy (Lilja, 2010). Hence, it might be more correct to say that democracies in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia are constituted along liberal lines. These democracies then, as Bhikhu Parekh (1992) points out, have features such as the following: “individualism, elections, majority rule, multiple political parties, a limited government, the autonomy of the civil society, fear of political power and the familiar mechanisms for regulating it” (p. 166). They also lack mediating institutions between the individual and the state. Additionally, liberal democracy nourishes the images of an abstract politician, of the abstract state and its abstract citizens (Lilja, 2010; Parekh, 1992).

Parekh (1992) maintains that different elements of liberal democracy (e.g., the concept of the individual, the concept of rights, and the abstraction of the state) cannot be universalized. Still, many institutions and practices of this kind of democracy have also proved to be attractive outside the Western context. Each component of liberal democracy must be contextually valued from the specific needs and circumstances of each country (Lilja, 2008; Parekh, 1992, pp. 172–173), and since it is impossible to transmit democracy mechanically to new contexts, “new democracies” are, by necessity, constantly negotiated into hybrid forms in the process of implementation.

The specific characteristic of liberal democracy that will primarily be discussed in this article is the notion of *representation*. Representation is mainly regarded as a matter of representing different ideas; *what* is represented takes priority over *who* does the representing (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Hadenius, 2006). The role of the politician is to carry a message; who carries the message in question does not matter and one person may easily stand in for another. There are no requirements that the representatives must know or “mirror” the characteristics of the person or persons represented. One of the most hotly contested issues within the research on new democracies, therefore, revolves around whether fair representation of disadvantaged groups requires their presence in elected assemblies.

The dominant attention to “politics of ideas”—with the focus being solely on views, ideas, and ideologies—is being challenged from different perspectives (Horowitz, 2002; Phillips, 2000).

For many feminists, for instance, the politics of ideas has arguably proved inadequate to be able to deal with problems of political exclusion. Anne Phillips’s (1995) critique of the ways in which male-dominated parliaments do not give equal consideration to the interests of male and female citizens is widely acknowledged. With her research, she has actualized issues of representation within political spaces.⁶

Following from her critique, Phillips (1997) promotes the concept of a “politics of presence” to complement the “politics of ideas.” Democracies as we know them do not complete their task of political equality and have encouraged an unacceptably high representation of political elites; subaltern groups should also be politically present. This notion of representation implies that a representative body should reflect salient identity categories in any society; different identity groups produce different interests and perspectives and only a negotiated model of representation—a representation built on the presence of subaltern groups—incorporates this diversity.

In the Cambodian context, the concept “politics of presence” contributes to the demonstration of how identities matter within the system of liberal democracy. As will be demonstrated below, the personal qualities of the representatives are important. When reviewing our interviews, the question of *who* represents prevails as more significant than *what* is represented; in other words, abstract political representatives are not sought after, but identities matter in the distribution of power in national decision making. The representative should, at best, be a known face and/or a familiar voice. It is, we argue, against this background that we should approach the hybrid version of “liberal democracy” that has developed in Cambodia.

Researching Democracy: Some Notes on Methodology

To further explore Cambodian democracy post 1993, this study has, besides relying upon secondary material, involved several field trips to the country between 1995 and 2007. The interviews were conducted by Associate Professor Mona Lilja, in English or (more seldomly) in Khmer—in the latter case with the assistance of an interpreter.⁷ The first visit, in 1995, included extensive research in the rural areas of Cambodia. Twenty-two interviews were made in Prey Veng, Kompong Speu, and Siem Reap. In mid-1997 Lilja returned to Cambodia and made 18 additional interviews with key persons who had unique insights into the democratic functioning of Cambodia. Lilja also attended different meetings with politicians and civil society representatives in the run up to the 1998 election. In late 1997, 1999, and 2002, interviews were conducted in Cambodia with 33 politically involved women and men from the three major political parties in Cambodia: the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), the *Front Uni Nationale pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutrale, Pacifique et Cooperatif* (FUNCINPEC), and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). In addition, interviews were also made with 11 Cambodian civil society representatives. These interviews revolved around the concepts of democracy, power, gender, and resistance. In 2007 Lilja returned to

Cambodia twice, this time together with Associate Professor Mikael Baaz, in order to specifically understand more about the hybrid nature of Cambodian democracy. Sixteen Cambodians were interviewed due to their specific competence, and their answers gave unique insights into the current situation in Cambodia. The interviews quoted in this article are mainly from the two trips in 2007, while the interviews that were made earlier serve as a background to and context for the issues addressed in the article.

