Organisation without Revolution: Labour Movement and the Failure of Democratisation in Cambodia

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Abstract

It is postulated that collective labour movements responding to demands for political reform, rather than to workplace demands, are key actors in democratic mobilisation. Contrary to this proposition, this paper draws on evidence from labour movements and related social allies in Cambodia to examine why they fail to mobilise democratic revolutions. By analysing the development of the labour movement and key social actors, the paper argues that, because they possess weak social and institutional alliances with political actors, such as opposition parties and other interest groups, to establish a democratic revolution, labour movements do not 'burst onto the political scene.' The capacity of labour movements to transform 'democratic intent' to 'democratic action' is thus hindered by the ability of authoritarian rulers and their coalitions, including business elites, to tightly control and co-opt any alliances of labour movements designed to put pressure on the ruling regime. In essence, capitalist development does not strengthen the capacity of but co-opt the excluded labour groups to break down the opposition alliance to prevent democratisation.

In the democratisation literature, workers have been considered an important and decisive actor in rallying for democracy. Diverging from Moore's "no bourgeois, no democracy" contingency

thesis, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens argue that capitalist development strengthens the organisational capacity of the excluded working class, which enables them to pressure for democracy.[1] Collier and Mahoney argue, in the same vein, that labour movements[2] play a prominent role in delegitimating authoritarian regimes.[3] However, the opposite consideration — why some labour movements fail to mobilise for democratic revolution — is less established in the literature.[4] In other words, what lies beneath the failure of some labour movements to transform their agenda "from workplace demands to demands for broad political liberties"?[5] Democratic revolutions are nonviolent, urban-based, mass uprisings that pressure for an end to authoritarian rule and demand a transition to democracy. However, this study posits that democratic revolutions do not necessarily entail the toppling of the dictator or ruling party. Labour movements can apply so much pressure on the regime that the ruling elites agree, while maintaining power, to adopt radical reforms that fundamentally reshape prevailing institutional arrangements; for example, fair elections, imposition of executive term limits, judicial reform and military professionalisation, among others.[6] Existing theories of labour's democratic behaviour focus on the moment when labour has "burst onto the political scene" and challenged dictatorial rule.[7] This paper aims to complement this body of literature with accounts of de-radicalised labour movements — less extreme political opposition and lacking strong social institutional parameters (alliances with and among local and international social and political actors) — that fail to establish themselves as shapers of regime trajectory.

Cambodia is a good example of the lack of labour-led democratic movements, even though the latter are perceived as radical actors of democratisation in this electoral authoritarian country. Political liberalisation following the UN-organised general elections in 1993 opened the door and space[8] for the formation of Cambodia's first labour union, the Free Trade Unions of Workers (FTUWKC) of the Kingdom of Cambodia, whose leader, Chea Vichea, has a strong connection with the opposition leader, Sam Rainsy. These two leaders were credited for an

unprecedented level of labour activism between the late 1990s and early 2000s, as they led workers' protests to demand higher wages and better working conditions. In the early 2010s, labour movements and unions appeared to have coalesced with the opposition party, indicating democratic *intent*. However, the latter intent has not escalated into democratic *action,* since the ruling regime has been consistently trying to break the coalition between the labour movements and the opposition party movements, and between the labour unions and other social actors. From late 2013 to early 2014, workers staged the biggest strike in Cambodian history, demanding a doubling of the minimum wage from $80 to $160, which demonstrated a move from democratic intent to democratic action. The mass strike was violently suppressed,[9] as it appeared to unite with the opposition party's (Cambodia National Rescue Party [CNRP]) mass demonstration demanding the re-elections and the resignation of the ruling regime's leader, Hun Sen, of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Following the violent suppression, the labour unions and protests were gradually co-opted by the ruling regime to weaken and de-radicalise the labour movements and their intended democratic coalitions with opposition parties and other actors.

I argue in this paper that the lack of labour-driven democratic revolution in Cambodia cannot be satisfactorily explained by the contingency thesis, which argues that labour's democratic mobilisation is most likely when they are disadvantaged by the policies of authoritarian regimes. In the Cambodian context, repression and mistreatment of pro-opposition and labour unions have not triggered mass mobilisations aimed explicitly at broad political reform or regime change as a means of readdressing labour issues, as in historical cases that inform the contingency argument. I argue that the absence of escalation to democratic revolution must be understood by adopting a more structural approach in order to grasp the capacity factors that constrain labour's democratic mobilisation. Capacity, as emphasised here, is beyond organisational factors such as worker unionisation, union density, and movement

leadership; it is the ability to form sufficiently strong coalitions with different interest groups that share similar political goals. Coupled with the ability of the ruling regime and the elites to suppress and co-opt the labour movements, it is the absence or weakness of these coalitions that contributes to Cambodian labour's lack of democratic mobilisation.

