Studie

Kontinuitäten politischer Kultur in Laos und Kambodscha

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Abstract

In der westlichen Welt gibt es einen weit verbreiteten Konsens, demzufolge die Entwicklungschancen von Demokratie und Marktwirtschaft eng mit der Beschaffenheit oder Funktionsfähigkeit von politischen Institutionen zusammenhängen. Ein Blick auf historische Entwicklungslinien vieler Staaten zeigt jedoch, dass diese These nicht sehr belastbar ist. In der vorliegenden Studie wird dementsprechend argumentiert, dass in Laos und Kambodscha historisch verwurzelte politische Kulturmuster die Funktionsfähigkeit politischer Institutionen unterlaufen. Um die politische Kultur zu verstehen, gilt es nicht nur die politischen und ökonomischen Verfehlungen beider Länder zu betrachten, sondern auch einen Blick auf Phänomene wie intransparentes Regieren und ausufernde Korruption zu werfen. (Manuskript eingereicht am 17.06.2008; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 31.08.2008)

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War brought a euphoric conviction, summed up in Francis Fukuyama's conception of the end of history,[1] that all states would necessarily, sooner or later, adopt liberal democratic institutions of government and free market economies. The choice was a rational one, since these institutions had proved their superiority in their epic struggle with Marxism-Leninism. Neo-conservatism went a step further, urging the use of American power in the service of this inevitable historical outcome. The U.S. would not simply provide a model of how these institutions should work, but would actively promote them, by force if necessary (as in Iraq). The forms of freedom associated with individualism were assumed to lie at the core of human nature: remove dictatorship (whether by an individual or party) and free institutions would naturally emerge, and be welcomed by all.

The irony in this ideological response to the end of the Cold War lies in the fact that precisely the same utopian progressivist thinking informed Marxism-Leninism, which looked forward to a time when the whole world would embrace communism. Both neo-conservatism and Marxism-Leninism envisage a uniform, globalised future for all humankind, defined by adoption of a specific set of institutions governing politics and economics. This is not the place to examine the roots of this belief, except to say that it combines Christian apocalyptic ideas with the progressivism of the Enlightenment, expressed in the thought of Condorcet, Comte, and Spencer, and carried over into social evolutionism; and so it is characteristically Western (for a devastating critique of such thinking, see Gray 2008). What both neo-conservatism and Marxism-Leninism do, however, is to discount the deep historical roots of cultural difference.

Perhaps not surprisingly, we find these Western preconceptions present in the policy prescriptions of international institutions. The title of the World Bank's 2002 World Development Report was *Building Institutions for Markets* (World Bank 2002). This one-size-fits-all program essentially argues that if the right institutions are put in place, then free markets will flourish and economic development will follow. Contributing economic institutions include an independent judiciary to administer commercial, banking and company law; appropriate

[1] In the sense that we have arrived at the final, most effective, form of political institution, that of modern liberal democracy. See Fukuyama 1992.

government instrumentalities, including an independent auditing authority; land and environment laws to protect public assets; and effective anti-corruption legislation. On the private side, the essential institutions include private banks, chambers of commerce, and stock exchanges, all practising publicly transparent regulated procedures. The unstated premise is that the West has the right institutions, so if other countries want to build equivalent prosperity, they should replicate them. The problem is that were such institutions are introduced, they may still not work: courts may not dispense justice, audit offices fail to reveal government misappropriations, environmental protection agencies do not protect the environment, and so on.

The institutions of democratic government may be similarly ineffective. Elections, for example, are a necessary, but hardly a sufficient, condition for democracy. Political institutions tend to be most effective where they develop organically, as it were, out of the historical experience of societies; and least effectively where they are imposed from the outside by force.[2] Institutions adopted as a result of relatively peaceable transitions from colonialism to independence lie somewhere between the two. So do institutions imposed through agreement between internal and external parties. Both these two categories entail at least the partial agreement of indigenous elites. So why, over time, are democratic political institutions so often subverted? The explanation, I would suggest, lies in the persistence of political culture.[3] I shall illustrate my argument by reference to political developments in Laos and Cambodia.

To compare Laos and Cambodia is of particular interest for these reasons: after independence, both countries were Theravada Buddhist monarchies at roughly similar stages of economic development; both experienced the disruption and destruction of civil war and political revolution; and both had imposed upon them, under pressure from outside powers, political systems for which they had little prior preparation. In the case of Laos the imposed political institutions were Marxist-Leninist, complete with Politburo, Central Committee, and a

[2] The verdict is not yet in on Iraq, but judging by events through 2008, including status of women and the march of Shiite theocracy, the signs are ominous.

[3] A similar argument with respect to Cambodia can be found in Roberts (2001). Though Roberts refers to 'traditionalism' rather than political culture, he identifies its core elements responsible for undermining Cambodian democracy as patronage networks (*khsae*) and "the views of absolutism held by the elite" (Roberts 2001:205).

single ruling party controlling every aspect of society. In the case of Cambodia, once the Khmer Rouge had been overthrown and the People's Republic of Kampuchea replaced, a multi-party democracy was installed, complete with competing political parties, non-government associations and organisations, and a relatively free press. These two systems could hardly be more different. What they have in common is their foreignness: neither built on traditional forms of governance. What they also have in common, as we shall, are the ways in which both these sets of political institutions have been subverted through the continuation of political processes that historically have been central to the political culture of each polity.