The selection of informants, since 1995, was done via snowballing and includes the whole range of public agents, from members of parliament to different civil society activists. Snowball sampling is a form of sampling in which existing sample members suggest potential new sample members—for example, personal acquaintances. Thus the sample group grows like a rolling snowball. As the sample builds up, enough data are gathered to be useful for research. Snowball sampling aims to make use of community knowledge about those who have skills or information in particular areas (Bernard, 1995; Heckathorn, 1997; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with all of the informants. The main reason for choosing semi-structured interviews was that this type of interview gives the respondents room for airing issues that they identify as important even though most questions were formulated beforehand (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Holme & Solvang, 1991, p. 111; see also Gusterson, 2008). Besides the interviews, the researchers also participated in different activities carried out within the political sphere in Cambodia, including visits to the National Assembly and the Senate (in order to follow debates and to have discussions with people participating in the political activities that take place there), and visits to various party headquarters and offices of civil society organizations.

Due to the difficult security situation in Cambodia, we took measures to protect our informants. Exposing the names of the interview respondents could jeopardize their positions since they, as individuals, are highly dependent upon the goodwill of their political parties or civil society organizations. The practical consequence is that the names of the informants are kept secret and only necessary information is revealed about them such as their title, gender, location, and when the interview was made.

Brief Political and Historical Background

In April 1941, Norodom Sihanouk was selected to become the king of Cambodia. The rationale behind the choice was that the colonial power, Vichy France, wanted to select a person who could serve their interest as they struggled to outlast Japan and, by extension, regain control of their colonial territory in Indochina. The French were, however, wrong about Sihanouk, who instead of acting as a puppet for the colonial power led Cambodia to independence, which was proclaimed in November 1953 and confirmed at the Geneva Conference of 1954 (Chandler, 1993, pp. 14–15, 2008, p. 201; Kamm, 1998, p. 28).

In March 1955, King Sihanouk abdicated and turned to politics. He won a convincing victory in the parliamentary elections that followed later that year and came to dominate Cambodian political life for the next 15 years (Chandler, 1993, p. 78, 2008, pp. 231–233; Kamm, 1998, p. 28).

From the mid-1960s, however, Sihanouk's influence diminished and his popularity fell. New political forces, including the Pol Pot-led Khmer Rouge (KR)—followers of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)—entered the stage. In March 1970 Sihanouk was removed as head of state and Lon Nol, the new Prime Minister, transformed Cambodia into a republic (Chandler, 2008, pp. 7, 240–254).

After the 1970 coup d'état, Sihanouk established himself in China and formed the National United Front of Kampuchea in Beijing. During his exile, he also began to collaborate with the KR, his former political antagonists (Chandler, 1993, pp. 199–229). Lon Nol's Khmer Republic eventually fell to the KR in April 1975 after a long and cruel civil war.

While in power, the KR implemented a very radical political agenda, resulting in a thorough political and societal revolution that is, most likely, unprecedented in history. In Democratic Kampuchea (DK), the new name of the country, all political as well as other decisions were taken in the name of the *Angkar* (i.e., the Organization or the Party), and the Organization was the spring of all power and all revolutionary plans. One of the most fundamental characteristics of the *Angkar* was secrecy, thus the concealment of the identity of the KR leaders was given the highest priority. The KR had great difficulty in abandoning the guerrilla tactics that were developed during the years of civil war in Cambodia, and it was not until September 27, 1977 that Pol Pot admitted that the hitherto anonymous and faceless *Angkar* was in fact the CPK. This obsession with secrecy was, however, unfamiliar and “foreign” for most Cambodians (Locard, 2004, pp. 6, 61, 99, 102, 125).

After almost four years of KR rule, Cambodia's historically complex relations with Vietnam eventually led to the overthrow of the KR regime. On January 7, 1979, Phnom Penh fell and, by consequence, Pol Pot and the KR fled to the northwestern part of Cambodia. Heng Samrin—a former KR cadre who defected to Vietnam in 1978—was installed as the head of state in the new People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)—the new name of the DK. The new regime was heavily dependent on Vietnam, who in fact occupied the country between 1979 and 1989. In 1985, the former KR battalion commander Hun Sen replaced Heng Samrin and became the most influential political leader in PRK (Chandler, 2008, pp. 277–284; Ciorciari, 2006, pp. 11–12; Kiernan, 2005, pp. 456–460); a position that he still holds.

In April 1989, while the Iron Curtain began to collapse and USSR's aid to Vietnam started to ebb away, officials in Hanoi announced plans for withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces in Cambodia in September of the same year. This raised the possibility of a renewed civil war between the KR and the PRK regime. Javier Pérez de Cuellar, the UN Secretary General at the time, therefore initiated peace talks in order to avoid this and to outline the future of Cambodia. The talks eventually produced a comprehensive peace settlement in 1991—the Paris Peace Accords. The UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) was established, with a mission to make the country a beacon for democracy, and the first free elections in the country since 1955 were held 18 months later in May 1993 (Ciorciari, 2009, pp. 42–43).

Then U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher described the elections, in which more than four million Cambodians participated (c. 90% of eligible voters)

as “the triumph of democracy” and U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Peter Tomsen said that the “UNTAC was a stunning peacekeeping success” (Etcheson, 2005, p. 39). Most scholars who specialized in Cambodian affairs, as well as many Cambodians themselves, were less optimistic. Sihanouk, now reinstated as the king of Cambodia, was very critical of the outcome and even argued that the entire UN peace process “was a waste” (Etcheson, 2005, p. 39).

