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# **Globalization and Generational Change**

## The Evolution of Cambodia's Social Structure

CHANTO SISOWATH

### **The Origin of State Legitimacy: The God King**

In order to appreciate the impact of globalization on Khmer society it is necessary to grasp the fundamental political and social values of Cambodia. Cambodian culture has been very resistant to change, showing strong reverence for the monarchy and the ways of antiquity. In traditional belief, the king was the sovereign ruler whose divine right legitimized his authority to rule over all social and political institutions.<sup>1</sup> See Yongseok Seo's *Further Thoughts*, "A Brief History of Cambodia," on page 307.

In the context of state and social relations, the origin of Khmer political and social values is found in the decisions of the God King, who wielded absolute authority. The culture of divinity has made an everlasting impact on the social values of Khmer society, the most visible impact being the application and administration of power. For instance, during the height of the Khmer Empire (6th through 13th centuries), the king was the center of Khmer culture and might, and his legitimacy was broadly revered by the religious sector and the general population. Starting from this premise, the king held absolute power, and although he granted some autonomy to local authorities, the royal court made the final decisions on policies about the development of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there was no separation of governmental powers that permitted the ministries to function independently, a problem that this present generation must overcome. When the kingdom started to establish foreign relations with European and neighboring countries, the monarchy had many difficulties in consolidating and protecting its absolute right to power as well as administering and implementing policy.<sup>3</sup> For example, by the eighteenth century, a time when the rest of the world was evolving from absolute monarchy toward constitutional monarchy, the kingdom of Cambodia was thwarted by external challenges, especially the rising power of Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Confined by institutional weaknesses, Cambodia was

contained within its own kingdom, isolated from international politics and the forces of modernization. The entire kingdom was almost lost.

Perhaps the reason the king resisted modernization was that the monarchy felt that it had the responsibility of protecting the political and cultural sovereignty of the kingdom. The fact is that the king was the state, and the state was the king, so whose sovereignty was at stake?<sup>5</sup> By failing to provide the legal right for social participation in nation-state building, the state ignored public opinion in the process of public-policy formulation.<sup>6</sup> It was the failure to recognize the right of participation and the value of political diversity that prompted a breach of trust between the state and society.

In addition to that, the monarchy also overlooked the important role of the bourgeoisie and the merchant class in nation-state building. In the case of Cambodia, the bourgeoisie and aristocrats composed the elite (landlords, provincial governors, and the military) who legitimized royal decrees. They were the buffer between the ruler and the ruled. When compared with their European counterparts, Cambodian elites did not seek a political and commercial revolution. Instead, they survived by feeding off the monarch. The primary concern of the aristocrats and the bourgeoisie was to embrace the royal culture and benefit from it.

By neglecting to recognize the importance of social and political diversity, the ancient regime created a system of class supremacy and alienation. Cambodia has inherited this legacy while it is trying to democratize its social institutions. The inherent challenge is not only that Cambodia has been a post-conflict society since the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991 ended the Cambodian civil war, but also that the norms of social mobility continue to distance the majority from social advancement because these norms undermine fair opportunities and competition. As a result, Cambodia faces the problem of political and social inequity, especially in this age of globalization.

### **Entering the Free Market System: Directional Change**

Although Cambodia gained full sovereign status from France in 1954, the political system remained exclusive. Cambodia has never gone through a social revolution but is now gradually undergoing a paradigm evolution due in part to globalization and in part to the erosion of traditional values. Cambodian society has never been comfortable with an open political system because its social values and institutions have not come to terms with liberal democracy.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until 1993 that Cambodia opened up to the global system and thus was able to accommodate some of the values and practices of liberalism. At the end of the Cold War, Cambodia was able to focus on economic development and strengthening its national identity. The fall of communism meant a reduction

in the Soviet Union's assistance to the communist states in Indochina, including Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> However, the end of the Cold War also ushered in a different kind of challenge to Cambodia, namely an international political economy that demanded simultaneous reform of both the economy and the polity.