What I want to argue, from brief studies of how this process has worked out in each case, is that setting institutions in place is no guarantee that they will work as they do in Western nation-states. It all depends on how power is understood and applied in each society, and what determines this is not a set of political institutions, which may exist as mere shells, but political culture, which informs the way people behave in relation to political matters. Laos and Cambodia have entirely different political institutions, but the way power is concentrated and used in each state is very similar, reflecting similarities in political culture that derive in large part from shared elements of their broader worldviews.

1 Laos

Laos is one of five remaining Marxist-Leninist states in the world today, along with China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba. It is also one of only five Theravada Buddhist states, along with Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Sri Lanka. In December 1975, the 650-year-old monarchy (under the Royal Lao regime, a constitutional monarchy) was replaced by a People's Democratic Republic. The ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party already existed, but as a highly secret organisation directing the Lao Patriotic Front and the even broader revolutionary movement known as the Pathet Lao. The Party already had a Central Committee and a seven-member Politburo, 'elected' at its clandestine 1972 Second Party Congress. The Party took power through semi-legal means when a hastily convened, hand-picked, Congress of People's Representatives appointed a new government consisting almost entirely of Politburo and Central Committee party members – a degree of overlap that has continued to mark Lao politics ever since. Party secretary-general Kaysone Phomvihan became prime minister, while another four Politburo members headed senior ministries.

The core Marxist-Leninist political institutions were modelled on those of the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Soviet and Vietnamese advisers shaped every institution, including those of the Party (for example, its control and personnel commissions), the government, and the security apparatus. This advice was necessary because the Pathet Lao had very few competent and educated cadres, nowhere near enough to run a country. And because they were so few, Party leaders were fearful of retaining any civil servant who had worked for the Royal Lao government, and whose loyalty might be suspect. Former senior and middle-level administrators were sent for re-education in remote parts of the country, for which they volunteered in the mistaken belief that they would be there for no more than a month or two. Most remained in re-education camps for several years.

The top, ideologically committed leadership of the Pathet Lao was largely lowland ethnic Lao,[4] but the majority of low-level cadres and soldiers were from ethnic minorities inhabiting the mountainous 'liberated zone', and were very poorly educated. By far the majority of ethnic Lao remained under Royal Lao government administration. So the Party was desperate to recruit ethnic Lao. Many of those who joined, however, were opportunists; and none had been honed by years of guerrilla warfare. Not all were required, as in Vietnam, to possess a proletarian or peasant pedigree. They brought with them traditional Lao attitudes to authority and ways of accommodating power, and many soon turned their positions within the Party to their own benefit (Stuart-Fox 1997).

Under Vietnamese and Soviet tutelage, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) imposed a series of orthodox socialist measures, including nationalisation of industry and finance, trade and price controls, and within three years, cooperativisation of agriculture. This last was the breaking point. Numbers of peasants killed their livestock, enjoyed a feast with friends, and left for Thailand. As government procurement paid minimal prices, those who remained worked little and cared less. Rice production declined, further exacerbating economic collapse. A change of course was inevitable. In mid-1979 came the first sign that pragmatism might replace ideology, a process which went further in 1986 with the shift to a market economy. The decision was taken at the 1985 Fourth Party Congress, which was delayed for several months during which what has proved

[4] Of the seven Politburo members, only Sisomphone Lovansay at number six was upland Tai.

to be the last great ideological debate in Lao communism took place. Hard-liners fought to retain a socialist economy, but the day was carried by Kaysone, with Soviet support, for by this time the Soviet Union no longer had the means or the will to keep subsidising Lao government expenditure, plus pay all costs for the Lao armed forces (both expenses that the U.S. had met for the Royal Lao government prior to 1975).

After seizing power, some among the revolutionary elite, like Kaysone, continued to live relatively simply. It did not take long, however, for revolutionary morality to be undermined. Party officials took advantage of their position and power to amass wealth and property. Wives (even Kaysone's) and other family members became conduits, as they always had been, for requests for favours and preferences, and benefited accordingly. Soon senior Party members began to dispense patronage in the traditional Lao way, favouring extended family members and loyal retainers with government contracts or jobs, for which they were often poorly qualified, in order to build a political support base of loyal clients. This was a system those who had lived under the former regime well understood. Remaining members of formerly powerful extended families moved to cement relations with currently powerful Party members, through such means as marriages between their children and joint business ventures.[5] In this way a new political and social elite began to take form, an alliance of new power with old wealth and social standing, which used the Party to promote family interests. This was reinforced in the next generation, as sons of senior Party members who had been given the advantage of educational opportunities abroad returned either to take up positions in government, or to go into business using their political contacts. Ironically this process of political-economic elite formation was powerfully assisted by the economic reforms of the late 1980s, known as the New Economic Mechanism (NEM).

The sort of politics that evolved was the kind ethnic lowland Lao intuitively understood. It was how politics had been conducted under the Royal Lao regime. Just as governments then included a balanced mix of representatives of powerful extended families and their clients ('clans') and regional interests, so positions in

[5] Though large numbers of educated Lao fled to Thailand, from where they were resettled in the U.S., France, Australia and Canada, some members of wealthy families remained in Laos. Their children attended the same schools as the children of the new political leaders, and over contact increased.

the Party and government came to be distributed on a similar basis. The only complicating factor was that representatives of the larger or more influential ethnic minorities (upland Tai, Hmong, Khamu, Brao, Akha) who had already mounted up the Party and military hierarchy were in a position to demand their share of the spoils.[6] Politics, secretly conducted within the Party, soon became predominantly a matter of horse-trading, as the lead-up to the 2006 Eighth Party Congress showed (Stuart-Fox 2007).