During the elections, the former Vietnamese-supported faction of the CPK, now led by Hun Sen and renamed the CPP,⁸ and FUNCINPEC, the royalist party, almost finished in dead heat. After negotiations, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, leader of the FUNCINPEC, and Hun Sen agreed to serve as co-prime ministers in a newly refashioned constitutional monarchy, with Sihanouk as king and official head of state (Chandler, 2008, pp. 286–289; Roberts, 2001).

The KR boycotted the elections, which became one reason for the Cambodian National Assembly to outlaw the movement in 1994 (Becker, 1998, p. 513; Ciorciari, 2009, p. 43). The KR was marginalized politically but neither the UNTAC nor the new Cambodian government had succeeded in defeating the movement militarily; in 1994 and 1995, KR troops continued their insurgency even though they were weaker than before. During these years, both CPP and FUNCINPEC sought to secure political defections from senior KR cadres by offering them land, money, choice military or government positions, and amnesty.

The pivotal moment came in August 1996 when Hun Sen concluded a deal with Ieng Sary. The deal, among other things, commuted the death sentence of the former KR foreign minister, which was handed down to him in 1979 by the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal at Phnom Penh to try the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique for the crime of genocide, for his role in the KR rule during the Pol Pot years. Pol Pot himself eventually died on April 15, 1998. By this time, the KR movement was also more or less dead (Becker, 1998, pp. 515–517; Ciorciari, 2009, pp. 63–66; Etcheson, 2005, p. 14).

The CPP carried out ambivalent rule since 1993. The regime upheld the Constitution and democratic rules to a “tolerable” degree; civil liberties, for example, were “adequately” protected and abuse of human rights had decreased, thus ensuring continued international support for the regime. However, the party simultaneously suffered from a local legitimacy crisis due to (perceptions of) bad governance in general and corruption in particular (Lilja & Öjendal, 2009).⁹ The UN intervention in Cambodia transformed the nature of the conflict in the country, but the conflict was far from over and the political situation continued to be difficult when Cambodia entered into the new millennium (Etcheson, 2005, p. 51).

Numerous occurrences of political violence continued to cast shadows over the CPP from 1993 onward. The worst outbreak of political violence post 1993 occurred in 1997 when the forthcoming 1998 election was preceded by a coup d’état in which the CPP ousted First Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh from power. Despite the problematic situation, the election was still held (Lizée, 1999, pp. 79–91). The coup reflects how tensions are easily created in Cambodia when parties stand to suffer from political defeat. This is due to the absence of any institutionalized experience of how to handle such defeats peacefully (Lilja & Öjendal, 2009; St. John, 2005).

Some of the current problems in Cambodian political life are related to security issues and an inability to handle conflicts within the democratic system. Yet

another issue is the outcome of developing a democratic discourse—implementing a discourse means providing space for new interpretations and hybrid meanings in various Cambodian venues. In Cambodia, various agents seek to fixate the meaning of the word “democracy”; and in the struggle over meaning that follows, there is continuously ongoing encounters in regard to the different “signs” of the democratic discourse (Laclau, 1990; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999).

Implementing Liberal Democracy in Cambodia: Perceptions of Power, Patronage, and Representation

The very framework for Cambodian liberal democracy is village relations and local discourses of power, often described in terms of “patron–client relations.” David Chandler (1996) describes these relations as face-to-face relations, which are negotiable, responsive, and “a shifting network of and control, chosen or imposed, benevolent or otherwise” (p. 106). Patron–client relations, he states, are manifested in everyday reality, in contrast to distant authorities (i.e., the king) that are experienced as remote and vague (Chandler, 1996, p. 106).

Serge Thion argues that patron–client relations have dominated Cambodian political life throughout history and have formed “the backbone of the traditional political structure” (Thion quoted in Ovesen, Trankell, & Öjendal, 1996, pp. 70–71). Thus, in the 1993 and 1998 elections, the Cambodians voted to “ensure a leader that would reward them for their loyalty in much the same way as they would under the traditional *khsae* networks” (Roberts, 2001, pp. 32–38, 204).

Khsae can literally be understood as “cords” that link people and families together. These relationships can be familial, institutional, or political in character, often involving a family and related individuals who have inherent and long-standing patron–client relationships. *Khsae* can also operate through kinship relations and be cemented through marriage (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 7).

Patron–client relations are vertical, as the patron is positioned hierarchically above the client; and multistranded, that is, the relations pertain to more than one sphere of life (economic, social, or political). The obligation of the Cambodian patron is to offer protection, economic assistance as well as moral support, but also to privilege their clients when selecting candidates for positions. Clients, on the other hand, are expected to support the patrons in their endeavors, including political ones (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 7; Ovesen et al., 1996, pp. 70–71; see also Scott, 1972; Wolf, 1969).

