

### **Kem Ley and Cambodian Citizenship Today: Grass-Roots Mobilisation, Electoral Politics and Individuals**

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Norén-Nilsson, A. (2019). Kem Ley and Cambodian Citizenship Today: Grass-Roots Mobilisation, Electoral Politics and Individuals. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 38(1), 77-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419846009>

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# Kem Ley and Cambodian Citizenship Today: Grass-Roots Mobilisation, Electoral Politics and Individuals

Journal of Current

Southeast Asian Affairs

2019, Vol. 38(1) 77–97

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DOI: 10.1177/1868103419846009

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## Abstract

Starting with a bang in 2013 and ending silently in 2017, Cambodia experienced a brief democratic momentum that saw people taking to the streets to demand political change. Kem Ley – a political analyst and grass-roots organiser – provided a rallying point that ordinary Cambodians gathered around particularly after his 2016 murder, yet his political legacy remains meagre. The Grassroots Democratic Party that Kem Ley was involved in setting up commands next to no popular allegiance and performed poorly both in local elections in 2017 and national elections 2018. This article seeks to explore an elusive aspect of Cambodia's democratic momentum: civil society activists moving to engage in electoral politics. It is argued that Cambodian activists have sought to reshape party politics according to civil society logics, but that this has been an ambiguous enterprise with little appeal to a sharply divided electorate.

## Keywords

Cambodia, citizenship, electoral politics, civil society

Date received: 28 February 2018; reviewed: 6 February 2019; accepted: 18 March 2019

From erupting triumphantly in 2013 to dying with a whimper in 2017, the greatest push for democracy since the 1993 reintroduction of multi-party politics rocked Cambodia. In connection with the 2013 national elections, many ordinary Cambodians took passionate

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part in campaign rallies and post-election protests (Um, 2014). Kem Ley (1970–2016) was a leading figure of this democratic momentum, and after being assassinated, he became its icon. An estimated two million people took to the streets to join his funeral procession – a mass gathering paralleled in modern history only by the 2012 funeral of King-Father Sihanouk (RFA, 2016). Yet the Grassroots Democratic Party that Kem Ley co-founded won only 0.07 per cent of votes in commune elections a year after his death and 1.11 per cent of votes in national elections 2018, according to official results.<sup>1</sup> How are we to understand this paradox? Political scientists face a challenge in assessing the drivers, competing agendas and consequences of Cambodia’s brief oppositional momentum. In this article, I concentrate on what the figure of Kem Ley, and the civil society-propelled grass-roots democracy movement he helped breathe life into, can teach us about notions of citizenship and political leadership that surfaced in Cambodia – and why not more came out of it.

Though in political science civil society and electoral politics are typically theorised as separate spheres, there is an emerging realisation in scholarship on Southeast Asia that the line between formal politics and civil society activity is “hazy” (Weiss, 2017: 305, see also Tomsa and Setijadi, 2018). Civil society proper and activism overall in Southeast Asia’s hybrid regimes were usefully decoupled by Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007), who recognised activism in the civil society sphere, defined by its relative autonomy from the state, as merely one available mode of political participation, forming a continuum with participation in the formal political system (Jayasuriya and Rodan, 2007: 782). While in Jayasuriya and Rodan’s framework formal political participation is limited to extra-parliamentary activity in state-controlled institutions, Weiss has reconceptualised the modes of political participation to also include electoral politics (2017: 382). The phenomenon of boundary crossing from civil society activism to engagement in electoral politics has an uneven record in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia and Malaysia, civil society activists have entered party politics, moving to promote their causes from the margins of civil society to within the power centre of key political institutions (Mietzner, 2013; Weiss, 2009). In Cambodia too, civil society leaders have stepped into party politics – including the deposed President of now court-dissolved opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), Kem Sokha.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the fledgling Cambodian grass-roots democracy movement here discussed is radical in that it set out to systematically gather civil society leaders in a political party, which would operate according to civil society logics. An additional ambition of this article is therefore to take up Weiss’s suggestion to consider the circumstances which prompt activists to engage with electoral authoritarian regimes via opposition politics and elections, rather than social movements. Such decisions are contingent on activists’ perceptions of relative risks and degrees of access, the nature of their claims and feedback from ruling elites (Weiss, 2017: 383). The Cambodian example is instructive from a regional point of view. It provides a missing piece in the puzzle of how activists strategically choose their modes of participation in the region, in this overlooked instance of civil society being mobilised to reform party politics. It is argued that the Cambodian grass-roots democracy movement came about in response to a legitimacy crisis among traditional political parties, which deteriorated following the 2013 election, and that activists have continuously

responded to subsequent political polarisation and the recent authoritarian turn defined by the 2017 dissolution of the CNRP.

In the following, I will proceed as follows. First, I will evaluate the status of political parties and leaders during Cambodia's democratic momentum. I then turn to discuss the ideas of Kem Ley: a charismatic individual who starting out as a political analyst, assessed the implications of grass-roots mobilisation for party politics, then, turning into a political broker, sought to master and lead this relationship. I will flesh out a Kem Ley model of citizenship from his political fables and situate it in relation to social and demographic change. I then turn to consider the Grassroots Democratic Party, a collective enterprise which growing out of this model of citizenship attempted to reshape electoral politics according to civil society logics. This, however, was by nature an ambiguous enterprise, and I explore this tension through the perspectives of Grassroots Democratic Party (GDP) leaders and activists, and the response of voters. In conclusion, I reflect on the implications for understanding the role of political parties, social mobilisation and charismatic individuals during Cambodia's democratic momentum and the future prospects of grass-roots democracy in Cambodia.