Any pretence that the Lao People's Revolutionary Party rules for the benefit of the mass of the Lao people has in the meantime pretty well disappeared. Promises to improve the life opportunities for minority groups remain largely unfulfilled. The few teachers and health workers in remote areas all too often are unpaid, while Party cadres in urban centres build new villas and drive expensive cars. The Party has become a vehicle to promote the interests of an increasingly corrupt political hierarchy, a mere framework within which powerful figures build their competing patronage networks.[7]

2 Cambodia

Revolution in Cambodia was much more radical and traumatic than in Laos. Despite the harsh conditions, relatively few died while undergoing re-education in Laos.[8] Tens of thousands were murdered in Cambodia, and hundreds of thousands more died of disease and malnutrition. The Khmer Rouge regime destroyed every vestige of traditional government and culture, from the monarchy to religion, in order to create a state and government only nominally Marxist-Leninist (Vickery 1986), run by a tiny, highly authoritarian, revolutionary elite, so riven by paranoia that it had all but destroyed itself by the time it was overthrown by the Vietnamese in January 1979.[9]

[6] To the extent that ethnic Lao patronage networks depend on extended family ties, ethnic minorities are disadvantaged, since intermarriage, even among the children of Party officials, is still rare.

[7] There is no one in Laos to remind Party members of their responsibilities: there is no civil society, no free press, and no political opposition. All is under the close control of the ruling Party. No organisation even claimed responsibility for a spate of small bomb explosions between 2000 and 2003, which were variously blamed on the Hmong, disgruntled internal opponents of the regime, and external opposition groups.

[8] Among those who did were members of the royal family, including the last king and queen of Laos and the crown prince.

The People's Republic of Kampuchea was a construct of the Vietnamese, based upon the same model applied in Laos (Stuart-Fox 1987). Cambodia remained a single-party state. Its institutions cemented the Cambodian People's Party in power, but the Party itself had virtually to be constructed from scratch. If the Lao People's Revolutionary Party had few competent cadres, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) had fewer still. Another tiny leadership group took control of the state, with no intention of either sharing or relinquishing power. In the context of the last years of the Cold War and Sino-Soviet enmity it had the backing of Vietnam; but with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CPP and its remaining backer were forced to agree to share power with the two anti-communist resistance factions.

Negotiations took time, but eventually the Paris Accords of 1991 created the State of Cambodia as a multi-party democracy under United Nations auspices, with Norodom Sihanouk reinstalled as constitutional monarch. Elections were held in May 1993, and the UN went home, leaving behind it an uneasy coalition government comprising the royalist FUNCINPEC Party, which had won the largest number of seats, and its former enemy, the Cambodian People's Party, which controlled major components of both the military and the police. For informed Cambodians this compromise power-sharing arrangement was a 'betrayal of democracy' (Peang-Meth 1997). Also left behind were the remnants of the Khmer Rouge, which both political parties attempted to woo, in order to swing the political balance in their favour.

The political settlement allowed the return of Cambodians from abroad holding dual nationality, who took advantage of the UN presence to establish business enterprises. Most supported FUNCINPEC, but over the next four years competition developed for control over key sectors of the economy between business interests allied to the two principal political parties. FUNCINPEC supporters did well, in the process providing the CPP with some useful tuition in corruption. What quickly became clear, however, was that business and politics

[9] Khmer Rouge paranoia played itself out internally through an appalling series of purges (executed at the prison of Tuol Sleng in the southern suburbs of Phnom Penh), which consisted of tracing networks of personal contacts among those presumed to be intent on destroying the regime – the one element of the traditional culture of patronage that the Khmer Rouge leadership could not purge from their own thinking! Externally paranoia focused on the intentions of Vietnam, which the Khmer Rouge leadership provoked through cross-border raids to the point where invasion became inevitable – and the regime's fears self-fulfilling (see Morris 1999).

were becoming inextricably entwined, resulting in what has been called a 'hybrid democracy' (Un 2005).

In July 1997, CPP 'second prime minister' Hun Sen unleashed his security forces against his FUNCINPEC partners. The 'first prime minister', Norodom Ranariddh and a number of senior politicians fled the country. Several FUNCINPEC militia leaders and politicians were killed. The success of this pre-emptive coup was reflected in the 1998 elections, when the CPP won a majority of seats (but not the 2/3 needed to pass legislation). The new player in these elections was the Sam Rainsy Party formed by Sam Rainsy, the French-educated former Minister of Finance and Economy, whose auditing of expenditures had so cramped the corrupt activities of powerful politicians that he was expelled from FUNCINPEC. A new CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition was eventually formed, with Hun Sen as sole prime minister. The death of Pol Pot the same year (1998) assisted the CPP, for it hastened the disintegration of the Khmer Rouge. Within a year, the Khmer Rouge was no longer a significant political player.

Over the next five years the CPP steadily consolidated its monopoly over the use of state violence and its control over state resources. In the 2003 elections, the CPP further increased its vote, but still fell short of the required 2/3 majority. So the CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition had eventually to be re-formed, despite the poisonous state of their relationship. This left Sam Rainsy out in the cold. His accusations against Hun Sen for ordering a 1997 grenade attack at an SRP rally and against Ranariddh for corruption led the National Assembly to withdraw his parliamentary immunity. Sam Rainsy thereupon fled to France. In December 2005 a Cambodian court sentenced him to 18 months in prison for criminal defamation. But negotiations followed, resulting in a royal pardon.