Up to today, Cambodian *khsae* networks are reflected in modern decision making, which leaves a mixture of traditional relationships with modern bureaucratic ones (Eastmond, 2002). This presents itself in a number of ways: in the attitudes toward representation, in gift giving, in election rallies, among others. To illustrate this point, gift giving by Prime Minister Hun Sen is remarkable in scale and leaves footprints on the national territory. Each building donated by the prime minister has his personal monogram emblazoned in gold letters on the roof and the Cambodian media would then cable out stories about the contribution to the public. The gift giving can be interpreted as drawing upon Cambodian tradition in two senses:

- 1 A familiar strand is the “meritorious benefactor”; through generous contributions to communal projects, the giver earns personal merits. Utilizing this

traditional image of identity means promoting Hun Sen as a disinterested guardian of the national good.

- 2 Political gift giving might also be understood as the pursuit of the above-mentioned *khsae* (network of support and protection) (Hughes, 2006, p. 470; Hughes & Öjendal, 2006).

Caroline Hughes (2006) writes:

Mobilisation of the first tradition erects a notion of innate and unassailable spiritual power, portrayed as clinging particularly to the person of Prime Minister Hun Sen, as a means of elevating the CPP to the status of natural power-holder and disinterested guardian of the national good. Mobilisation of the second tradition draws upon a secular ethic of reciprocity as a means of garnering votes among the population and consolidating the power of the party through personal links of protection and favour which underpin and harness the considerable coercive powers of the modern state, and backing this with the deployment of a palpable sense of menace. (p. 470)

However, as Trudy Jacobsen (2008) points out, the strands or traditions referred to above are overlapping and powerfully mixing: “Clients accept their position within this framework because elite status is perceived as giving that person natural rights over others due to their higher levels of *bunn* [merit], or the power that results from the performance of meritorious acts” (p. 7).

According to Hughes (2006), traditional structures in Cambodia are transposed into a modern bureaucratic order. In addition to this, after having bureaucratized these traditional strands, they become means of domination and work to serve the Cambodian state. In all, traditional structures are underpinning modern state power.

The stance taken above is interesting and correct; however, as indicated earlier, there is more to add. Not only are traditions the “vehicle” of Cambodian politicians but there is also a strong pressure from national politicians to alter democratic practices and institutions of the modern bureaucratic context to better reflect traditional patterns of decision making. Thus, while patron–client relations, merit-making, and gift systems are used by contemporary politicians as means of domination—thereby, in some senses ossifying these traditions—current Cambodian politicians are also the bearers and promoters of processes of social change. Seemingly, the aim is to wrench the political system out of place in order to make it “fit” the local context; in particular through promoting the system of voting for individuals rather than parties. In addition to this, in the struggle over meaning and in the powerful mixings and crossovers between the modern and traditional, the Cambodian democratic discourse is far from “fixed”; but rather is fluent, ambivalent, and hybridized (Lilja, 2010).

The “Politics of Ideas” Versus the “Politics of Presence”

Liberal democracy was, as we now know, introduced in Cambodia in the beginning of the 1990s and the meaning of it was hastily and fragmentarily explained through pamphlets, meetings, newspapers, and other means to the Cambodian public. Many Cambodians, however, remember how the word “democracy” was also frequently used during the KR era. The DK was, through

its constitution, pictured as a socialist democracy. Partly therefore, the attempt by the UN to redefine the word, in order to agree with the content of liberal democracy, was bound to be problematic. Key persons within various political parties pictured the disorder connected to the very meaning of the word “democracy”:

Pol Pot killed all educated people in Cambodia. No one has education now. People are not educated. At that time the leaders called themselves democrats too. Even the country was named a democracy. Therefore, people lose their faith in democracy. Before they did not know what democracy was. Do they know that now? (Female politician, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

There is no history of education and democracy in Cambodia. There is no strong culture and education, that is, education to understand the elections. [. . .] We must also fight the picture that democracy is a western idea, which is created by the Asian values debate. (Female civil society representative, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

The two quotes above, illustrate how layers of meaning are connected to the word “democracy.” What democracy meant in the past and how it is interpreted currently or within the Asian values debate differs. There seems to be confusion over the very meaning of the word. Indeed, informants in 2007 seemed more troubled and confused over the very content of “democracy” than the informants who were interviewed in 1995, when they appeared to be much more confident in relation to the new system that was imposed upon them (Lilja, 2010). One interviewed civil society representative stated in 2007 that

People do not know what democracy is. Is child labor wrong here? But children must work. We cannot afford their schools. Democracy does not fit here. We do not know anything about it [. . .] People here get no salaries so corruption is not corruption. Corruption is their salary. That is how we get the system to work. People get very stressed up when things, such as corruption, suddenly are “wrong” because of the implemented system. (Female civil society representative, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

As this civil society representative argues, not all Cambodians have accepted or even understand the new meaning associated with the concepts of “democracy,” “corruption” or, for that matter, “child labor” (Lilja, 2010).