## **Cambodia's Democratic Momentum**

Democratic space briefly opened up in Cambodia following the 2013 national elections. In these, the political opposition, competing under the electoral vehicle of the CNRP and winning 44 percent of votes, delivered a first real electoral challenge to the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP), winning 49 per cent of votes, since the 1993 rein-troduction of multi-party politics. There followed a brief opening of democratic space. A variety of emboldened actors with agendas to democratise Cambodia were no longer speaking from the fringes but from the centre stage of national politics. This moment was brief. It was punctuated by a government crackdown during the first half of 2014, and gradually closed down since the CPP ended a friendly line towards the CNRP in 2015. The year 2016, marked by the murder of Kem Ley, saw an "autocratic upgrade" (Un, 2016), and legislative changes successively introduced during 2017 enabled the final dissolution of the CNRP that year, signifying the introduction of a *de facto* one-party state (Strangio, 2017).

Now that Cambodia has transitioned from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism (Schedler, 2002: 47), it is important to take stock of what political models were articulated and embraced during the brief pro-democracy momentum, but also to pay serious attention to the relationship between grass-root mobilisation, political parties and charismatic leaders – a relationship of importance for assessing possible future trajectories.<sup>3</sup> The exact popular yearnings that produced the 2013 electoral results remain elusive, but reasons for the strong opposition performance likely include a mix of economic factors such as a widening income gap, low wages, high inflation and interest rates and land grabs; and social ones including social injustice, nepotism, corruption, demographic change brought about by an increasingly young population and the availability of alternative and social media (Chheang, 2013; McCargo, 2014: 75; Strangio, 2014: 260–61). While the CNRP gained from the party's seven-point policy

focused on enhancing popular livelihoods, the CPP saw its system of patronage and social control begin to crumble (Chheang, 2013; Ngoun, 2013; Strangio, 2014: xiii–xiv, 260).

One aspect of the question of what the 2013 vote represented is whether it is best interpreted as anti-CPP or pro-CNRP. The CNRP campaigned under the rally cry of “change” – fundamentally a pledge to change status quo under the CPP and Prime Minister Hun Sen. The 2013 elections did not, however, in terms of the percentage of votes mean a large surge in support for the opposition. Rather, the opposition benefited disproportionately from uniting into one party vehicle, through the merger of Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and Human Rights Party (HRP) (Hughes, 2015: 1). United, the opposition came within reach of regime change, which allowed it to take a budding oppositional momentum further by galvanising supporters and enlarging discursive space. The sense of possibility of change in turn opened a window of opportunity for a range of political actors over the next mandate period.

Electoral, 2013 turned Cambodian politics into a zero-sum game between two political parties. In response, scholarship on post-2013 political developments has understandably placed a focus on the two main political parties and their strategies to navigate social and political change (e.g. Eng and Hughes, 2017). However, despite electoral polarisation, not all political desires fit easily under the label of the CPP or the CNRP. Indeed, from the very earliest post-election protests, it was evident that the overlap between the CNRP and the oppositional movement more broadly conceived was not complete. In tandem with the strengthening of the CNRP, a reform movement of the opposition came about. The crystallisation of a binary party system triggered a re-evaluation of the role of political parties, their leaders, and their relationship to the electorate.

Arguably, both Kem Ley’s message, and its lack of final impact, centre on the relationship between grass-root mobilisation, leaders and political parties. In Cambodia, charisma is a component of power (*omnaich*) (Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox, 2013: 9), and charismatic top leaders variously add legitimacy to the party state (Gainsborough, 2012: 43) or challenge it. Focus lies on charismatic leaders rather than parties themselves, and lower level candidates lag even further behind. Most Cambodians demonstrate awareness of parties rather than their lower level candidates, but likely associate the parties more with their leaders than with specific party programmes (Everett & Meisburger, 2014: 11–12). Indeed, the incumbent regime has transitioned from a party-based regime to a party-personalist regime (Morgenbesser, 2018: 201 sets the date to 2005), in which Hun Sen’s personalism exists in a symbiotic relationship with the dominance of the CPP (Morgenbesser, 2018: 192; 202).

The importance of top party leaders is cemented by party hierarchy which gives them an iron grip on lower level candidates. Cambodia’s closed-party list system has further strengthened the position of party leaders vis-à-vis their candidates, as party leaders can choose whom to put in an electable position (Croissant and Lorenz, 2018: 52).

Rather than mitigating this trend, the use of social media, which privileges the personal and intimate, has accentuated the importance of top leaders – in line with a regional pattern (Sinpeng, 2017). On Facebook, it is the party leaders’ pages that have the highest

levels of interaction, and Prime Minister Hun Sen and long-time opposition leader Sam Rainsy have since 2013 utilised Facebook to engage in a veritable online duel (Young and Chivoïn, 2017).

While the attention of the Cambodian public is strongly focused on party leaders, there is not an overall negative view of parties. In 2014, the majority of Cambodians (68 per cent) felt that political parties care about them (Everett and Meisburger, 2014: 30). This puts Cambodia at odds with nearby countries including Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia – the three countries that were for long South East Asia’s electoral democracies – where anti-party attitudes are rife (Tan, 2013). The failure to meet the expectations of voters is characteristic of countries that underwent transitions to democracy (such as the three countries mentioned above), where a “lack of vision, aloofness from concerns of voters, incompetence, corruption and bickering with each other” typically turned parties “from heroes to villains” (Tomsa and Ufen, 2013: 3). These factors neatly summarise the main deficiencies of Cambodian political parties, suggesting that the lack of widespread anti-party sentiment is an anomaly, and that there should be fertile ground for it to take hold in the wake of the nullified move towards democratisation.

In fact, during the democratic momentum, many Cambodians’ views of leadership remained conservative. In 2014, just 31 per cent believed they could influence national level decision-making, which may have been largely acceptable to the majority of Cambodians (60 per cent) who expressed a paternalistic view of the role of government, while just 38 per cent believed government and people to be equals (Everett and Meisburger, 2014: 27). Citizenship has remained defined by interactions with local authorities that are personal in nature and characterised by dependence. Building strong, but unequal, relationships with commune and village authorities are a main concern to access services and benefit from development initiatives and political gift-giving, allowing local authorities to co-opt support for the CPP (Hughes, 2015: 7–9; 10–11). Decentralisation, unfolding over the last fifteen years, may have increased closeness between local communities and commune councillors (Kim, 2012: 92–4), but has primarily served as a CPP strategy to strengthen its grip at the subnational level (Eng, 2016). Unsurprisingly, then, in 2014, only 35 per cent of Cambodians believed they can influence commune-level decision-making to some extent (Everett and Meisburger, 2014: 28). It was this model of citizenship that Kem Ley set out to transform, precisely by reversing the order of importance of top leaders, political parties, and local-level candidates.