In the economic sphere, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) required Cambodia to make structural reforms and replace the indigenous economy with the mechanisms of a liberal market economy. In the political sphere, Cambodia was expected to liberalize its political system and guarantee civil liberties. By entering the market system Cambodia had to make directional changes, transforming a post-conflict society into a market society through structural reforms. After years of international isolation and extensive internal strife, Cambodia has no choice but to accommodate the international system, making economic, political, and social reforms in order to integrate into and benefit from the global community.<sup>9</sup>

But first, Cambodia had to manage and resolve its own internal differences. It successfully achieved national reconciliation through the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement on a Comprehensive Settlement for the Cambodian Conflict. Following the 1991 Paris Agreement, Cambodia wanted to accomplish national unity followed by national rehabilitation, and ultimately combat poverty and improve the living standard of its citizens.<sup>10</sup> When the four rival political parties (namely the Cambodian People's Party; the Royalists-United Front for the Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia; the Buddhist Democratic Liberal Party People; and the People Democratic Kampuchea)<sup>11</sup> signed the 1991 Peace Agreement, they agreed on a process of national reconciliation and adopted a pluralistic democratic constitution. The Paris Peace Agreement uniquely focused on the principle of human rights, especially the components of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In addition, the four major political parties agreed to cooperate with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and to be subject to UN-sponsored national elections in 1993. The presence of the UN Peace Keeping Force and national elections organized and monitored by UN personnel were historic events. More important, the very fact that the four contending parties gave up armed competition in favor of a national election and accepted conditions set by the international community, emphasizing the importance of human rights and democracy, was indicative that Cambodia was moving toward a new era of nation-state building.

For any developing country or country with post-conflict experience, the process of democratization is challenging, and Cambodia is no exception. One dilemma is whether to pay more attention to democratization or to poverty reduction. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, an economist from Columbia University, argued that for Cambodia at the early period of post-conflict recovery, it is necessary

to tend to the challenges of poverty, especially food security, and then gradually turn its attention to building democracy.<sup>12</sup> Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also often argued that democracy and poverty reduction should be achieved simultaneously because the two are indivisible. For the average Cambodian, having access to public services such as health care, food, and education is most important for daily life, but at the same time they do not discard their desire for democratization.<sup>13</sup>

For many Cambodians, democracy is necessary for two fundamental purposes: for enabling equitable growth and protecting political rights and civil liberties, and for the prevention of a political and economic monopoly. In this context, the correlation of democratization with poverty reduction is very crucial for a post-conflict society because a responsible and accountable political system is a prerequisite for social development. Interfacing with the global system means reforming civil administration so that both the private and the public sectors accommodate the market system. This emerging process is mainly channeled by civil society, which includes international development institutions and agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Food Program (UNFP), United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), World Bank, IMF, and International Labor Organization (ILO), in addition to myriad local and international nonprofit organizations and religious establishments.

Civil society has impacted the country considerably, particularly by raising awareness of human rights, equality, equity, poverty alleviation, preventive medicine, birth control, HIV/AIDS prevention, planning parenthood, children's rights, gender equity, and workers' rights. In many ways, nonprofit organizations are liberating people from the shackles of state-made decisions by empowering the grass-roots levels with practices and information necessary to manage their own lives.

From another perspective, the fusion of global communications and integration processes continues to change Cambodia's social structure.<sup>14</sup> For instance, globalization demands competitiveness, but competitiveness has been defined in terms of creativity rather than capital and by intangible assets such as knowledge rather than tangible assets. Cambodia has been compelled to respond to the paradigm change rather than having been persuaded by it to reform its social and political philosophy and economic practices.