In February 2006 Sam Rainsy returned to Cambodia and met with Hun Sen. The outcome was an agreement to introduce some superficial reforms to the electoral commission in return for agreement to change the constitution to allow governments to be formed on a 50-plus-one basis (instead of a 2/3 majority in the National Assembly). On the same day as the necessary amendment to the constitution was passed, Hun Sen dismissed the FUNCINPEC co-ministers of defence and the interior, thus leaving the security apparatus entirely in the hands of the CPP. What else was agreed with Sam Rainsy is unknown, but it is evident that Hun Sen, having destroyed FUNCINPEC, is prepared to allow the smaller and weaker Sam Rainsy Party to fulfil the role of 'loyal opposition'. In the words of Cambodian political scientist Dr Kheang Un: "Cambodia now has one and

a quarter political parties" – with what remains of FUNCINPEC completely subservient to Hun Sen, and the SRP as his only opposition.[10]

The July 2008 elections merely formalised what everyone in Cambodia expected. The CPP increased its representation in the National Assembly, as it has done in every election to claim just on two-thirds of the seats. Effectively, therefore, elections in Cambodia have served to endorse a progressive shift from multi-party democracy to the control of all state institutions by a single party. Elections will continue to be held, but the outcome will be no more in doubt than in Singapore. All power now rests with the CPP. How has this been achieved?

The CPP had one goal when forced to work within the institutions of a multi-party democracy, and that was to regain the monopoly of political power it had previously enjoyed during the PRK period, and which every previous Cambodian regime had enjoyed. The election of 1993 came as a shock to the Party, but it still had control of its own substantial security forces. The 1997 coup indicated the lengths to which Hun Sen was prepared to go to consolidate his power, to the point where he is now unchallengeable. He has done this by two means: by marginalising those in the Party who might have opposed him by winning over their supporters with the promise of patronage; and by consolidating the CPP patronage network through appointment of supporters to key positions, through 'joint ventures' between Party members and wealthy businessmen, and by strategic marriage ties. Relations are particularly close between Hun Sen, his powerful deputy prime minister, Sok An, and police chief Hok Lundy. At the same time Hun Sen bought off the military by allowing senior officers to exploit the country's timber and other agricultural resources. This has concentrated wealth, as well as power, in the hands of a narrow, deeply corrupt political-economic elite, and transformed the CPP from what was originally a Marxist-Leninist party to one structured as a hierarchical patronage network converging on a supremely powerful leader – a power structure that is traditionally Khmer. Indeed this has been the form taken by every regime in Cambodia's turbulent modern history, from Sihanouk's Sangkum party to the Khmer Rouge.

Admittedly the monopoly of power exercised by the CPP in Cambodia, where there is still a political opposition and the elements of civil society, is not as comprehensive as the LPRP enjoys in Laos, but its dominance is unchallenged.

10 Interviewed in Phnom Penh, June 2006.

What is interesting is that Laos and Cambodia are remarkably similar in the way that in both countries the traditional politics of patronage has been used to undermine political institutions, both Marxist-Leninist and democratic. So how and why has this subversion come about? The best way to approach an explanation is through the concept of 'political culture'.

3 Political Culture

Political culture was originally defined as the set of 'orientations' people share towards 'political objects', including institutions and events (Almond/Verba 1963). The term 'orientations' suggests both a way of understanding and a propensity to act. Political culture, therefore, refers to shared meaning underlying patterns of action that have political effect. To say that meanings are shared, however, does not imply that they are uniform. Political culture is a sub-set of a broader category that for each of us comprises the meanings by which we understand the world. These meanings are imparted by processes of enculturation and socialisation. They develop over time and are modified by experience, but at any one time they constitute the worldview, or cognitive culture, of the individual. So every individual worldview is different. What is shared is a set of presuppositions, core values, and meanings that together bias activity in identifiable ways. In relation to political activity, these biases create patterns of behaviour relating to the exercise of power. If we want to explain those patterns, we must understand the meanings and presuppositions that lie behind them. The abstract construction that results is how we conceptualise a particular political culture.

The political cultures of Laos and Cambodia are similar and different. What they share in common derives largely from religion, from belief in Theravada Buddhism and the animistic, supernatural world of spirits (known collectively as *phi* in Lao; *neak* in Cambodian) that both peoples fear and propitiate. Buddhism permeates the Lao and Cambodian worldviews,[11] and was an obvious target for revolutionary regimes intent on forging a new socialist mentality. The Khmer Rouge attempted to eradicate all religion, root and branch. Monks were forced to disrobe, images were smashed and monasteries vandalised. This harsh repression

[11] I refer here to the dominant ethnic groups of both countries. While 90 percent all Cambodians are Khmer and Buddhist, in Laos lowland Lao Buddhists make up less than two thirds of the population: the rest comprises a large variety of ethnic minorities practising different kinds of animism (see Chazée 1999).

was relaxed under the PRK, and today Buddhism again shapes the worldview of the majority of Cambodians. The Lao revolutionaries were more flexible. Only during the first three ideologically driven years of the Lao PDR regime was Buddhism subjected to severe political constraint, as the Sangha was brought under political control (Stuart-Fox/Bucknell 1982). It was not long thereafter before even Party leaders were attending Buddhist ceremonies. But then very few Lao, even within the LPRP, were committed communists.[12]

3.1 Common Elements

The key elements of the Buddhist worldview, for both Cambodians and Lao, include the notions of karma and rebirth, which are assumed in the same unquestioning way as believing Christians and Muslims assume the existence of heaven. Karma acts as a natural moral law, which none can escape: one's deeds will inevitably be rewarded or punished, if not in this lifetime, then in the next, or the next – which is one reason why there is a widespread lack of enthusiasm in Cambodia for the trial of Khmer Rouge leaders: Cambodians have no doubt that they will suffer for their sins over future lifetimes.