This paper's argument is structured as followed. Firstly, it addresses the limitations of applying the contingency framework to the Cambodian context. Secondly, the origin of labour unions is reviewed to show how the international environment, under which the labour movement emerged, contributes to its de-radicalisation, the latter characterised by the weak linkage between the opposition party, labour unions, and other groups. Then, the literature on civil resistance and authoritarian politics is drawn upon to inform an empirical analysis[10] of (i) how the domestic political environment contributes to the weakness of societal elites and hence pre-empts broad-based alliances between these elites and workers; and (i) the way in which the ruling party's resilience, driven by the incentives of the elites, impedes the emergence of radicalised labour movements.

The Limit of the Contingency Argument

Many theories explain how democratic transition is induced by labour movements. Agency-based explanations that regard democratisation as a negotiated outcome achieved by political elites have been challenged by structure-based explanations that centre on the role of social forces; further arguments on whether capital[11] or labour[12] is the most salient agent of democracy animate the debate. While the question of *whether* labour plays a role in the transition to democracy is largely settled, the question of *when* it is more likely to behave as such is debatable. More recent research casts doubt on labour's democratic commitment: Labour movements act as "major engines in the protest against the authoritarian rule"[13] in some contexts and trigger the overthrow of elected governments by military coups in others. Like

other organised interests, workers are "*contingent* democrats for the very reason that they are *consistent* defenders of their material interests."[14] Bellin argues that labour's attitude towards democracy is contingent on "state dependence" and "aristocratic position", which may resonate with the case of Cambodia's electoral authoritarianism. In Mexico, labour was provided with generous organisational and material gains (acceptable minimum wage, financial subsidies, profit-sharing and social welfare) by the state to prevent their ability to democratise the regime. Thus, as a rational actor, labour is disincentivised from eroding its privileges by promoting a form of democracy that would allow the regime to build alternative support bases and respond to mass interests.[15] The labour aristocracy hypothesis is applied to account for the indifference of some workers in South Korea and the absence of the Arab Spring in Algeria.[16] Cambodia's labour movement appears to diverge from these cases. They intended to delegitimate the authoritarian ruling system for democratic reforms, but were oppressed in order to alienate them from political mobilisation.

Based on the Latin American experience, Levitsky and Mainwaring[17] concur with Bellin's contingency thesis. They write that what is important in labour's strategic calculation is not regime type (i.e. autocracy vs democracy) but regime policy (i.e. inclusionary vs exclusionary).[18] Historically, inclusionary authoritarian regimes incorporated workers and union leaders by offering them "unprecedented material, organisational, and symbolic benefits", and they "strengthened labor movements, expanded worker rights and benefits, created new channels of union access to the state, and placed union leaders in important positions of power."[19] Labor's indifference to democracy, then, may be "entirely rational" rather than exceptional.[20] Only when exclusionary regimes that threaten labour's interests are in power does labour support a democratic transition. Yet while co-optation of union leaders may explain the democratic apathy of pro-government labour unions, it cannot explain the indifference of marginalised labour unions that proclaim their independence from the

government and those that openly support pro-democracy opposition parties. Neither Bellin, nor Levitsky and Mainwaring, investigated the variation in labour behaviour as a result of an authoritarian regime's divide and rule strategy.

The limit of the contingency argument is that it is largely an incentive-based explanation. While it is appropriate in some contexts, it is incomplete when it comes to a post-conflict country like Cambodia, where the characteristics of authoritarianism are unique — that is, where the ruling leader has clung to power for several decades through the employment of unfair and unfree electoral contestation.[21] Activism traverses a space between partly-opened and partly-restricted, contingent upon the evolution of the political environment and the contestation between opposition and ruling parties.[22] To apply Burgess' and Levitsky's notions of democratic mobilisation in Latin America[23] to Cambodia's labour movements, the analysis needs to take into account both the 'incentive' and the 'capacity' to mobilise, to understand the lack of transition from democratic *intent* to democratic *action*. Although Bellin argues that the exploitation and economic position of Korean workers explain their "interests in and capacity for" pushing for democratic reform, her supporting evidence is heavy on grievance and relies on the organisational capacity. The approach taken here is to define 'capacity' more broadly than organisational capacities such as union density and leadership, and to include cooperative capacity or the ability to coordinate between multiple social organisations or movements and mobilise as a unified unit. Although unionisation strengthens workers' bargaining power,[24] union density does not necessarily translate into union militancy. Hence, this paper postulates that the failure of labour movements vis-a-vis democratisation in Cambodia is due, partly, to the weak capacity of coalitions between interest groups and actors, whose economic and political interests are coercively co-opted by the ruling regime and the elite benefactors. Not only does this co-optation incentivise the de-radicalisation of labour movements through the pursuit of economic interests, such as the increment in labour wage, rather than regime change,

it also breaks down the capacity of coalitions between labour movements and opposition parties to translate democratic intent into action.