However, even if globalization is thought to improve the distribution of resources within nation-states or within the global community, the reality is that only a few profit, while the benefits of globalization remain out of the reach of most people.<sup>15</sup> An imbalance in access to public services and opportunities re-

mains for many Cambodians. But regardless of the debate on how globalization is to benefit Cambodia, it is a fact that globalization is a catalytic factor and has compelled Cambodia to readjust its social structure. Global politics and international relations are negotiated in terms of investments, cost and profit, production, competitive advantage, labor, tariffs, and the market. Market access and investments have become the means of peaceful cooperation for coexistence and co-prosperity. In this age of globalization, the law of supply and demand knows no boundary, nationality, or race.

At the present, Cambodia is facing what Ross and Trachte describe as “the irony of the new leviathan.” The new leviathan of global capitalism does not defend the citizens of a nation from foreign invasion, as Hobbes imagined. The old leviathan emphasized the state’s legitimacy to exercise its authority. State sovereignty and power were defined in the context of self-preservation and order. In Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, the state’s primary instrument for social order was force. The new leviathan’s idea of social order is rational calculation, individual interest, capitalism, investments, specialization, and employment. In the age of a global economy, national security encompasses the idea of protecting the domestic economy and industrial development.<sup>16</sup> Principles of property rights, ownership, commerce, and trade are issues that complicate administration. And even if the global economy culminates in interdependency, it is not necessarily a prelude to commercial and political harmony, a point that political economists such as Giplin, Wallerstein, and others have made.

### **Globalization: The Contesting Process**

In addition to the increasing presence of democratic values, decentralization and deconcentration, and the modernized development model, information technology (IT) and information and communications technology (ICT) have affected and shaped how Cambodia and Cambodians behave and respond to the impact of globalization.<sup>17</sup> For the past eleven years, Cambodian youth have been enjoying a wealth of information. If this process continues, it is probable that a new social paradigm and values will emerge within this generation. Cambodia recognizes the influence of Western economic and political models because the market economy demands structural reform to succeed. This means that if Cambodia wishes to accelerate its poverty reduction goals and benefit from globalization, it must simultaneously reform its political practices through decentralization and deconcentration of power by rearranging the structure of the state for more flexibility and efficiency.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the essential requirement to benefit from this emerging paradigm is to give priority to human resource development and access to technical information that will be useful for decision making. The

advent of technological transfer, as well as skills transfer, has helped reshape the way people work, think, play, and interact internally and externally.<sup>19</sup> The present generation has much more exposure to developmental information than its predecessors. The increasing acquisition of analytical tools and the understanding of technological application helps the process of nation-state building as well as social mobility. Today, Cambodian youth are exposed to updated information, particularly on democratic processes, and the functions of the market economy, medicine, engineering, liberal arts, and international cultures. Cambodian youth are now able to evaluate the credibility and legitimacy of the state while at the same time being less receptive to state propaganda and more responsive to the importance of human rights and intellectual development. As a consequence, state propaganda and the feudal system have lost their potency, and so the culture of divinity is facing an institutional crisis. Similarly, Cambodia's patriarchic system is beginning to fade as the mystique of the God King, feudalism, and nepotism all gradually lose functionality and the support from the younger generation, especially since the current generation is suffering from low employment opportunities.

While the state is steadfast in protecting its own prerogatives, privileges, and power, the private sector continues gradually to erode the functions and authority of the state. This means that the state has had to become more cooperative with the private sector and finally accept its significant role and function in nation-state building. In this age of globalization, the Cambodian state has to become more open and transparent, which in many ways demystifies the power of the state. This enables people to become more aware of their rights and to recognize the limitations on the power of the state.