Belief in karma has social and political implications. If rebirth is in accordance with karma, then social position has been earned in previous existences. In other words, the rich and powerful have a moral right to their wealth and power – even if they are venal and corrupt. Belief in karma explains why people are evidently not born equal, and why, in popular Buddhist belief, women are not equal to men, even though they do have an equal chance of being reborn male. So karma both undermines any principle of social equality, and reinforces acceptance of social hierarchy.[13]

The political effect of karma derives from this acceptance of social hierarchy, which is reinforced by another component currently evident in Cambodian political culture: the value accorded to social harmony and order. Social order

[12] Even LPRP Secretary-General Kaysone Phomvihan, when he knew he was dying, sought solace in Buddhist prayer and protection under the direction of a respected monk, and was later accorded full Buddhist funeral rites (see Evans 1998:64).

[13] Social hierarchy has deep historical roots in both Lao and Cambodian cultures. In traditional Tai societies, a large social gap separated the ruling aristocracy from their subjects, with below them non-Tai ethnic minorities and slaves (both known as *kha*). In Cambodia, the social order consisted of king, nobility and peasantry. This 'pyramidal' structure encouraged 'authoritarian and paternalistic' rule and popular passivity (Peang-Meth 1991).

was traditionally prized because of the opportunity it provides for individuals to pursue their own spiritual paths through gaining merit, which is why Buddhist kings were expected to promote harmony and order within their realms. In both Laos and Cambodia, social order is prominent in political rhetoric. Both regimes require everyone to know and accept their place in society, without political complaint. Cambodians in particular do not want any more radical social experiments or political turmoil. Those who today disrupt social order may be reprimanded, even censured. Among the people of both countries there is a deeply ingrained reluctance to provoke confrontation with established power holders, which obviously plays into their hands.

Let me reiterate. Karma underwrites the stability of social structure, for birth depends solely on one's personal accumulation of karma throughout innumerable previous existences. Karma thereby not only explains one's position in life, but also legitimizes both social inequality and the exercise of power, for the perquisites of power are the just deserts of those either born to it or who obtain it. Theravada Buddhists believe that to accept one's lot and to live in accordance with the precepts of Buddhism will improve one's chances for a better future rebirth – hence the 'fatalistic outlook' that is supposed to result.[14] Karma thus traditionally reinforced the hereditary principle underlying monarchy, and today still underwrites popular acceptance of political leadership.

3.2 Differences

Differences between Lao and Cambodian political culture derived from differences in traditional structures and perceptions of power, and from historical experience and how that history is understood.

3.2.1 Laos

Lao political culture has roots in Tai social structure, and the clear social distinction drawn between aristocrats with a right to rule, and commoners (the *phrai*, or peasantry) who were tied to their rulers by reciprocal bonds of loyalty and protection. The core traditional political structure of all the Tai peoples (Lao, Thai, Shan, etc.) was the *meuang* (a term now used to mean 'district' in Laos). *Meuang* were of variable extent, but they were primarily centred on

[14] Peang-Meth 1991. Karma is not, however, necessarily 'fatalistic', for the opportunity is always there to counteract bad karma by willingly doing good and accumulating merit.

core territories. Smaller *meuang* were nested within larger *meuang*, a variable set of which constituted *Meuang Lao*, the *mandala* that comprised all *meuang* that at any one time accepted the king of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang as their sovereign. Each *meuang* was presided over by a *chao meuang*, or ruling prince, drawn from the leading aristocratic family. He was supported by three other officials (the *uparat*, or viceroy, the *raxavong* and the *raxabut*, in that order), all drawn either from the ruling family or a collateral branch of it. All four officials fulfilled both civil and military tasks, depending on circumstances. Given the hierarchical social structure of the *meuang*, no commoner could ever expect to be appointed to one of these positions.[15]

What held each *meuang* together as a political structure were personal relationships. In return for taxes in kind and corvée labour, and military service as and when demanded, the *chao meuang* ensured social order. He was responsible for administering and enforcing customary law within the *meuang*. A minor *chao meuang* signified his loyalty to a superior prince, who in turn would swear of allegiance to the king by publicly taking an oath and drinking consecrated water. Each *meuang* provided tribute in the form of luxury trade goods and military levees, so the power of a *mandala* was a measure of how effectively it concentrated political, economic and military resources.

Ideological power both derived from and reinforced legitimization. The right of *chao meuang*, and ultimately the king, to exercise power depended on three sources of legitimization: on hereditary descent (in the case of the king of Lan Xang, in direct line from the mythical first Lao ruler, Khun Borom); on the 'consent' of the spirits of the land (*phi meuang*), which required recognition and propitiation; and on Buddhism (particularly the notion of karma, as we have seen). Monks taught that the king had the right to rule, by virtue of his karma; which he demonstrated by generous gifts to the Sangha.

The political culture of the *meuang* continued undiluted throughout the period of Siamese domination (1779 to 1893), and was hardly undermined by French colonialism (1893-1953), which favoured the pro-French aristocracy. Even when Laos obtained independence, Lao social structure continued to be hierarchical, underpinned by belief in karma. Politics was the preserve of

[15] During the six and a half centuries of monarchy in Laos, only one powerful generals not of royal descent was able to seize the throne, after the king disappeared invading Cambodia. His son also ruled briefly before the throne was restored to the royal line (see Stuart-Fox 1998).

members of powerful families.