The Origin and de-politicisation of labour politics in Cambodia

Labour and trade union movements appear to be silent in Cambodia's politics. From 1953 to 1975, there were unions operating in some factories, but little is known about their characteristics. While the Khmer Rouge was quite strict in controlling assembly, unions were believed to exist during the communist regime, but, again, little is known about their nature. From 1980 to 1991, unions were tightly controlled by the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The Association of Women, the Youth Association and the National Salvage Front were popular unions. Under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), political space was opened up,[25] allowing the establishment of unions that were able to enjoy the freedom of assembly and a democratic environment. After the UNTAC-organised election in 1993, a new form of union emerged. This was the result of Cambodia transforming its economy from a planned to a free-market economy, allowing the increased volume of foreign investment in the manufacturing, garment and tourist industries. The burgeoning of trade and labour unions in the early 2000s was also due to the conditions imposed by the apparel importing countries, especially the United States and the European Union, which awarded Cambodia the Generalised System Preference (GSP) and Everything but Armed (EBA) schemes, respectively. While worker unions are economically crucial for export trade with North America and European countries, they are very political in building alliances with either the opposition party or the ruling party. Given the large union membership and its role in the country's economy, both the ruling and opposition parties have striven to either establish alliances with or to control these unions for respective political and economic interests.

Hughes (2007) argues that the ties between the FTUWKC of Chea Vichea and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) weaken both parties because, as soon as FTUWKC allies with SRP, it increases the perception of the union's lack of neutrality and independence vis-a-vis the members and the ruling party.[26] Inducements to withdraw union membership would, as a matter of course, be increased by the ruling government, acting on the premise that workers are more materialistic than motivated to create significant political impact. In the process of bargaining and negotiating material interests (in terms of wages and working conditions), each union has to maintain its identity, even though its voice and demands may be similar to the SRP or opposition party; if it cannot maintain its identity, it will be accused of siding or serving opposition party interests. Not only does this jeopardise the interests of the union per se, but it also harms the process of bargaining with employers and the government for the worker-members' interests.

> Workers are opposition members because other unions, such as Chea Vihea, were supported by the opposition party, such as Sam Rainsy. As those workers are from rural areas, they feel that only the opposition paid attention to their concerns.[27]

As the interview suggests, there is a likeness between the members of the unions, and those of the opposition party,[28] CNRP; thus, trust between the union and the party is created, and an alliance formed between the two. In recent peaceful protests, the Workers Friendship Union Federation was arrested and imprisoned in February 2018; it was alleged to have organised an illegal strike and to have incited violence at a garment factory in Kandal province.[29] The repression of union activities, especially protest and labour unrest, were orchestrated to ensure stability and maintain "overseas investor confidence in Cambodia as a stable economy."[30] The assassination of Chea Vichea of FTUWKC is an example; when there

is a strong tendency towards union alliance with the opposition party, there is a strong backlash and heavy suppression orchestrated by the unhappy stakeholders. Chea Vichea was killed on 22 January 2004, and this was followed by other ringleaders of trade unions also being harassed or arrested by the government. The killings and harassments aimed to break the (invisible or indirect) coalition of independent trade unions with the opposition party; Chea Vichea was, in fact, a founding member of Sam Rainsy's Khmer National Party. Given their aligned interests, especially vis-à-vis the issues of labour wages, working conditions and human rights that are exacerbated by the authoritarian leadership monopoly, the worker unions appear to "intend" to join hands with the opposition and other civil society organisations to democratise the political system. Yet, this intention appears to be implausible, given the stranglehold of the ruling party and, as such, it is hard to transform the 'intent' into the 'action' of democratisation. Worker unions are caught in a dilemma between political and economic interests. Following the killing of Chea Vichea and perpetuate harassment arrests of union leaders, the democratic 'intent' and 'action' of unions appeared to have retreated as not many major protests were observed even though unionisation (number of unions) was proliferating. As a form of democratisation, the labour movements and protests demanding the increase in minimal labour wage were silent, and labour wage was barely increased until the early 2010s (see Figure 1).

There is strong interest in entrenching the neutrality of the unions or, in other words, decoupling them from party politics. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), given its role as a UN agency, appears to discourage unions from being involved in or affiliating with any political parties that would adversely affect a union's identity and its bargaining power with the government, especially the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, and its employers. This is the case when it comes to unions operating under the ILO's Better Factories Cambodia programme (BFC), which covers 557 (almost 100% of the industry) factories in the country.[31] "We do not support riots or strikes, so we do not have such responsibilities. We work

inside the factory only."[32] Even BFC works with all unions in the garment sector; their programmes focus on labour conditions and policy impacts that benefit the welfare of the workers, gender equity and working conditions, rather than overarching political impacts (democratisation) that provide long-term and sustainable solutions to the worker population;[33] thus, their agenda does not necessarily empower workers and unions to bring about democratic change as an ultimate solution to their issues. Underlying this approach is the diplomatic role that the ILO adopts to maintain its legitimacy vis-a-vis the government. Although BFC aims to support the workers' economic interests, their programmes need to balance such support with the interests of government institutions, workers and employers.