### **The Information Market: Education as a Main Driver**

Cambodia's educational process is gearing the next generation toward the market economy. Privately owned educational establishments are flourishing across the country, providing the younger generation with technical skills so they will be better prepared for the market system. As the success of the market is driven by financial interests, the state has recognized that private education may provide the needed services and values, namely *marketable skills*. Liberalizing the economy and furthering education promotes competition and competitive advantage, strengthening knowledge and employment prospects for the younger generation. Although at the moment public-information management is usually confined to state ministries, access to public information through the Internet and Web sites provides the younger generation with a better understanding of the role and function of state institutions.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as youth from elite families receive

education abroad, they are returning home better prepared for administration and management. Local institutions such as the National Institute of Management (NIM), the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), Norton University (NU), and the Royal Academy of Administration (RAA) are the four main accredited educational institutions that produce future leaders. International nonprofit organizations such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan International Cultural Exchange (JICE) promote technical and infrastructural development such as water plants, power plants, roads, education, schools, irrigation engineering, telecommunications, broadcasting systems, satellite operation and broadcasting, cultural preservation, environmental engineering, and development of the legal infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Cambodia's RUPP is well known for its science and technology department, while NIM specializes in economics and international business. NU focuses on foreign languages, especially English, and RAA is responsible for producing top-notch administrators.

### **Globalism: Challenging Conventional Wisdom**

Since the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, Cambodia has been preoccupied with internal politics. To prevent the return of conflict, the government had to sideline public services, administrative reform, and good governance initiatives. Consequently, Cambodia has made limited progress on human resource development, which eventually complicates its ability and opportunity to harness external and internal resources for nation-state building.<sup>22</sup> As a result, in comparison with Vietnam, Cambodia is facing the problem of development gaps because Cambodia failed to sustain the competitive advantages needed to attract foreign direct investments and loans. While it is true that globalization offers numerous possibilities, it also narrows opportunities by raising the levels of competition, standards, and expectations. For Cambodia to harness the benefits and opportunities of globalization, it must redefine its own working culture, social relations, modes of production, finances, legal system, civil and state relations, and international relations. An important example of this occurring is in the military, which continues to work on improving civil relations by educating junior- and high-ranking officers on the role and function of the military in conflict resolution and constitutionalism,<sup>23</sup> while the Ministry of Defense continues to implement exchange programs and sends attachés to Western institutions.

More generally, to keep pace with development and institutional changes, Cambodia is gradually changing its social values and state relations. State centrism, an idea that once dominated the social and political landscape of Cambodia, is being redefined and eventually will be restructured toward accommodating the ideas of individualism, liberty, and economic and political rights.



## Expectations and Realities

Opponents of globalization argue that the process of globalization creates development gaps and increases inequity. Yet there are many positive opportunities for developing countries, including Cambodia, to benefit from the process. However, before Cambodia puts all of its expectations and faith in the global system, it needs to have a model that is compatible with globalization. This is where the problem lies. For Cambodia, in particular, the main question is how to construct and finance development or create a development model that is compatible with its own social values and practices.<sup>24</sup> What are Cambodia's development options, and which can Cambodia afford? Like many developing and post-conflict countries, it is the international financial institutions (IFIs) and international economic institutions that influence national development models. The former expects the latter to implement structural reform and complex technical operations to accommodate the market economy.<sup>25</sup> This in many ways increases the burden of policy and financial planning. IFI policy planners need to keep in mind that the majority of the developing nations are not able to build or accommodate the market economy overnight without risking political and social instability. In such a case, the market system coerces developing countries with market pressure and eventually co-opts them into crippling economic and political debts.

## Conclusion

Globalization is causing Cambodia to adjust its social and political values. The state, while retaining its legitimacy, finds that its credibility, functionality, and efficiency are challenged by the market system, global information, and the rising level of knowledge. It is the duty and opportunity of Cambodian youth to find the successful balance of traditional and global for their future.

## FURTHER THOUGHTS

### **A Brief History of Cambodia**

*Yongseok Seo*

#### **Indian Influence in Premodern Cambodia**

THE FIRST WAVE of global influence in early Cambodia came from India. According to Chinese records, Funan, located in modern Cambodia, was the first ancient kingdom to appear in Southeast Asia. The kingdom of Funan flourished as a strategic place of maritime trade between India and China from the first to