## **Kem Ley’s Model of Citizenship**

Scholarship on Southeast Asia has begun to mobilise the notion of citizenship to investigate political change from the viewpoint of the relationship between the individual and larger political community (Berenschot et al., 2016). Understood in this sense, citizenship is a fruitful notion for analysing Kem Ley’s attempt to remodel Cambodian democracy. Kem Ley’s vision for a citizen was to take part in electoral politics but also to push for more comprehensive political, social and economic rights (see Kem, 2016a,

2016b; Song, 2016). The most important factor for fully democratising Cambodia was grass-roots empowerment. Though change was predicated on the active stance of each individual, he saw collective action to be required for change to come about.

From 2013 onwards, Kem Ley frequently provided political analysis on radio talk shows, and it was on air that he found his largest audience. He gained in reputation from frequent visits to local communities and public forums, giving proof of an accessibility which connected him to key local actors and likely contributed to his popularity. Kem Ley also published short stories and ideas on his personal Facebook page.

In sketching a model of citizenship proposed by Kem Ley, I will focus mainly on examples from “The farm of ferocious animals” (*Rongvong nei suon sât sahav*), a series of political jokes and fables posted on his Facebook page in the weeks leading up to his death.

### Fear

In the fable “The farm of ferocious animals” (*Suon sât sahav*), animals of different temperament live together. In one corner only, food is abundant, while in other places food is scarce. The ferocious animals (*sat sahav*) decide to scare other animals away from approaching the food. They come up with different pretexts: warning of ghosts, a cage, and a deep pit. Frightened, the kind animals continue to live quietly in the usual part of the forest, while the few who venture to the corner are eaten mercilessly in order to spread fear. This story conjures up an image of today’s Cambodia as a society in which the behaviour of citizens is dictated by fear. Powerholders seek to restrain citizens by sowing fearfulness, but the reasons they give are but a smokescreen for maintaining their monopoly on national resources. Breaking the climate of fear is consequently key to changing power relations between citizens and powerholders. In the story, the farm is ruled by an endless number of wild animals, until the kind animals finally reflect: “If kind, good, useful animals like us do not gather together [ . . . ] and remain scared, then the ferocious animals will command by fear forever.” This is an exhortation to citizens to jointly put fear behind them by organising collectively.

### Leadership

In “The Year of the Monkey promises many opportunities” (*Chnam vok chnam sva mean oukas chroen*), monkeys discuss how they relate to their masters. One says: “if I see that my master is corrupt, I pretend not to notice, since I am afraid I otherwise won’t receive anything from my master.” Another announces, “I heard my master sold a house and made great earnings, but I am happy to close my ears because they gave everyone 500 USD for bananas.” Another monkey says that one lives easily if one follows the boss (*me*). In this story, monkeys are an unflattering metaphor for citizens, who elaborate on the manifold reasons for which they accept and uphold corrupt leadership. At the root is a lack of independent thinking: the monkey citizens are said to perform as they have been trained, singing, and dancing to the established beat. The story ends by the sentence: “Some rabbits told the monkeys: you should use your understanding rather than follow

orders that are incorrect and lead to disaster for national society and our citizenry.” This places responsibility for national society on the ordinary citizens, the underlings, who are to rely on their own thinking to lead rather than to follow.

### *Knowledge and Education*

The centrality of independent thinking for citizens to assume leadership is addressed in “Thinking that no one can see” (*Sman tha ke moel min khoenj*), a story about a greedy man who goes to study magic (*vityeaseyl*) from a hermit. With the help of this privileged knowledge, he gathers riches invisible to others. One day, he tries to make himself invisible and walks naked from village to village. Yet since he forgets one point of his magic, the people and government officials all see that he is naked – and see his riches. In this version of “the emperor’s new clothes,” knowledge is power – and so is vision. Exclusive knowledge enables powerholders to hiddenly amass riches, but failure to maintain monopoly on knowledge exposes their greed to full view. This story provides a contemporary example of the power of the gaze, which has long been a leitmotif in Khmer politics (Hughes, 2001: 58). SRP, which went into the CNRP, co-opted and adapted the idea of a protective (outside) gaze, while accusing the government of obscuring people’s vision: their protective gaze prompted fears of a dependence mentality among Cambodian democrats (Hughes, 2001: 64). By contrast, “Thinking that they cannot see” reinstates the power of the gaze to the popular masses.

### *Collective Action*

Collective action is almost always present in these stories, but typically only as a theoretical possibility. After such possibilities of collective action are introduced, the stories come to an abrupt end – leaving the reader to wonder whether collective action will indeed be taken. “Thinking that no one can see” simply ends by “Oh wow, he thought they did not see anything!” The reader is left to make up his or her own scenario of what the consequences will be of people realising the shortcomings of this powerful man. Similarly, “The farm of ferocious animals” abruptly ends when the kind animals have concluded that failure to stand up to the vicious animals will allow the latter to rule by fear forever. Provocatively, this leaves the ball in the reader’s court.

### *Disseminating the Model*

It is hard to state with certitude what parts of this model resonated with ordinary citizens, in particular the many people who rallied around Kem Ley after his death. This is particularly so since it is difficult to assess what proportions of Cambodians were familiar with Kem Ley during his lifetime, something which likely varied by locality.<sup>4</sup> Indications are however given by the messages disseminated on social media. One dictum in particular was frequently reproduced in the wake of Kem Ley’s murder and can be said to define his intellectual and moral legacy. It reads: “Wipe your tears, continue your journey” (*chout teuk phnek robás neak, ruoch bántá domnaoer tov mukh*).