> We promote tri-party dialogue between unions and representative workers, governments, and employers/garment factory associations. We facilitate round table discussion and dialogue. There are highly politically sensitive factors in worker and labour issues to be addressed, but we do not have leverage. However, our dialogue yields fruitful outcomes and solutions to working conditions and wages. We appreciate this. [34]

Protest in 2014 was a catalyst for labour movements and the intention to democratise, but it was suppressed and then co-opted by the ruling government. Co-optation is one of the approaches staged by the ruling party to break the coalition between unions and opposition parties, and between opposition parties themselves; in fact, it is intended to protect the pro-ruling party's interests, cronyism and elites.[35] To prevent future mass demonstrations, the ruling government responded (after a violent crackdown) with a gradual increase in the minimum wage.

After the movement in late 2013 and early 2014, we have seen a lot of reform, including increases in the garment workers' labour wage and the salary of government officials. The Prime Minister started to spend long hours of talks with workers and unions at public events to console and lure them. At each event, we saw the Prime Minister distribute cash incentives to the workers.[36]

Figure 1 below demonstrates the history and trend of the minimum labour wage in Cambodia. It indicates the relationship between mass labour demonstrations and the increments in labour wages. With the absence of significant demonstrations in the decade 2000 to 2010, the labour wage remained fairly unchanged; this contrasted sharply with the sudden increase in the monthly salary, from US$100 to US$153, that occurred after the mass protest in early 2014 and was also due to the performance of the opposition party in 2013 elections. Many workers were believed to support the opposition party in the election. It was then sharply increased to US$170 in 2017 when the Cambodian Supreme Court dissolved the opposition party. This gradual increment in the minimum wage is intended to de-incentivise and break down the relationship between the workers and unions and the opposition party.

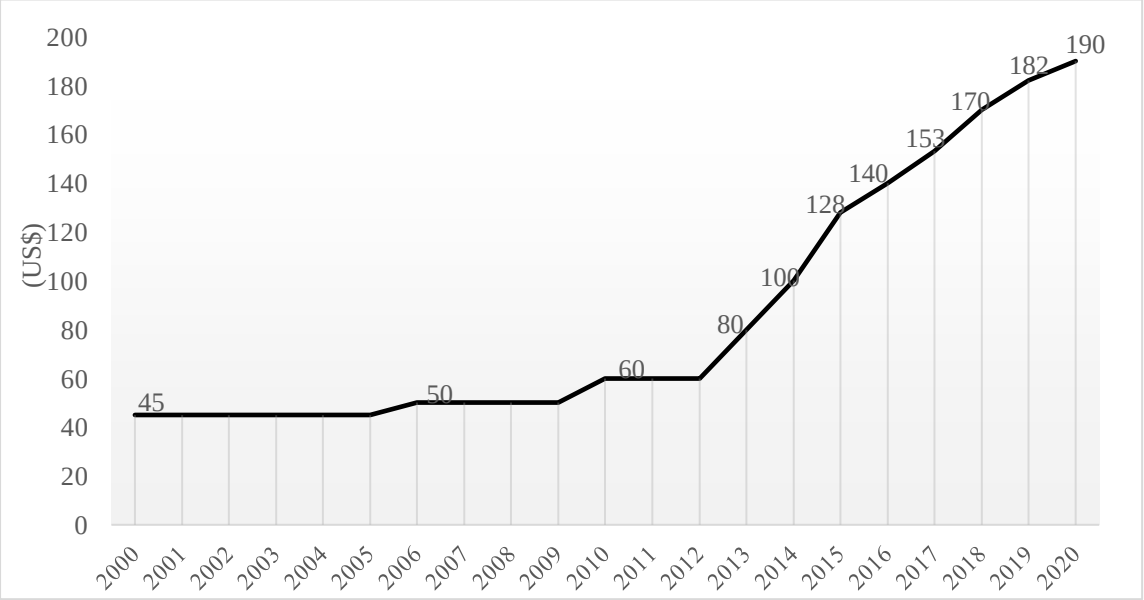

Figure 1: The trend of labour wages in Cambodia.[37]

The violence against the freedom of unions and worker protests appears to be ignored by international buyers and investors, especially investors and employers from mainland China. About 64% of the garment factories are investments of and/or owned by Chinese (mainland China, Hong Kong, and Chinese-Taiwanese),[38] in which working conditions are not as good as those of other investors, such as European, Japanese and Korean companies.[39] While these investors are driven to invest in Cambodia as a result of the enabling diplomatic relations and the buyer countries' trade preferences (EU's EBA, US' GSP), their main objective is profit-making rather than influencing policy and politics. The lack of commitment of these buyers and investors to empower unions in such a way as to lead to democratisation has allowed the ruling regime to perpetuate the country's repression.