Indeed, while the UN’s impact on meaning-making and meaning circulation was outstanding in 1993, today the promoted liberal discourse is challenged and resisted by other agents/sites where alternative discourses are produced. At the same time, the UN’s presence is rather limited today; the Organization is no longer superior in its position relative to others in regard to the establishment of liberal and democratic discourses. Although there are additional international voices that are in contrast to the local discursive production, the local voices are stronger today than before (Lilja, 2010). This opens up areas for negotiating the democratic discourse and, as we shall see below, some Cambodians are now “wrenching the meanings out of place” in order to make the democratic discourse and practices fit Cambodian notions of decision making. Using the perspectives of democratic theory on representation, this can be interpreted as the divide between the “politics of ideas” and the “politics of presence.”

In a liberal democracy, as opposed to direct democracy, we usually do not know who represents the people. Anyone could represent the people since it is

the implementation of different ideas and/or an ideology that matters. Phillips (1997) concludes: “[T]he role of the politician is to carry a message. The message will vary, but it hardly matters if the messenger is the same” (p. 175). However, as already indicated, the Western emphasis on ideologies, party programs, political opinions, and viewpoints does not correspond with some of the discourses of “democracy” in Cambodia. Some local and Western discourses of governance hybridize, as well as clash, in post-Cold War Cambodia. In this we will not argue that there is *one* discourse that dominates the political scene of Cambodia or that *all* Cambodians are the followers of the same notions of power; but we will argue that there is a tendency to favor a “politics of presence” and the implications of this particular discourse.

When voting, the overriding concerns of many Cambodians are neither political party program nor political issues that are mobilized. Rather, traditional strands of Cambodian culture involving social networks, personal loyalties, and discourses of merit and authority become entangled in contemporary practices of gift giving and material benefits, which become the principal reasons for many Cambodians to support a particular political party. According to a survey conducted by The Asia Foundation in 2003, nearly two-thirds of the voters referred to the delivery of material resources as one of their two main reasons for choosing a party, and only 28% of the survey respondents highlighted the party’s policies, views, and ideology as their motives to vote (The Asia Foundation, 2003). Together, this indicates that many Cambodians vote according to the formal practices of “liberal democracy” but not in line with its key characteristics that are grounded in the importance of heterogeneity and ideological diversity. Instead, in traditional village structures that have become the very framework of the newly implemented democratic system, still existing patron–client relations have affected not only the thinking that denotes “democratic” discourse but also the construction of who is sought after as a rightful leader.

This argument is exemplified by the experience of some contemporary female politicians, today members of the parliament, whose political legitimacy appeared to have been underpinned by village relations that provided the base for their career in national politics.

In the aftermath of the KR period, people had gone back to their home villages and reinvented the “normal” and thereby, by extension, were ossifying traditional social networks of reciprocity. In the process, a mixture of traditional and modern bureaucratic relationships prevailed. Ultimately, those who came to dominate garnered their power through the mixture of the two systems. As patron–client relations were reestablished in accordance with local understandings of traditional values, women suddenly found themselves expected to perform the position, role, and ultimately the identity of a village leader; thereafter moving on to national politics with the help of national networks of support and protection.

One woman explained how she became a trusted politician at the national level in the following way:

In my village, my family has been very important in comparison to other families. My family is the knowledgeable family, and I have a better reputation. My parents liked to help anyone who had a problem and that is very important in Cambodia. The ones who got help do not forget what help they got from my parents. Beside the job at the government my father also helped the authorities by taking some

notes and solving some problem in the village. Beside the job at the government he also helped the society, the community that they come from. In Khmer society they will not easily forget that. For example my parents used to help someone, and those people always think of my parents and if the parents are not alive any more then they think of the children. (Female politician, Phnom Penh, May 1999)

These statements indicate how the villagers looked at the woman using local discourses of the pursuit of *khsae* or, put differently, traditional networks of support and protection. As it happened, in the wake of the death of her family members, she was sitting at the apex of the pyramid and was therefore in a sense “hailed” into a leadership identity. An image of identity, constructed within the Cambodian patron–client relations, was then performed and re-performed by the woman in order to seek political legitimacy. She built her power base on a kind of reconstructed “clientelism” dating back to previous times. In fact, a number of today’s members of parliament hold their current positions because of where they were situated within local village structures. Their access to high-ranking political positions is due to their family identity rather than to party affiliation or party ideologies. This shows how political power in contemporary Cambodian politics is often distributed in accordance with familiar forms of political relations, and that many Cambodians today still deem ideologies as nonsignificant and instead promote personal representation and a politics geared at obtaining material benefits.