It appeared at first that the Lao revolution might herald the end of both the patronage-based political culture of the *meuang* and the influence of the powerful aristocratic families making up the old political elite. The structure of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), open to all, and favouring workers and peasants, promised to introduce a modern, institutionalised approach to politics that would replace traditional Lao political culture. Soon after assuming power, however, the Party came to be perceived as being the principal avenue of social mobility for the ambitious and their principal source of patronage. Personal contacts became more important than actual qualifications or talent in obtaining not just Party or government positions, but also such benefits as government contracts, scholarships for children or relatives, and support in court cases. As debts for such assistance had to be repaid, wealth became concentrated in the hands of those with political power.

The example set by senior Party members, both in Vientiane and in the provinces, was soon adopted at all levels. Party members with access to the resources of the state appropriated some for themselves while dispensing others as patronage in the traditional Lao way. But whereas under the Royal Lao regime, powerful families openly competed for political influence and there was at least some residual notion of a bureaucracy in the service of the state, in the Lao PDR the LPRP alone exercises political power and the bureaucracy functions as a highly politicized arm of the Party. With no tradition of bureaucratic administration (as in China and Vietnam), politics in Laos reverted to competition between networks of influence and patronage based on extended families and regions.

Two other developments that characterized how the Pathet Lao came to exercise power during the period of revolutionary struggle contributed to the prevailing political culture. One derived from the structure of the revolutionary movement, the other from its mode of operation. The Pathet Lao was a communist movement, hierarchically structured and tightly disciplined along Leninist lines. At its core the LPRP provided direction for both the broad Lao Patriotic Front and guerrilla operations. Strict top-down discipline was justified not just by the circumstances of war, but also by communist ideology in the name of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and 'democratic centralism'. This whole structure was in fact most undemocratic, but it did mirror, and so both build upon and reinforce, traditional attitudes towards hierarchical political and social relationships. In terms of operation, the Pathet Lao enforced a high level

of secrecy. Information was communicated strictly on a need-to-know basis, and cadres were required to accept and act upon instructions without question. Non-transparent, top-down decision-making and obsessive secrecy were two elements that the Pathet Lao brought with them into government.

It took some time for the ethnic Lao population to adjust to the revolutionary politics of the new regime, but as new networks of influence and political patronage took shape, people soon recognized a system they understood and could operate within. As the system clearly works in the interest of powerful and wealthy families, members of the new political-economic elite have little incentive to change it. Muted opposition comes only from the educated few whose interests and upward mobility are frustrated. The mass of the population tends to accept the system with a resignation that reflects traditional attitudes and values.

3.2.2 Cambodia

The Khmer empire was organised in the form of a mandala, centred on the capital of Angkor and made up of tributary fiefdoms whose rulers swore oaths of personal loyalty to the king. Within their own territories, regional lords exercised considerable power, on condition that they sent regular tribute to the capital, and provided a fighting force when needed. Often their daughters served at court as concubines of the king. Personal bonds still link provincial governors to whoever holds power in Phnom Penh. Where Cambodia differed from Laos, however, was that in Cambodia, monarchy carried with it a persistent aura of divinity. The Brahmanism of the Angkor period established the king as semi-divine. All power derived from the king, who demanded absolute loyalty from his ministers and subjects. The king stood at the apex of a rigidly ordered social hierarchy: any preferment depended entirely on his whim.

This conception of the king as semi-divine continued throughout the colonial period, quietly supported by the French authorities, who saw it as a means of keeping the population placid and law-abiding, and had no intention of modernising Cambodian politics. And it was preserved even after Cambodia gained independence. According to the 1953 Cambodian constitution, the king's person was "sacred and inviolable". When King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated to create his own political movement (known as the *Sangkum*), it was not organised as a political party with branches and elected officials, but rather drew upon Khmer absolutism and Sihanouk's royal aura to demand the personal loyalty of

all Cambodians.

The overthrow of Sihanouk and proclamation of a Khmer Republic by General Lon Nol in 1970 failed to change traditional Khmer political culture, for Lon Nol simply took Sihanouk's position at the apex of the social and political hierarchy. And as in Laos, the hierarchical structure of Marxist parties, whether during the Khmer Rouge or PRK periods, simply reproduced the traditional social pyramid and authoritarian power structure. Neither introduced any notion of democracy, or institutions to promote it. Restoration of Sihanouk even as a constitutional monarch in a resuscitated Kingdom of Cambodia, allowed much of traditional Cambodian political culture to survive, or be resuscitated. All the principal political players were deeply imbued with traditional notions of power and status, with the result that democracy (which requires its own political culture to succeed) remained an 'illusion' (Lizèe 1993).

As in Laos, so in Cambodia patronage networks (*khsae*) constructed through personal relationships formed the core of the traditional political order. Personal advantage was always, and still is, gained through the favour of someone in a superior position in the social hierarchy, rather than through one's own initiative and talent. So the more powerful one's patron, the greater one's opportunities in life. Those in leadership positions increase their social power and wealth through expanding their networks of loyal dependents. This is still largely how power is accumulated in Cambodia – not through building political institutions, or even coalitions of influence among those whose positions had been gained through their own talent, but through establishing relations with a powerful patron, or 'big man' (*neak thom*), and developing one's own network of patronage and influence through that relationship.