The neglect of Western buyers, the US and EU, has long provided the opportunity for authoritarian rulers to break the alliance between labour unions and the opposition, thereby obstructing their ability to join hands towards democratisation. As a buyer, the EU has recently raised the labour issues, intending partly to push for democratisation in the country, especially following the 2014 protest and the dissolution of the opposition party in 2017. The EU's EBA initiative, which allowed Cambodians to export apparel and other goods to the European market without tariff, was deployed as a weapon to press the ruling government to democratise. The opposition appeared to take advantage of this provocation to encourage workers' uprising, but the endeavour encountered a public backlash from the Garment Manufacturing Association in Cambodia and other unions, as the call for the withdrawal of the EBA harmed Cambodian workers' livelihoods. As the intention to do so did not yield any significant result, the EU decided to partially revoke its trade preference from the country in February 2020, citing the continued "serious and systematic violations of the human rights principles enshrined in the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."[40] Instead of complying with the demands of the EU, the ruling government declared that Cambodia would not forsake its sovereignty[41] and resorted to a free trade agreement with China,[42] the country's main donor and investor. The close ties between Cambodia and authoritarian China,[43] by which the latter owns approximately 64% of garment factories in Cambodia, is unfavourable to the freedom of the unions and their alliance with the opposition.

The Lack of Societal Allies: Diversity without Solidarity

Given the fragile alliances between the labour unions and opposition parties, it is argued here that the intention to democratise is seriously challenged, as there is a lack of societal allies with other social groups. While many scholars suggest that the societal allies are important for the contribution of unions to the democratisation of the political regime, the decisive factor that persuades these unions to form alliances between themselves and with other groups is complex. The case of Cambodia is clearly represented by the absence of nationalistic interests among unions and other interest groups. As illustrated in the foregoing section (Figure 1), the material interests of union workers are co-opted by increases in labour wages and welfare, whereas other unions, such as student and religious unions, and NGOs are still small and fragile. In the early 1990s, teacher and student unions were strong actors in political activities, human rights and freedom of expression, but these unions have been drawn under the control of the ruling party. Perceived as part of civil society in Cambodia, NGOs appear to be separated from trade unions; only a few NGOs work with unions and garment factory workers, and there are few independent unions.

As our interviews suggest, the formulation of alliances between different actors or union groups in Cambodia is very unlikely because the interests of unions and members do not coincide with other unions' interests. This trait also characterises the issue of nationalism and

elites. Slater argues that communal elites with nationalist and religious authority are essential for high-risk protests such as a democratic revolution.[44] But this is true only when they are politically autonomous from the authoritarian regime, which, in turn, makes them 'structurally available' to regime challengers. In cases where the 'political positioning' of communal elites leans toward the opposition, nationalist and religious authority facilitates high-risk collective action by "inducing deeply held conviction and commitments at the individual level."[45] Emotional investment in democratic mobilisation helps explain why some protestors are willing to endure "suffering and self-sacrifice, including torture and death."[46] Slater adds that the participation in or expression of support of respected nationalist and religious figures for a democratic revolution make deadly crackdown by the security forces less likely; such repressive action is expected to cause "moral shock" that can provoke wider protests.[47] Cambodia is a typical case where political-economic institutions have been designed to mobilise loyalty and support from business, religious, and military elites.[48] The successful coup d'état in 1997 orchestrated by Hun Sen was fully supported by the business elites[49] that are now benefactors of the ruling party.[50]

Religious associations exist, but remain weak and controlled. While the roles of emotion and commitment are essential in blistering anti-authoritarianism and democratic opposition elsewhere,[51] the individual elites of the afore-mentioned groups in Cambodia, given the country's historical and chronic civil wars in the past, are lacking the commitment to democratise the regime, preferring to support the system. Aytaç and Stokes hypothesise that "when people experience adversity that they see as caused by political actors, the sense of outrage and propensity to act collectively is all the stronger."[52] However, while many Cambodians have seen the irregularities—low labour wages, social injustice, abuses of power and human rights by government officials, and land grabbing—and have emotionally expressed their anger, including voting for the opposition party, and joining their protests and marching

to mourn outspoken activists such Kem Ley, Chhut Wutty and Chea Vichea, these experiences have not incentivised the majority of the population to act collectively. In addition to the on-going severe repression, as in the case of the January 2014 labour protest and CNRP protest in the same years, many Cambodians have "broken courage," as they are traumatised by the Khmer Rouge violence. The on-going suppressions through legal means[53] following the 2014 protests have become popular government tactics to coercively co-opt labour activists and unions in Cambodia.

After the introduction of the Trade Union Law (TUL) in 2016 (amended in 2019), and the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organisations (LANGOs), NGOs and the unions appeared to not be working together. A few NGOs, only those working for worker rights, advocated for the betterment of the trade union's freedom of expression, rights and demonstration, whereas the majority of NGOs (given their diverse interests, service delivery and advocacy approaches) appeared to neglect the concerns of trade unions and worker rights NGOs. As the LANGOs were about to pass, many NGOs joined hands to protest against the law and petitioned to repeal the law after the passage.[54] As such, when many discuss the space of civil society, they refer to the issue of freedom of speech and mobilisation of NGOs, rather than trade unions. NGOs are controlled, via LANGO, by the Ministry of Interior, while unions are the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training. The business interests of NGOs and unions appear to be different, even though their concerns on issues of human rights and freedom of expression intersect. They also rely on different sources of support: NGOs appear to be accountable to donors who fund their projects, whereas unions rely on workers' contributions.