Some of the informants dismissed political parties as vague constructions of imagination and intervention, which made them too impersonal. Instead, the informants mobilized, in favor of a transformation of the entire Cambodian political system, within the civil society. Repeatedly, during elections political experts and politicians would call for votes based on persons rather than parties. The following remarks regarding the Cambodian political system were aired:

A: [We must] change the election system from a proportional to a majoritarian [system] and to have the possibility to vote for a person. Individuals care about people, and the people vote for you! [. . .] People want to have persons not parties. People do not know who sits in the parliament. There is no accountability. (Male politician, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

B: People like to know for whom they vote. Then they can [hold] someone responsible. (Female civil society representative, former politician, Phnom Penh, May 2007)

C: To vote for party or people? People get frustrated because they think that they vote for someone they heard make an election speech. But that person did not get a seat, but someone else higher up on the party-list [did]. (Female civil society representative, Phnom Penh, May 2007)

D: In Europe, people vote for persons not parties. That is much better. (Female politician, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

These four voices provide examples of one mode of resistance against the prevailing liberal democracy; still they present an alternative rather than merely a refusal. Indeed, most informants argued that the people should know the decision makers; not until then can they be held responsible for political decisions and outcomes. Accordingly, in 2007 political parties started to visit people in their homes to develop more personal contact with their voters (information from Female politician, Phnom Penh, April 2007).

In post-independent Cambodia, the habits of personalizing power and practicing patronage have been highly evident (Chandler, 1996; CDRI, 2007, p. 50). Accountability is a key word here and the practice of holding someone responsible is connected to persons, not to parties; “accountability is conceptualized as . . . ‘one-to-one’ accountability” (CDRI, 2007, p. 3).

The four statements also indicate skepticism toward the representatives’ general interest in fulfilling the population’s needs. In the West, a strong dividing line has been constructed between civil society and the state. While human beings in civil society are understood as the bearers of multiple and changing identities, in the state they are expected to remove these identities and act only as citizens—“that is, as equal bearers of formal and state-derived rights and obligations and being guided solely by the interest of the whole” (Parekh, 1992, p. 160). This idea was, however, questioned by some critical informants who wanted to see well-known politicians performing a caring, and yet political, subject position.

Hence, contrary to what is expected in classical liberal democracies, in Cambodia, one discourse states that leaders *should* act from various identity positions—anchored in, for example, family relations, or area affinities—and not removed from these. Therefore, contrary to the program of liberal democracy, explicit identities are often encouraged by those within the political sphere. This is also demonstrated by the example above of highly ranked women “patrons” who gained their national positions through different traditional networks.

Such expectations can be understood via local interpretations of social hierarchy, where “favoritism” is often considered natural or even good; it is neither comprehended as “unfair,” nor “unjust” (CDRI, 2007, p. 54). Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002) explored this ideal in an earlier study, with a Cambodian villager who explained that she did not receive development aid because she was not the favorite of the village chief. The villager argued that this was fair because “after all, one is expected to favor one’s kin and friends, otherwise one might be seen as neglecting the interests of one’s kin” (Ledgerwood & Vijghen, 2002, p. 128). Thus, the idea of a citizen’s representative who merely implements the agenda of an abstract “whole” does not correspond to notions of social hierarchy within Cambodian society. Instead, loyal kinsfolk and other allies who identify with and struggle for their neighborhoods are highly regarded; that is, a “politics of presence,” in which *who* represents is what matters.

Voting for persons rather than parties was also occasionally promoted as a strategy to reconcile and rebuild Cambodian society by adapting liberal democracy to a post-conflict context. Political parties were constructed and understood as being violent, oppositional, and power-loaded, in contrast to accountable and well-known representatives. Moreover, one representative cannot create a war, but parties can:

Party programmes tend to fail. Parties fight and there is violence, conflicts and so on. Better to vote for individual persons then. People do not understand democracy. They understand, but they do not want to vote for a party. They want to vote for a person. (Female politician, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

The remark can be understood as a response to the violent political history of Cambodia, which carries memories of killing and destruction, not least during

the KR years amid the anonymity and secrecy of the *Angkar*. In fact, the goal of “stability” has generally been assigned a high value by various Cambodian regimes from the 1950s and onward. However, as Margaret Slocomb (2006) argues: “the more a regime claimed to value stability and equilibrium, it seemed, the more unstable and precarious life became for the Cambodians” (p. 389).

War and genocide in Cambodia have fostered suspicion of “strangers,” which makes a representative who is personally known to the people even more appealing. Furthermore, in the face of their violent history, Cambodians feel an even stronger need for a patron who can provide them with both security and economic benefits (CDRI, 2007, p. 57).

References to reconciliation might also be associated with prevailing masculinities and how memories of violence inform the image of men in Cambodia. In contemporary Cambodia, men are typically seen as the ones who produce violence and they thereby lose political legitimacy due to such memories of violence (Lilja, 2008). Hence, “the violent man” is assigned a negative meaning, and their presence in politics is constantly questioned. One civil society representative, for example, suggested that: “there should be vote based on personality. Then we could get rid of Hun Sen” (Male civil society representative, Phnom Penh, April 2007).

The statement is best understood through the culture of menace that is identified with the proprietary name of Hun Sen. In the post-conflict context, Hun Sen has cultivated an image of himself as “a strongman who protects his followers and is ruthless towards their enemies,” an image that “encourages voters to wonder whether democratic processes can command the allegiance of the independently powerful, or whether electoral defeat of the powerful will lead to instability and war” (Hughes, 2006, p. 479). To some, this image seems more repugnant than appealing. In the statement above, the informant argues for the possibility of democratically dethroning the “big brother.” This implies how democratic notions of democracy are hybridized with the idea of a “politics of presence” and local notions of power and power holders.