In interviews, activists commonly pointed out additional sentences considered to be well-known. One read: “Let’s speak the truth, rather than speaking to defend” (*chaur yung noam knea niyeay kar pirt, chea cheang niyeay kar pear*). It is also widely remembered how Kem Ley believed that providing analysis would cost him his life. Kem Ley’s personal bravery and readily understandable speaking style likely contributed greatly to his popularity. Activists cited Kem Ley’s bravery in speaking fearlessly as a key reason for popular support. Finally, the goals Kem Ley set out appeared to be realistic and achievable. In the words of one GDP activist, Kem Ley is popular in the countryside “because he spoke about society’s diseases, and how to cure them.” It seems reasonable to conclude then that Kem Ley’s messages of fearlessness and moving forward define his ideas to ordinary Cambodians.

### **Situating Grass-Roots Leadership in Relation to Social and Political Change**

The grass-roots model of citizenship sketched above responded to social and political change that around 2013 was evidently producing cracks in the established political system.

With regard to fear, Cambodia’s democratic momentum thrived on an emerging fearlessness. This was in part a result of a changed CPP political strategy. Fear-mongering peaked in the 1990s, but since then, political assassinations steadily decreased (Hughes, 2015: 11). Kem Ley’s call for fearlessness aimed to embolden ordinary people who already had grounds to believe that they would not be violently punished for dissent.

Social and demographic change challenged existing CPP leadership. In particular, the disruption of mechanisms of local-level control called into question continued CPP hold on power. Cambodia tops the list of Southeast Asian countries with youthful populations: in 2018 almost two-thirds of the population were below the age of thirty (UNDP, 2018). Most rural young voters were alienated from local authorities and patronage systems by lack of land ownership and poverty (Hughes, 2015: 13), which far exceeds poverty and landlessness among their elders (Hughes and Eng, 2017: 399). Many young voters are further insulated by being mobile, often working in urban areas during parts of the year (Hughes, 2015: 13). Youth have attributed their marginal status to the style of CPP leadership, using words such as nepotism and corruption (Hughes and Eng, 2017: 400).

There is empirical evidence to suggest that aspects of the CPP model of leadership had, by 2013, lost in legitimacy across political camps and generations. The CPP has built relations with voters through a patronage system, in which the presentation of development as gifts and gift-giving ceremonies send the message that gifts are linked to votes. In a 2014 study, ordinary Cambodians widely rejected the CPP’s political gifts on the basis that these were understood to be contingent exchanges, and therefore evidence of vote-buying. Though a desired ideal of political leaders giving gifts persisted, it called for gifts that would not discriminate according to political party affiliation and require nothing in return (Norén-Nilsson, 2016b: 811–812).

With regard to education and knowledge, Cambodian youth gave proof of what Yunhan Chu and Welsh (2015: 156) have referred to as “the political paradox of East Asia’s Millennials,” finding these to be “behaviorally less engaged, cognitively more competent, and attitudinally more critical compared to earlier generations.” East Asian millennials to a greater extent than older generations feel politically empowered since they are better educated, the Internet gives them access to infinite sources of information and outlets for disseminating their views, and online social networks allow them to accumulate social capital; but though they are more likely to participate informally in politics, social networks and online media, they are disengaged from party politics (Chu and Welsh, 2015: 157–9).

This appears to hold for Cambodian youth, who though materially disempowered, were politically empowered by access to information and social networks. In 2016, it was estimated that 38 per cent of the population were Internet users, and that 60 per cent of these were younger than 25. That year, Internet overtook other media as the main source of news. Social media brought what Hughes and Eng (2017: 403) have referred to as “electoral power to the urban poor and rural families.” Meanwhile, youth participation in formal decision-making is extremely low (for the mandate period 2012–2017, only 615 of 11,459 commune councillors were below 30, and for the 2013–2018 mandate period, no MPs or Senators were). Understood in this context, Kem Ley’s call for collective action responded to the disconnect between a young population and conventional politics. Kem Ley sought to engage citizens through a multitude of avenues, which included electoral politics but was not limited to it, and to which we now turn.

## Reshaping Political Participation

### *Establishment of the Grassroots Democratic Party*

In October 2014, Kem Ley co-founded “Khmer for Khmer” (KfK), an initiative to reshape citizen participation, with civil society veterans Yang Saing Koma and Yeng Virak. Variouslly defined as an advocacy group and a network, KfK united civil society leaders around a common cause: promoting more democratic party politics. The network aimed to engage citizens in the political process by building a “people’s movement” (Chea and Suy, 2015).

From the outset, speculation was rife that the network would start a political party, but these speculations were strongly denied by the group which claimed its mission to be building political leadership (Willemyns and Naren, 2014). Yet already at the end of November, Kem Ley announced that a set of political parties would be established in 2015, starting by five parties in different provinces (Boyle and Murray, 2014).<sup>5</sup> In December, Kem Ley announced that the KfK would set up twenty-five micro-parties at the commune level in early 2015.<sup>6</sup> The relative success of these local development parties would determine whether they should be expanded to the provincial and national level ahead of the 2017 local election. The *Cambodia Daily* quoted Kem Ley as saying: “Let’s be clear: We are not politicians, but we are promoting the people to be in political roles” (Willemyns, 2014).

In August 2015, the GDP was launched as an alliance of commune-level parties (Hul, 2015). Members from ten communes came together to adopt a structure and policies and to elect leaders. At a difference from practice at CPP and CNRP party congresses, members were allowed to stand for election. In spite of having jointly designed the congress, neither Kem Ley nor Yang Saing Koma attended it (Willemyns, 2015). Yeng Virak, the third member of the founding troika, was the only candidate who came forward for temporary President, and was elected (Mech, 2015). A few months later, Yang Saing Koma became the GDP's Program Director (Khy, 2016). Kem Ley, however, formally distanced himself from the party but continued playing a crucial advisory role. He announced that as soon as 100 commune-level micro-parties had been incorporated into the fold of the GDP, a first official party congress would be held in which a range of different candidates could stand for election (Mech, 2015).