Student activism used to play an important role in Cambodian politics but has also been subject to repression in recent times. In 1956, the Khmer Students' Union in Paris, led by Pol Pot and his colleagues, was an example of how students were radicalised; the union

transformed into a political party that then became armed resistance in the 1960s and 70s. Student unions also played roles in the transition from the Sihanouk to the Lon Nol regime in 1970, as student protests were orchestrated against the pro-US government.[55] Student activists and unions were subsequently absent from politics due to the civil war and the Khmer Rouge. Between 1998 and 2001, student unions and activists re-emerged. The Democratic Front for Khmer Students and Intellectuals (DFKSI) and the Student Movement for Democracy (SMD) were the major student movements that were critical of the government. In the 1998 protest against the election results, by which the Cambodian People's Party of Hun Sen won the majority, the leaders of these associations were threatened, and some of them fled the country. The protests of SMD and DFKSI often encountered the violent reaction of the pro-government student activists known as Pagoda Children, Intelligentsia and Student Association (PCISA), comprising in 2001 about 4,000 student members from about 27 pagodas in Phnom Penh.[56] PCISA is commonly known as an arm of the Prime Minister, who branded himself as a former pagoda boy and who rose to the apex of the country's ruling administration. At the university level, student activists are tightly controlled by university leadership, which is appointed by the ruling party. Government influence is entrenched in all student unions, whether at public or private universities, in the form of ruling party members and youth associated with the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia (UYFC), a pro-CPP youth organisation led by Prime Minister Hun Sen's youngest son.[57] UYFC has emulated the state administrative structure from village to ministerial levels to instil their control.[58]

Buddhist movements in Cambodia emerged in the early twentieth century when monks joined hands with others to protest against French administration. The non-violent resistance of the Umbrella Revolution of Buddhist monks against France in 1942 was an example, but such endeavour appears to have been inactive in Cambodia's political arena in the post-colonial period, during which Buddhist religious practice was completely banned, and some monks

were killed or disrobed by the Khmer Rouge.[59] In the post-Khmer Rouge period, during which they were controlled by the Ministry of Cults and Religions, monk associations of almost all Buddhist temples appear to have been inactive in politics and union activism. A few independent monk associations are now operating as NGOs, but have not created much impact on Buddhist monks in the Cambodian religious arena. The supreme leader of Mahanikay tightly controlled Buddhist monks, and the association of monasteries: Heniyeak and Mohayean are closely associated with Prime Minister Hun Sen. Venerable Tep Vong issued numerous religious decisions to prohibit monks from being involved in political activism. Despite this prohibition, some Buddhist monks have endeavoured to be involved in human rights advocacy, environmental campaigns, and political protests[60] from the early 2000s. The success of the continued protests in 2008, which resulted in allowing monks to cast votes after being denied by the ruling party since 2003,[61] was one of the motifs that persuaded Buddhist monks to participate in activism, but their activities do not appear to have drawn the attention of the public.

As social media emerged as an affordable means of communication and information exchange, monks began to partake in activism as individuals and groups. Established in 2013, the Independent Monk's Network for Social Justice (IMNSJ) claims a membership of 5,000 monks,[62] most of them located in urban Phnom Penh. Venerable Loun Sovath, whose family members were exploited by the ruling elites in the land dispute in Siem Reap, began activism in various scenarios — land disputation, human rights and injustice. Leading monk activists like Venerable But Buntenh (of IMNSJ) and Loun Sovath have escaped Cambodia as they were about to be arrested by the ruling government. Co-opted and suppressed by the ruling party, independent monk associations and monk activists in Cambodia remain weak compared to the Myanmar and Thai Buddhist movements. Political legitimacy given to the monarchy in Thailand, and to the junta in Myanmar, is stronger compared to Cambodia.[63] In 1988, Burmese

Buddhist monks (Sangha) were involved in the 8-8-88 movement events (People Power Uprising) after the military slaughtered hundreds of unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators. When soldiers attacked a meeting of about 7,000 monks in Mandalay commemorating the second anniversary of the 8-8-88, the monks refused to perform Buddhist blessing ceremonies for government officials and the military. To take control of Buddhist monks, the Burmese government and military derobed monk activists and brought monks and monasteries under the closer scrutiny of the Ministry of Religion.[64] In the 2007 Saffron Revolution, thousands of Buddhist monks mobilised from around the country against the ruling junta and offered blessing ceremonies to Aung San Suu Kyi while she was under house arrest.[65] Unlike Buddhist monasteries in Cambodia, Buddhist monasteries in Myanmar are sources of both political legitimacy and weapons that discredit and dismantle authoritarian rulers.[66] Burmese Buddhist followers are more serious in worshipping Buddha and Buddhist monks, and thus Buddhist monks are sources of power that can direct the followers, whereas, in Cambodia, there is a reluctance among Cambodians to openly believe in Buddha and practice Buddhist philosophy. The contribution of Buddhist monks in Cambodia, including joining hands with other interest groups, trade unions, NGOs, and other movements, is likely to be discredited by individual followers and the ruling government.