Clients of a 'big man' are expected to show their gratitude for any favour from their patron in monetary form. This concentrates wealth in the hands of patrons, who use it to accumulate the symbols of power (villas, cars, body guards, beautiful women). Such accessories are expected of 'big men'. But for a political leader to expand his patronage network, he must have access to additional sources of patronage to disburse. Patronage may take many forms, but all depend ultimately on possession of power and wealth. Examples range from intervention to secure a job or win a court case or get a loan, to the award of government contracts and arrangement of business deals for clients. In return, clients give loyalty and support – and, of course, cash. The monopoly of political power in both Laos and Cambodia rests on the twin bases of control over use

of state violence and control over state resources with which to disburse as patronage.

All significant political parties in Cambodia exemplify the political culture of patronage and its use to accumulate power. All are similarly organised as hierarchical patronage networks centred on significant leaders (Hun Sen, Sam Rainsy), whose authority is reinforced by the absolutism inherent in Cambodian political culture. Parties do not stand primarily for a set of political principles, or represent the interests of particular social classes (with the partial exception of the Sam Rainsy Party). Rather they are formed by and cohere around powerful and charismatic leaders who are able to disburse patronage. The competition between them is not ideological, in terms of policy prescriptions. Rather it is on the basis of which party offers the better prospects of patronage.

Parties so constructed compete for power in a multi-party system by competing to build patronage networks of loyal clients. If a party leader fails to provide expected patronage benefits, clients may transfer their allegiance to another party. This is exactly what has been happening in Cambodia since 1993. Instead of forming a democratic opposition in alliance with the SRP and enunciating an alternative policy platform after the 1997 elections, FUNCINPEC continued in coalition with the CPP in order to obtain access to state resources as patronage for its supporters. But the greater benefits offered by the patronage network of the CPP enticed the greedy, and FUNCINPEC lost out in this competition for power, Cambodian style. What remained of FUNCINPEC was coopted into the CPP, leaving the Sam Rainsy Party, which draws funds from expatriate Khmer as well as its primarily urban supporters, many with the bolt-hole of dual nationality, to form a rump opposition – too powerless to change the political culture in the direction of effective democracy.

4 Patronage and Corruption

The political culture of Cambodia goes a long way towards explaining not just the subversion of Cambodian democracy, but also the pervasiveness of corruption, for patronage on a grand scale requires the resources of the state to grease the patronage network. Resources that would otherwise be used for the benefit of all citizens are directed preferentially to favoured recipients. The larger the network, the more resources are required. Where a single ruling party takes the form of a hierarchical patronage network, a substantial proportion of the resources of the state are appropriated by the party. One result is that the state becomes

increasingly deprived of revenue to meet not just development expenditure, but even basic services such as health and education. This too has been happening in Laos.

Corruption permeates every aspect of Cambodian life. Every service has to be paid for, from grades in school to nursing care. Every position in government service, and most in the private sector too, have to paid for (to those who assisted in getting the job, and often as a percentage of salary to those who continue to provide it). These payments feed up the ruling party hierarchy, providing great personal wealth for party leaders, plus the resources to purchase more patronage. In 2006 the CPP won over 90 percent of positions in elections for village chiefs. Villagers know very well which party was more likely to provide them with a new schoolhouse or make a contribution to a religious festival – and they voted accordingly.

Corruption also permeates the economy, in the form of government contracts and business in return for kickbacks, and the judiciary in the form of political influence and payments to decide court cases. The entire justice system is under the close control of the CPP. The courts, right up to the Supreme Court, provide an arena for the exercise of patronage. Cases are decided on the basis of who is prepared to pay more, or who has the most powerful political patron – on who has the longest string, as the saying goes in both Cambodia and Laos.

An anti-corruption law has been on the drawing boards since 1993 in Cambodia, but has still not been presented to parliament for enactment – despite considerable pressure from NGOs and the international community. An obvious problem is not past corruption (an amnesty could be declared for past offences), but that corruption lies at the heart of the patronage system. Even if an anti-corruption law is eventually enacted, it is doubtful if it would be any more effective in curbing corruption than environmental laws have been in protecting the environment. There is a model law on the books in Laos, which has no effect at all. Not one senior Party member or official has been charged with corruption since the law was enacted.

In Laos, when the economy was opened up to Western foreign aid and investment, much of the latter came at first from Thailand. Thai businessmen did business the way they knew, and offered bribes for service in obtaining permission to establish their projects. Decisions were made by senior Party members, who benefited accordingly. Their example caused corruption to permeate the Party. Corruption of power there had always been, as in any single-party state. What

changed was the way power was applied to accumulate wealth. Party leaders were no longer content with comfortable villas and official cars. Families and followers wanted more, so more of the resources of country were diverted into the hands of the ruling elite, which justified their actions as the legitimate perquisites of power, just as in previous regimes (Stuart-Fox 2006).

Patronage networks are not purely political: they are not limited to the ruling party. Patronage networks are also social, in that they define hierarchies of social status based on influence and wealth; and more importantly they are economic, stretching into the business community through 'joint ventures' to ensure that political leaders share in the proceeds of business opportunities. In addition, through control of application processes, charges, and levels of taxation (including exemptions), political leaders extract a share of foreign investment projects. In Laos, where regionalism has always been strong, provincial party leaders have benefited from making 'state land' available for plantation agriculture, even if this has traditionally been used by Lao villagers and ethnic minorities. This has also happened in Cambodia, and in both countries the military and political elite has exploited timber resources (see the damning report by Global Witness 2007).