As indicated earlier, liberal democracy as implemented in 1993 partly remains, although it is not always interpreted or used in accordance with the original intention (Lilja, 2008; The Asia Foundation, 2003). To illustrate this point, patronage today influences the political institutions of democracy in all three government branches, where the loyalty to political leaders, party networks, and hierarchies override loyalty to constituencies (Calavan, Díaz-Briquets, & O’Brien, 2004; CDRI, 2007, p. 59). The oscillation between the ideas of liberal democracy and the actual “doings” or performances in line with local decision-making discourses creates hybrid *governance*. One way of interpreting the current “hybrid democracy” is to acknowledge how the global is reflected in the local or how the local is embraced in the global. Or in other words, the particular exists in the universal and, indeed, vice versa (Lilja, 2010).

In sum, the meanings attached to liberal democracy are not read the way international society hoped they would be. The discourse is still inextricably linked to the site in which it was made—far from being accepted by all in Cambodian society. The leader and decision maker in Cambodia—the patron—is often a known person; a familiar face. Thus, the very idea of an unknown, faceless representative is somewhat odd, not to say “foreign,” to many Cambodians. This

standpoint was repeatedly argued by our informants and apparently represents one discourse among the Cambodians. The “politics of ideas” has, simply put, not yet been fully accepted by everyone in Cambodia.

The problem with personality-based voting, however, is that only a few persons correspond to the image of a politician. For example, one civil society representative described how poor people are often excluded from political decision making. She said, “Poor people do not get political power. [The] rich get political power, because money gives status and a high rank” (Female civil society representative, former politician, Phnom Penh, April 2007).

This can be understood by applying Jacobsen’s outline of the Cambodian client–patron relationship; the power of the patron springs from meritorious acts and someone with status is assigned the natural right to rule (Jacobsen, 2008). This notion of power in itself contradicts the general understanding of democracy. According to Ovesen and colleagues (1996), some of these Western “liberal democracy” ideas seem to run counter to a number of elements of the traditional Cambodian worldview. Popular participation in political decision-making processes and relative equality are only two of the ideas promoted that are said to contradict beliefs inherent in traditional Cambodian culture (Ovesen et al., 1996, pp. 70–71). For example, women are generally not expected to become politicians (Lilja, 2008). To illustrate this point, one informant acknowledged that “Gender hierarchies and democracy do not go together” (Female civil society representative, returnee, Phnom Penh, April 2007).

The inflow of new values that contradict local traditions, including different democratic values, have an emancipatory potential that appear to have led some people to oppose the democratic discourse. One informant argued that

Democracy is confusing and strange to the Cambodians. In the US it means that you can do anything. You are allowed to do everything. That is strange in Cambodia. We want democracy, we want it but first we must know what it means. Now we can do everything. Scream at our parents. Everybody have rights [sic]. That is really strange. People do not know what democracy is. (Male civil society representative, Phnom Penh, April 2007)

The civil society representative who was interviewed thus concludes by stating that it would be really strange if “everybody have [sic] rights.” As implied earlier, traditional hierarchies are quite visible in Cambodia and individual freedom is, in one sense, only available for those at the top of society. In the end, the emancipatory potential of the democratic system is disturbing to some; while for others it is revelatory.

Conclusions

Processes of hybridization emerge when Cambodians interpret liberal democracy from the standpoint of local decision-making processes, thereafter trying to fix and rehabilitate the former; for example, by way of arguing for votes for persons rather than for political parties. Hybridity is then created in historically and politically rooted processes of wrenching meaning—in this case to make “liberal democracy” fit local notions of decision making. New “democratic” truths have been constructed when liberal democracy means voting for material benefits and for persons, rather than for representatives and ideologies of various political parties. But how might the democratic system be adapted to fit Cambo-

dian notions of decision making? And who would initiate and carry out such kinds of governmental changes? These are crucial questions to address if one is interested in a more sustainable democracy in Cambodia.

There is a need to view the globalization of democratic values from a local, “bottom-up” perspective and consider what democracy means at the local level and what practices these understandings foster. A “bottom-up” perspective reveals the ways in which global and local discourses are accommodated, resisted, and/or reformulated locally. Moreover, nationally grounded and culturally sensitive studies can contribute to the problematization of simplistic portrayals of a linear process of modernization/democratization (cf. Young, 2000).

In this article we have used Phillips’s concept of “the politics of presence” as a source of inspiration in order to make visible the strong dividing line in Cambodia between who represents and what is represented, respectively. By using Phillips’s categorization, we wanted to show how personal identifications are politically important not only from a gender perspective, but also in the national setting of Cambodia, amid growing demands for a reformed political system that corresponds to local notions of decision making. The interviews reveal how the “politics of ideas,” as implemented by international society via the UN in 1993, are being increasingly replaced by a strong demand for “politics of presence.” Indeed, this is not only an appeal. The political system in Cambodia today emerges as a hybrid democracy, adding a personalization of power to the concept of liberal democracy, thereby wrenching “democracy” out of place.