The hesitant establishment of the GDP reflects its founders' ambiguous stance towards entering party politics. The party emerged as an attempt to reform established political parties, in particular the CNRP. GDP leaders criticised the CNRP for a lack of internal democracy and alleged focus on producing followers rather than leaders (Porée, 2016), and charged that the CNRP lacked the ability to lead a peaceful change, favouring a quick and tumultuous one (author's interview with Sam Inn). Seeing that their advice fell on deaf ears, they concluded that starting another party would be the only way forward. Indeed, following the establishment of the GDP, Kem Ley and several associates would advise both the GDP and CNRP.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis of leadership style of the established political parties stemmed from their long-standing refusal, stuck in the civil war strategies and identities of the 1980s, to acknowledge each other as legitimate contenders (Hughes, 2002: 167–68). The various political parties have advanced headstrong claims to the nation's genuine representation, painting rival parties as illegitimate hoaxes (Norén-Nilsson, 2016a: 10). After the 2013 elections, polarisation came to its head as the electorate divided into two strongly opposed political camps.

The first aim of the GDP was to provide an alternative political culture. It was to replace insults and blame by, in Sam Inn's words, a "political culture of hope, love and respect for one another, to clear out all the political dirtiness" (Hul, 2015). The party set out to mobilise supporters by positive messages of non-violent and peaceful change, rather than messages of hatred, anger, and racial discrimination (author's interview with Sam Inn).

In this respect, the party echoed the language of the ailing "culture of dialogue" – a political truce between CPP and CNRP sealed in a July 2014 agreement to ameliorate the tone of political discourse. In July 2015, this newfound cordiality peaked when Sam Rainsy and Hun Sen snapped a selfie when dining together at a luxury hotel. Yet arrests of opposition officials and supporters over the following month sounded the death knell of the culture of dialogue. The GDP was conceived at a point of time when inter-party dialogue was prime on the national agenda, but formally established when the CPP had finally abandoned such pretences.

A second aim of the GDP was to address the divide between the electorate and political parties. The GDP sought to encourage the emergence of local leaders, by providing a platform for ordinary Cambodians to debate party policies, ranging from

local agriculture, to health, education, and foreign relations. Grass-roots participation in the decision-making process (intra-party democracy) would help produce democratic leaders within the party, key to building a democratic society. The GDP was to function as a greenhouse, nurturing a multitude of competent leaders without over-relying on popular top leaders (author's interview with Sam Inn).

This ambition addressed another aspect of the crisis marking established political parties: their detachment from the concerns of the general populace. Politics has remained an intra-elite affair, and the distance between the political parties and the public so large as to earn the label of "the politics of non-representation" (Hughes, 2002: 170). Cambodian political parties have advanced elite bids to popular representation not by addressing grass-roots concerns, but by equating their political identity with that of the nation (Norén-Nilsson, 2016a: 12).

### *Civil Society Dreams and Desires*

The GDP ambition to cure the ills of Cambodian electoral politics through grass-roots empowerment reflects the fact that the party was the brainchild of civil society elites. Kem Ley had two decades of experience as researcher and consultant for NGOs, Yang Saing Koma was the founder and director of agricultural NGO CEDAC, Yeng Virak was former director of the Cambodian Legal Education Center, and Sam Inn, the GDP Secretary General, was former director of the NGO Life with Dignity. For GDP leaders, party politics was an extension of their civil society work in the sense that the GDP transferred civil society principles to the party political arena.<sup>8</sup> In their eyes, the Cambodian NGO sector, burgeoning since the early 1990s, had produced a huge potential of grass-roots leadership which remained untapped into the political system. GDP leaders saw an opportunity to transform grass-roots leadership into political leadership. Holding commune-level leadership positions, community-based organisation (CBO) leaders would spearhead local development (author's interview with Sam Inn). This would benefit Cambodian democracy by inserting democratically minded leaders into the political system. By consequence, not only GDP leaders but also grass-roots level GDP activists have tended to be veteran civil society activists, with a large representation from CEDAC. Tellingly, in around fourteen communes of twenty-seven where the party was active in May 2017, GDP local leaders had previously involved with CEDAC (author's interview with Yang Saing Koma).<sup>9</sup> Interviews also suggest that new GDP members are recruited through CEDAC structures.<sup>10</sup>

For GDP activists, their shared background as civil society activists constitutes a powerful bond, implying a shared worldview and vision. In the words of one: "Most people in the GDP come from NGOs, and we feel like we understand each other [. . .] Civil society workers have the same heart". Activists consider themselves to differ from ordinary politicians in terms of the privileged knowledge of popular needs and desires that local development work has earned them. To quote one, "People from civil society are close to the people; they know how the people are, and what people want in their hearts. As for politicians, when people suffer, they don't know what to do to serve them." Another activist explained the GDP mode of politics as a civil society "habit" to

prioritise the common interest and thus consider leaders as a facilitator, not a boss (author's interviews, October 2018).

The decision to shift activism from civil society to electoral politics reflects a disillusionment with the possibilities of civil society work in Cambodia – a space that is subject to increasing co-optation by the state (Curley, 2018). Yang Saing Koma expressed this as follows:

If I work with Cedac, I can only help a small number of farmers, but if I do politics and win an election to lead the government in a sector like agriculture, I would be able to help farmers nationwide. [...] Currently, we cannot implement [good ideas] because we don't have power and the national budget. (Kang, 2015)

In interviews, activists echo this view. One stated

We [activists] found that if we work as civil society, we just support our villagers. But if we could move into politics and get a position in the government or in parliament, we [...] will have another power to force the government to do many things for our people, so that is why we decide to form a party. [...] We think that working with the people we win a lot of supporters, and we will have a position in politics and could help the people more. (Author's interview, October 2018)

Yet there are fundamental tensions in creating a political party vehicle for civil society. On one level, interviews suggest that Kem Ley distanced himself from the GDP because he and his associates aspired to change the Cambodian political landscape without participating in any political party (author's interview with Hang Vitou). Indeed, Kem Ley and his associates worked towards grass-root mobilisation through a plurality of activities that went beyond party politics, as will be explored below. Kem Ley likely aspired to be a coordinator who connecting himself with different groups in society would be the centrepiece to organise change (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang). Unlike CNRP leaders, who took a partisan, oppositional stance, he sought to be accepted by all different groups in society (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang). Accordingly, he advocated consensual politics: alliances between the micro-parties and established political parties, alignments over specific policies in particular communes, and the finding of common agendas (Boyle and Murray, 2014). Consequently, the GDP can be understood as first and foremost a model political party designed to show a way for grass-roots mobilisation for all political parties to emulate.