The Lack of Business and Elite Allies

As hypothesised above, the 'intent' to democratise is possible and is translated into 'action' when there is a strong alliance among interest groups, including elites. O'Donnell and Schmitter assert that "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself …" Divisions among the ranks of both hard-liner elites (who prefer the authoritarian status-quo) and soft-liners (who prefer a certain degree of democratic reform) can emerge, despite weak opposition challenges

or as a result of strong opposition pressure.[67] Whereas hard-liners favour repression and resist change, soft-liners favour a more moderate state-labour relationship and political reforms to accommodate labour demand.[68] In these cases, labour triggers elite conflict leading to regime weakness. Either mode of transition suggests that an intra-elite split is a critical condition for realising the democratic agenda of organised labour. The ruling regime, which maintains elite cohesion has been well aware of such a possibility; the rhetoric is known as "the rulers' ability to maintain the loyalty and cooperation of allies within the regime"[69] to prevent elite defection for democratic revolution as in Latin American authoritarian contexts. The breakdown of elite cohesion and royalty in countries where rulers have clung onto power, such as in Indonesia during the Suharto regime, has been shown to be the catalyst for authoritarian breakdown.[70] This has been a vital lesson learnt by Cambodia's ruling regime.[71] Labour unions and factories are owned by elites and officials who are loyal to the CPP. The rulers' alliances or winning coalitions, especially elites, who all benefit from the unions and garment industry in Cambodia, do not support but rather suppress the unions and their alliances in order to resist change, thus making democratic revolution highly improbable.

> There are a few independent unions. The unions that align with the government and receive a monthly payment from the government are larger than the independent unions in terms of membership and brand operations. They have collected money and contributions easily from the factory owners.[72]

The CPP's strength lies in the long-term vested interests of political leaders and business elites who benefited economically and politically following the Khmer Rouge and the 1997 coup d'état. These interests have prevented the defection of these political and business elites from the CPP. Like the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party, opposition parties

are labelled as a threat to not only the political order, but also to the accumulation of capital of the business elites. The opposition party's exclusionary approach to challenging the CPP's domination only serves arguably to reinforce elite perceptions and the rhetoric that the threat of political chaos is real and, for that reason, the security of the CPP's continuous rule is required.

Sam Rainsy's uneasy relationship with the business elites dates back to the 1990s, when he was a senior Funcinpec official and Finance Minister in the 1993-1998 coalition government. His most memorable achievement is the 'anti-corruption crusade' against the "intimate nexus between the government and a new class of crony-tycoons that had emerged since the free-market reforms of the late 1980s."[73] After a face-off with a powerful tycoon over a controversial market development project, Rainsy was expelled from the cabinet and Funcinpec.[74] Rainsy's willingness to go against the grain and stand up for the oppressed supercharged his political struggle and made him the symbol of opposition politics in Cambodia. But it is not a welcome development for those who have benefited from the CPP's rule, including the garment manufacturing and labour union.

The garment and related industrial sectors, which employ hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, are owned by pro-ruling party elites and officials, and Chinese investors. Special economic zones (SEZ), where garment and other factories are located, are examples of how the elites, especially Oknha, have controlled labour unions and workers (see table 1). Major SEZs, like Sihanouk Ville SEZ II, employ up to more than 34,665 workers belonging to Oknha Lav Meng Khin, a senator of the CPP. Likewise, a powerful senator of CPP owns and controls Koh Kong SEZ, comprising more than 8000 workers. In Phnom Penh, Phnom Penh SEZ is owned by Oknha Lim Chhiv Ho and employs more than 33,156 workers. In 2017, it was estimated that all SEZs in the country employed about 140,000 workers,[75] who have played a major role in production processes. Like the events of early 2014 in Phnom Penh, any strike or

mass demonstration will disrupt not only the production processes but also the revenue of the companies and SEZ owners. Thus, to maintain stability and attract investors or foreign companies to invest or rent factories in their SEZs, unions are tightly controlled.

Table 1: Special Economic Zones, employment and owners[76]

Special economic zone	Firms	Workers	Est.	Owners
Poi Pet				
Poipet Sanco SEZ	10	1,354	2013	Chhour Vichet/ Takahiro Yamamoto
Poipet O'neang SEZ	5	2,473	2006	Van Ny
Sihanoukville				
Sihanoukville SEZ II	109	34,665	2008	Oknha and senator Lav Meng Khin
Sihanoukville Port SEZ	3	857	2009	PAS & JBIC Loan
Sihanoukville SEZ I	3	652	2006	Oknha and Senator Lav Meng Khin
Phnom Penh				
Phnom Penh SEZ	92	33,156	2006	Oknha Lim Chhiv Ho
Goldfame Pak Shun SEZ	2	4,606	2007	Chan Ji Kvong
Bavet				
Manhattan SEZ	31	27,200	2006	Clement Yang (Taiwan)
Tai semg SEZ	27	9,085	2007	Ly Hong Shin
Dragon King SEZ	4	1,168	2012	Ngov Mok
Koh Kong				
Neang Koh Kong SEZ	5	8,257	2007	Oknha and Senator Ly Yong Phat