The fact that patron–client relations affects politics in Cambodia is well known (Roberts, 2001; Un, 2005). However, as shown above, the deficits of the democratic system somehow become clearer in the light of Phillips’s theoretical outline. Here, we seek to pinpoint not only problems, but also the possibilities inherent within Cambodia’s hybrid “democracy.”

The overall conclusion of the article, going forward, is that two dimensions of Cambodian democracy need to be further investigated; namely, how are local notions of “politics of presence” influencing, assimilating and hybridizing with notions of liberal democracy? And how might a “politics of presence” notion be brought in to develop a democratic system that is more in line with local notions of decision making?

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Notes

¹“International society,” following the English School of International Politics, refers to “a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognise their common interest in maintaining these arrangements” (Bull & Watson, 1984, p. 1). Our current, modern international society is, however, best understood as a *hybrid* phenomenon. It emanates, Barry Buzan (1993) argues, partly from the international “community” (*gemeinschaft*) that started to develop in Europe in the end of the 15th century and that was steadily forced upon the rest of the world during the colonial and imperial periods. But it is also made up by

the society of non-European communities that gradually, as a result of decolonization and an intensifying globalization, have been interconnected together with the old “European” international society during the 20th century; especially after the end of World War II and even more so after the end of the Cold War. Hence, current international society is no longer a globalized expression of a European community, but rather a society made up of some 200 sovereign states that recognize the sovereignty of each other. Current international society is, per definition, a postcolonial phenomenon, but due to its European (or Western origin), it is more integrated in the core than in the periphery regarding the number and variation of, as well as, the intensity of the institution that ties it together in a global network of regimes and other social arrangements.

²Civil society is defined in this text as “a *political space* where associations of citizens seek, from outside political parties, to shape [the] rules that govern society” (Scholte, 2012, italics added).

³In its most basic sense, the concept of hybridity refers to “mixture.” In the Social Sciences and the Humanities, the concept of “cultural hybridity” is, among other things, used to describe societies that develop from a cultural interaction between Western “explorers” and those “explored.” Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2001) writes: “We can think of hybridity as layered in history, including pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial layers, each with distinct sets of hybridity, as a function of the boundaries that were prominent, and accordingly a different pathos of difference—The importance of hybridity is that it problematizes boundaries” (pp. 221, 231).

⁴According to our understanding, “resistance” can be understood as a response to power from “below,” a subaltern practice that could challenge, negotiate, and undermine power (see further Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2013).

⁵Bhikhu Parekh (1992), writes about liberal democracy in the following way: “Liberalism is its absolute premise and foundation and penetrates and shapes its democratic character. Liberalism is a complex body of ideas which began to gain intellectual and political ascendancy in different parts of Europe from the seventeenth century onwards” (p. 161).

⁶Anne Phillips’s critique is founded upon a number of observations. First and foremost, the function of the parliamentary system does not handle the differences in everyday life experiences between women and men. This becomes problematic, as political process can never be planned entirely in advance. Even in those cases where bills and programs have been thoroughly worked out before the parties take a vote; in the end the elected representatives still have certain autonomy in their daily work in the parliament. And when the representatives are primarily men this has a number of consequences. Phillips (1995) states: “New problems and issues always emerge alongside unanticipated constraints, and in the subsequent weighing of interpretations and priorities it can matter immensely who the representatives are [. . .] representatives *do* have considerable autonomy, which is part of why it matters who those representatives are” (p. 44, italics in original).

⁷The informants’ answers are reproduced in the article as closely as possible to the originals. Only minor grammatical corrections have been made.

⁸The KR was initially supported by China, while the Communist/Socialist government of PRK (later the State of Cambodia [SOC]), primarily made up by KR defectors, was supported by Vietnam (and thereby also by the USSR). Cambodian politics between 1979 and 1996 can partly be understood as an internal KR affair; as a struggle between different cliques of the very same movement. It is, in fact, also possible to understand the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (the hybrid war crimes tribunal prosecuting former KR leaders) as part of this political struggle, in which the former Vietnamese supported KR are punishing former Chinese supported KR, assisted by the post-Cold War globalized international society.

⁹Regarding the categories “political culture,” “electoral processes and pluralism” and “functioning of government” Cambodia scored 5.63, 5.67, and 6.07, respectively, in the 2012 Economist Democracy Index; values between 6 and 7.9 qualify a country as a “flawed democracy,” that is: a country with free and fair elections and even if there are problems (such as infringements on media freedom), basic civil liberties will be respected. There are, however, significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation. In the category “civil liberties,” however, Cambodia only scores 4.12, the same score as, inter alia, Turkey, Mozambique, Egypt, and Rwanda (The Economist, 2012).

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