This view was echoed by activists in interviews. Habitually apolitical civil society activists characterise the GDP as a “neutral” party, typically explaining the party “neutral” way as badmouthing no other party, and contrasting this with the CNRP inciting hatred (author's interviews). Party activists are strongly committed to a middle way (*plov kandal*), which they typically define as not holding any Cambodian for an enemy. In this reading, the GDP is fundamentally different from an opposition party. The desire to represent the entirety of the nation – in contrast to a singular political party – runs like a red thread of commonality between competing Cambodian political projects (Norén-Nilsson, 2016a). By definition, it sits uneasily with multi-party politics. The

notion of a “neutral party” is a fundamentally apolitical designation which denies the legitimacy of electoral politics.

### *The Grassroots Democratic Party After the Death of Kem Ley*

On 10 July 2016, Kem Ley was shot to death over his morning coffee at a petrol station in central Phnom Penh. His murder turned Kem Ley into an icon of democracy, but the GDP has faced an uphill battle since. Most GDP activists believe that the party would have received more support if Kem Ley were still alive, and party leaders lament the loss of a charismatic leader with a gift for communication they know themselves to be lacking (author’s interviews).

The GDP strategy shifted from a strong attention on media presence to focused grass-roots mobilisation in a few communes with strong activist networks ahead of the 2017 commune elections. Candidates were elected at commune congresses. Local leaders canvassed house by house, informing voters about GDP local development policies; held small public meetings with villagers, and sometimes engaged in minor development projects. Facebook was the party’s main media platform, though use was also made of slots on radio and TV programmes offered by the National Election Commission and NGO radio programmes (author’s interview with Sam Inn).

The poll results fell far short of party expectations. The GDP had submitted candidates in twenty-seven communes across nine provinces, but won only five seats on three commune councils in rural Domnak Sokrom (Kampot), Sakraeam (Kampong Thom), and Pate (Ratanakiri). Support in these communes appears to be attributable primarily to CEDAC, as in all three communes there were strong local CEDAC branches, and activists believed their development record to be key for electoral support. In Domnak Sokrom, the elected commune council member pointed to the local CEDAC branch’s long-standing work in development, working with communities, repairing roads, helping people in hardship, and creating job opportunities – giving voters faith in the ability of the development practitioners making up the local GDP branch.<sup>11</sup> Closeness with party leaders played an additional role. Many grass-roots in Domnak So Krom had met Yang Saing Koma during visits, and in Pate, the popularity of Kem Ley who had visited the commune was believed to be a powerful factor.<sup>12</sup>

At face value, the 2017 commune election results suggest low popular support for GDP causes and principles. Viewed through the lens of citizenship, the conclusion might be different. The CNRP won 46 per cent of the vote, significantly higher than the combined 31 per cent of the SRP and HRP at the previous commune elections in 2012, while at 51 per cent, the CPP vote share slumped from the 60 per cent the party had won in 2012. Participation levels were, at 86 per cent, historically high. A vote for the CNRP might not have taken seriously the two criticisms that Kem Ley raised against the party: a political culture of blame and a lack of intra-party democracy. However, a vote for the CNRP was in line with the twin messages of fearlessness and moving forward that may well sum up Kem Ley’s model of citizenship in the eyes of the electorate. The election results suggest a major change in how grass-roots relate to their local politicians. Due to the discretionary powers of local officials to distribute patronage and grant access to

services, local elections carry strong incentives to cultivate personal relations with local CPP officials, resulting in a consistently better electoral performance for the CPP in local than national elections (Hughes, 2015: 7–9). Local officials are also well-placed to monitor the political allegiance of their communities, which instills fear. The 2017 results suggest fear was retreating. As the one credible challenger to the incumbent CPP, the CNRP was the party to capitalise from such changed notions of citizenship.

From August 2017, Cambodia took an authoritarian turn as the government launched a crackdown on the political opposition, civil society, and media ahead of national elections in July 2018. In November 2017, the CNRP was dissolved and its seats redistributed. While National Assembly seats were mainly allocated to minor parties, the bulk of local-level positions were transferred to the CPP (Kijewski and Khouth, 2017), confirming the importance of local-level power for the CPP-led political order.

While the leaders of the dissolved CNRP called for a voter boycott of the 2018 election, the GDP saw a chance to take the democratic relay from the CNRP and called for former CNRP supporters to vote for the GDP en masse. In response, the CNRP leadership accused the GDP of wrongfully legitimising the election.

Given the GDP's large target group of voters, the shock official 2018 election result surprised party leaders and observers alike. A one-party parliament consisting of 125 CPP MPs was voted into place, the CPP winning 76.85 per cent of votes according to official results. The GDP ranked as the sixth party, with 1.11 per cent of votes, lagging behind even newly formed Khmer Will Party. It is important to note that no independent election observers were present, and that the results can therefore not be treated as reliable data. Strong CPP pressure on the electorate to vote can be assumed to have skewed the results. Even so, the dismal performance of the GDP warrants an explanation.