Among many sectors, the examples above illustrate how the grip onto power of the ruling party and the elite leadership bestows capital accumulation that later support the cultivation of electoral legitimacy.[77] For example, powerful tycoons or Okhna reportedly provided financial and logistical support to the CPP to win elections, and also coup d'état in 1997. The club of Oknha, also known as winning coalition of the CPP, has been a cornerstone of the ruling's party influence not only in politics and business in Cambodia.[78] The opposition's exclusionary strategy has done little to break this symbiotic and lucrative relationship, even during the economic crisis induced by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The opposition took advantage of the pandemic to provoke workers' resistance against factory closures and the lack of proper remediations of the ruling government but did not yield any fruitful results. During

the pandemic, surveillance and suppressive measures are increased by the ruling government. The government consecutively arrested ordinary citizens, human rights activists, workers, and opposition party activists for they criticised the ways the government handled the pandemic and distributed Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccination; many of them were alleged of instigating and causing social instability.[79] The opposition, especially Sam Rainsy, is in a dilemma when seeking elites to democratise the ruling system. On the one hand, in his most recent attempt to return to Cambodia in 2019, Sam Rainsy wished to seek elite cooperation, including soldiers, to isolate Hun Sen; on the other hand, he threatened the private property of the elites, pledging that his party would confiscate the wealth of the current "corrupt leadership" to pay for the poor's microfinance and bank debts.[80]

Conclusion

Similar to the fallout from other political upheavals elsewhere, such as in the Middle East recently, Cambodian people have been traumatised; they have also been indoctrinated by the ruling party's narrative of peace and stability. This narrative is the antithesis of that needed for mass mobilisation and an alliance of different unions and other interest groups for regime change or democratisation. The implausibility of democratisation is high if it depends on trade unions alone. Unions are small, and their interests do not represent the entire ecology of interest groups, including students, NGOs, Buddhist monks, and elite businessmen. Business elites are co-opted by the ruling regime as part of their winning coalition, whereas the opposition or independent unions are circumvented if they resist co-optation. The current labour relations with employers, government and international organisations are conducive environments for the ruling elites' wealth accumulation (given the profit margin between worker wage and exporting price). As the post-1990s, free-market designed economic institutions allow these

elite groups to perform well in their economic and financial activities, they are unlikely to support or pursue democratisation or regime change.

The proposition that capitalist development strengthens the organisational capacity of the excluded working class (especially workers and labour movements), which in turn enables them to pressure for a democratic revolution,[81] appears to underestimate the societal alliance issues. This is especially so in a country where the rise of authoritarianism is strong while unionisation is young. Labour movements alone are a fragment of the larger social movement which requires participation and cooperative capacity from other key actors and interest groups, such as youth, religious, student, and civil service unions, to bring about a democratic revolution. The rise of youth-centred movements against authoritarianism through elections, especially in 2013, when the support for the opposition party was significant,[82] was subsequently curbed by the ruling party through the dissolution of the main opposition in 2017 and the violent clampdown and arrests of protesting youth workers in 2014.

In other contexts within Southeast Asia, the participation and support of societal elites — such as student activists, who campaign on the nationalist cause, or religious activists who bear religious authority — are likely to encourage democratic protestors to endure repression and make a personal sacrifice for broader political goals.[83] Paradigmatic cases of democratic revolutions, such as the Philippines' People Power movement and Indonesia's anti-Suharto protests, were characterised by broad-based mass uprisings led or supported by societal elites with nationalist and religious authority. Given the asymmetry of agendas and the lack of nationalistic interests for democratic transition in the Cambodian context, these key societal and business elite groups have, however, been controlled and co-opted extensively, resulting in their inability to remain politically autonomous and active. Compared to Indonesia, where the breakdown between (business) elites and the ruling regime led by president Suharto was a factor of democratic transition in 1998,[84] the current economic situation in Cambodia, even

while severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, does not appear to be such a conducive environment. Business elites in Cambodia have exploited the advantages of their support for the ruling party, and any defectors may be punished, especially by the pro-ruling party's anti-corruption unit. The tight nexus between the elites and the ruling party is a reciprocal and clientelistic process, and in the face of any movement against either of these parties, suppression and co-optation to protect are often, then, the lucrative choices.[85] Without trusted alliances with other societal elites and interest groups, labour movements in Cambodia are perceived as a form of democratic 'intent', but such 'action' is often co-opted by the ruling regime's wage labour incentive to eventually break down coalitions with the opposition party movements.

NOTES

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1 Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).

2 Labour movement, labour protest, and organised labour are used interchangeable in this article.

3 Ruth Berins Collier and James Mahoney, "Adding Collective Actors to Collective Outcomes: Labor and Recent Democratization in South America and Southern Europe", *Comparative Politics* (1997), 285–303; See also Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

4 Adapted from Mark R. Thompson, *Democratic Revolutions: Asia and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2003); Mark R. Thompson, 'Whatever Happened to Democratic Revolutions?', *Democratization* 7 (2000): 1–20.

5 Collier and Mahoney, "Adding Collective Actors", 292.

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