In Laos, political horse-trading is confined to members of the Party hierarchy, who keep rank and file Party members under their control through a mixture of rewards and promises of more to come, and the threat in extreme cases of expulsion and re-education.[16] Decision-making is highly centralised within the Party hierarchy, whether concerning the Party itself, government, or administration. Lower-ranking cadres fear to make any decisions that might affect their careers. What all Party members agree upon is that the Party should continue to monopolise power, for it alone offers them the prospect of eventual access to power and wealth. In Cambodia, the CPP functions in a similar way.

Lao politics has reverted to competition for the spoils of office between families and clans centred on powerful political leaders, just as under the former Royal Lao regime. Membership of the Politburo has simply replaced membership of the aristocratic elite. Leaders make sure their supporters obtain a share of government appointments (qualifications notwithstanding), and promotions, and

16 This is usually reserved for those who threaten the system; for example, by agitating for multi-party democracy, a crime for which three middle-ranking Party members in Laos served 14-year prison sentences.

contracts, and business deals, for which they pay with appropriate presents handed over at *baci* ceremonies, and other such occasions, or by providing free goods and services. The Russian doll structure of these networks parallels that of the *meuang*.

In Cambodia, democratic competition between political parties quickly became a competition to amass power through building patronage networks focussed on a single leader, the political *neak thom*. As this struggle played out, voters judged its outcome and gave their support to the patronage network most likely to bring benefits to themselves, their families and/or their communities. Prominent Party officials and supporters gained similar benefits as in Laos, with the same results: politicisation of the bureaucracy and judiciary, channelling of the resources of the state to powerful supporters rather than to supply government services, encouragement of dodgy investment projects in return for kick-backs, and so on.

5 Conclusion

The persistence of political culture in both Laos and Cambodia has taken the form of a resurgence of hierarchical patronage networks. The difference between the two countries has been that in Laos these networks have been constructed within a single party, while in Cambodia they have been developed both within political parties and through extension beyond them as a means of consolidating power for competition between them. In both cases, patronage networks, by monopolising resources, have effectively subverted political institutions designed to distribute political power and to promote development. Take state finances as an example. In patronage systems, senior bureaucrats (who are Party officials) use financial resources to build their networks (and so their power) by distributing benefits only to loyal clients. To prevent this, international lending institutions argue, finances at both central and provincial levels need to be audited. For this an independent audit authority must be established. So one is duly set up, as in Laos. But it is no more than another component of the Party system, whose function is little more than to provide a convenient rubber stamp for corruption. Or take banking reform. All sorts of regulations can be in place, but they will not prevent bank officials, who are members themselves of patronage networks, from providing loans for the politically well-connected with minimal collateral if they are instructed by their political patrons to do so. Laos has comprehensive environmental protection and anti-corruption laws; but they are not enforced. If

they work at all, it is to provide benefits to the officials appointed to police them, through payments to circumvent whatever new regulations the laws contain. Cambodia has failed to pass anti-corruption legislation, and its environmental protection laws are completely ineffective.

Lao and Cambodians accept the systems they know, underpinned as they are by cultures that conceive of power as a function of personal relationships and accept social hierarchy and inequality as the natural order of things, decreed by karma. Criticism of prevailing political cultures comes from those Lao and Cambodians (mostly expatriates) who have experienced or learned about alternative systems in the West.[17] But critics have little or no influence on the power structure – including Sam Rainsy Party members in Cambodia, who will continue to provide a weak parliamentary opposition. In Cambodia internationally supported NGOs still monitor government policies, and some press freedom remains. But all real power now lies in the hands of Hun Sen and the CPP. In Laos no opposition or criticism of any kind is permitted.

Under these circumstances, institutions alone are unable to change the politics of power. They merely provide a new set of conditions to which patronage (patrimonial) systems must adapt. The modern hybrid bureaucratic/patrimonial system that results has been called 'neo-patrimonialism', and is not confined to Southeast Asia (Bratton/van de Valle 1994). Political culture is not easy to modify, even if the promised outcomes are faster development and greater national wealth. Only improved education over time linked to higher living standards, and accompanying extensive knowledge of global best practice might bring about incremental change. But education is a minor focus for aid programs, and state school curricula are in the hands of the ruling party. Some international pressure will come from the West, and some from ASEAN, for neither Lao nor Cambodians like losing face in the development stakes.[18] But China is more influential as a model demonstrating compatibility between economic development and authoritarian politics. So the prospect is for the persistence

17 Abdulgaffar Peang-Meth argues that the Khmer mentality is 'dichotomous', torn between the self-effacement encouraged by Buddhist values of social harmony and restraint, and the combativeness and exaggerated sense of wounded pride, which derives from Khmer history and Brahminism, and which may erupt in anger and violence. So Cambodians are at the same time complacent and resolute, passive and combative (see Peang-Meth 1991).

18 Warnings have been sounded for years that the prevailing political culture 'remains a major obstacle to sustained economic reform and development' (see St John 1995:278).

of historically rooted political culture in both countries, which will continue to subvert whatever institutions are insisted upon by Western aid donors – to their continuing frustration, and to the detriment of the majority of the Cambodian and Lao peoples.[19]

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[19] The discovery of oil off the Cambodian coast, and the exploitation of minerals and hydropower in Laos offer the prospect of increased national wealth. The fear is that the culture of patronage and corruption now firmly in place in both countries will prevent new wealth from being distributed in a way that will promote national development and welfare (Radio Free Asia 2007).