On the most basic level, the GDP was unable to take the relay from the CNRP because of the CNRP's fiery condemnation of the GDP for participating in the election. Former CNRP voters therefore either boycotted the election, invalidated their ballots, or voted for the CPP.<sup>13</sup> The CNRP also accused the GDP of fraudulently using Kem Ley's reputation, and some CNRP activists reportedly charged that the GDP was funded by the CPP. Several GDP activists attributed popular disbelief in the party to the abundance of lies in Cambodian society making people lose faith overall – much like tasty-looking food being likely to have poisonous chemicals in it (author's interviews).

A main problem was that of reach. In the aftermath of the election, GDP leaders carried out an informal survey with activists in Phnom Penh, Kandal and Kampong Speu and found that the average voter there did not know the GDP.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the CNRP, the GDP lacked organisation down to the village level. While for the 2017 commune elections, the GDP had twenty commune-level working groups, for the 2018 election, the GDP operated on the provincial level. GDP national leaders, meanwhile, were largely anonymous. In Domnak Sokrom, local leaders attributed a drop in support to a lack of familiarity with the upper level leadership (author's interviews).

More fatally still, GDP leaders and activists concluded that there is no popular support for the middle way in today's polarised Cambodia (author's interview with Sam Inn).

Local activists perceived non-CPP voters to be frustrated with the GDP not speaking out against the government in the wake of CNRP's dissolution. One likened the situation to how a person that has been hit wants the attacker to be hit back for simple relief: nothing could be more unpopular than asking that angry, suffering person to refrain from hitting (author's interviews).

### *Non-Party Avenues*

Kem Ley was also behind numerous non-party initiatives to propose his model of citizenship. Expert groups were to function as dynamic environments to foster critical and independent analysis of social and political affairs through focused mentoring of a select group of people. The Young Analysts Group (YAG) was established in September 2015, and at its most numerous counted twenty-three members (author's interview with Hang Vitou). Its key objective was to motivate young people to engage in community governance. Debate competitions were held to encourage original thinking, the pursuit of new knowledge, and enhance public speaking skills. The project kicked off with an intense twenty-week training period, following which the young analysts were made to practice their newly acquired skills by participating in radio talk shows.

A counterpart for mature political analysts, named the Analysts Network, was established in April 2016. It included a number of established and rising political commentators and analysts. Rather than providing a unitary vision, the members of this network each provided ad hoc, independent, political analysis.

Following Kem Ley's death, the Analyst Network members continued to provide analysis in their individual capacities. The Young Analysts Group initially became a smaller group with an acute sense of continuing the mission set up by Kem Ley (author's interviews). The related Khmer Student Intelligent League Association compiled and published several books about Kem Ley's ideas (Kem, 2016a; Song, 2016), printing nearly 13,000 copies and distributing 1,000 copies to university libraries (Mong, 2017). The ongoing government crackdown at first brought youth involvement in these initiatives to a halt (Kijewski and Yon, 2018), but at the time of writing in early 2019, activities had been resumed.

### *Media and Civil Society*

Another arena to disseminate Kem Ley's model of citizenship has been the media. The Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), led by Pa Nguon Teang, was a coordination point for these efforts. In his words in early 2017, "The new idea [after Kem Ley's death] is to try to create different ways to reach people. To create poems, songs, different messages, and post Kem Ley's photos and activities online" (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang). The Voice of Democracy, a video station operated by the CCIM, set up a monthly seven-minute radio drama on Kem Ley's message, engaging listeners by inviting them to call in to discuss. This attempt to change notions of citizenship on air was nullified by charges of breach of trust against Pa Nguon Teang, which prompted him to escape abroad in late 2017.



In March 2017, Situation Room was created, an election-monitoring consortium consisting of around forty NGOs and INGOs. It was stately designed specifically to continue Kem Ley's mission in a politically viable manner in the increasingly restricted political environment after his death (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang). Firstly, Situation Room aimed to serve as a bridge between civil society and political parties by engaging in dialogue. Secondly, no individual was singled out as its leader, to avoid that any individual in particular would become a target (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang). In July 2017, Situation Room was banned for violating the nongovernmental organisation law (Khuon, 2017).

### *Initiatives to Commemorate Kem Ley*

Upon Kem Ley's murder, his entourage quickly analysed that Kem Ley's martyrdom could mean life or death for grass-roots mobilisation and set up a funeral committee to create a momentum to rally popular support (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang). It was successful. An estimated two million people accompanied Kem Ley's body in a 90-km long cortege from Wat Chas pagoda in Phnom Penh to Tram Kâk in Takeo province (Mong, 2017).

Seeing another opportunity at the occasion of the 100 days commemoration of Kem Ley's death, former funeral committee members organised a four-day celebration at Wat Chas that included a display of photos the public submitted of Kem Ley; celebrations were also held in Khmer pagodas around the world (author's interview with Pa Nguon Teang; Meng, 2016). But at Kem Ley's death anniversary in July 2017, civil society activists gathering at the place of his murder were mostly brushed away by para police, while about 500 people gathered in Kem Ley's home province Takeo (LICADHO, 2017).

Fundraising for a stupa, mixing elements of the Phnom Chisor and Preah Vihear temples, at an estimated cost of USD 170,000 (Touch, 2017) has provided avenues for others to insert themselves into commemoration efforts – Hun Sen has on several occasions donated tens of thousands of dollars. After fringe party Cambodia Youth Party made a donation, its leader Pich Sros filed a complaint against core members of the funeral committee Pa Nguon Teang, activist monk But Buntenh, and labour activist Moeun Tola, for allegedly mishandling funds (Nachemson and Mech, 2017). The three were charged in January 2018 for breach of trust (Khy, 2018); charges against Moeun Tola only were dropped in July that year. The erection of the stupa is managed by Kem Ley's younger brother, Kem Rithisith. In February 2018, he set up the Kem Ley Party, which soon changed name to the Khmer United Party to comply with legislation banning political parties from bearing the name of a person. The party won a humbling 0.77 per cent of votes in the 2018 elections, according to official results. Kem Ley's widow, Bou Rachana, urged voters not to vote for the party and has charged that the party spokesman is ordered to destroy her husband's reputation (Yon and Mech, 2018).

## Conclusion

Kem Ley's huge popularity among Cambodians, contrasted with his meagre political legacy, begs the twin questions of what he represented politically, and why not more came out of it. While Kem Ley's model of citizenship resonated with the changing tides of social and demographic dynamics, his party political solution did not – at least not after his death, when it was tested.

The case of Kem Ley makes a parallel with that of Sihanouk – whose 2012 funeral likewise saw two million people gather, while the royalist party FUNCINPEC which he had founded failed to win a single seat in 2013's national elections. This unexpected parallel points to the continued importance of charismatic leadership in today's Cambodia, and the difficulty of channelling loyalties to a charismatic leader into support for a political party that outlives (invariably) him.

The grass-roots democracy agenda brings to light the possibilities to cross-navigate between various modes of participation available to activists in Cambodia and also allows for some tentative conclusion about their relative importance. Political parties, marred by a legitimacy crisis, play an uneasy role for channelling today's political energies in Cambodia. But the fact that civil society came up with a political party solution to reform them nonetheless shows the primacy of electoral politics. Moreover, the apolitical party that resulted could not win support.

In 2017, voters chose between the elite-defined trajectories of the CPP and CNRP: the two electoral vehicles that could realistically secure victory. In 2018, they refused to elect anyone else. Civil society activists-turned-politicians in Cambodia follow a different pattern from in Malaysia and Indonesia, with different democratic impact. In Malaysia, civil society activists have taken part in electoral politics particularly since the late 1990s, including through standing as opposition candidates (Weiss, 2009: 743). Civil society played the role of a clear opposition force against the electoral authoritarian Barisan Nasional (BN) regime. When the BN was voted out of power in 2018, part of the explanation appeared to be incoming Pakatan Harapan's rootedness in civil society (Weiss, 2018). CSO activists succeeded in effectuating democratic change, but as part of a broad opposition coalition.

In Indonesia, civil society activists took up active roles in formal politics following the 1998 fall of the New Order regime (Mietzner, 2013: 29). Spreading across the entire party political spectrum, Mietzner finds that civil society activists “view themselves as a new class of politicians who can build bridges between the two arenas” and have furthered democracy by providing a counterweight to oligarchic interests (Mietzner, 2013: 47).

In Cambodia, activists seek to further democracy by engaging in electoral politics with a sitting electoral authoritarian regime, unlike in Indonesia, and through staking a “neutral” middle path, unlike in Malaysia. This approach has, as we have seen, been shaped by activists' perceptions of risk and possibility, the nature of their agenda and interactions with established parties in the evolving post-2013 context. Whether the GDP can have a democratic impact in the new authoritarian context will depend on and be limited by its utility to the ruling CPP; activists, adapting, are hoping to assume such a

role, however hidden from view. The continued presence of multiple parties is an important legitimacy marker for the CPP government. That the GDP could be of benefit in this way is evident by the strong pressure the party has faced to join the multi-party consultation forum set up by the CPP government following the 2018 election – pressure the party has so far withstood. At the local level, activists report CPP willingness to rely on the GDP for development work and facilitation solving local conflicts. Many hope that the CPP will quietly pick up GDP policy suggestions, even likening this scenario to a victory. Others see in the GDP’s development-focused orientation a strategy for doing politics in the new authoritarian context – in which mention of politics provokes fear. Cambodian civil society activists crossing into electoral politics know clearly that bringing local development is inherently political, even when not named as such.

### **Acknowledgment**

The author is grateful for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article by Marco Bunte and two anonymous reviewers.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. Since there were no independent election observers in 2018, the figure cannot be confirmed.
2. Kem Sokha, who established the HRP in 2007, had been a prominent civil society figure who founded the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.
3. Cambodia 1993–2017 is best understood as competitive electoral authoritarian regime, in which the electoral arena “is a genuine battleground in the struggle for power,” and since the 2017 dissolution of CNRP as a hegemonic authoritarian regime, where the electoral arena “is little more than a theatrical setting for the self-representation and self-reproduction of power” (Schedler, 2002: 47).
4. In interviews, Grassroots Democratic Party activists variously considered Kem Ley as well-known, alternatively unknown, to ordinary farmers during his life-time.
5. These were a provincial party in Kampong Speu, a commune party in Takeo, a district party in Ratanakkiri, an ethnic minority party in Mondulakiri, and an Islamic party in Kampong Cham.
6. These parties were to be formed in Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Mondulakiri, and Kampong Speu provinces.
7. Pointing to similar goals, objectives, and values, some even envisaged a future merger (author’s interview with Pa Nguon Teang).
8. For example, Sam Inn (author’s interview) cited that while Life With Dignity empowered local people to become CBO leaders, the KfK and GDP went further by applying internal democratic principles to the political system. Kem Ley considered the KfK mission to be providing education about political rights, mirroring NGO work providing information about civil and social rights (Willemyns, 2014). Yang Saing Koma stated that he moved from NGO

- work to the GDP so as to reach a greater number of farmers: the target group of his NGO CEDAC (Kang, 2015).
9. Similarly, GDP leaders interviewed in Kampong Cham and Kampot estimated 40–50 per cent of party activists to have formerly worked for CEDAC (author’s interviews, October 2018).
  10. For example, a former employee of CEDAC, was visited by Yang Saing Koma in 2017 and asked to help establish a CEDAC youth business group. He agreed to, understanding clearly that this would be a GDP group (author’s interview, October 2018).
  11. The overlap between the GDP and the CEDAC is such that in Domnak Sokrom, the GDP branch convenes in the local CEDAC branch office.
  12. Author’s interviews, Domnak Sokrom, 16 October 2018.
  13. Information from activists around the country suggests that former CNRP voters voted for the CPP in a bid to make the election results look illegitimate to the domestic electorate and international community alike. Author’s interviews.
  14. Author’s interview with Sam Inn, 11 September 2018.

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