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# Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation: Adjusting to Shrinking Space in Cambodia

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## Abstract

Scholarship on autocratisation has investigated the strategies of cooptation and repression that autocratic and autocratising regimes employ to maintain and enhance their power. However, it has barely explored how civil society reacts to these strategies. Concurrently, the existing research on civil society and social movements mostly suggests that civil society organisations (CSOs) will either resist autocratic repression or disband because of it, thereby often neglecting the possibility of CSOs' adaptation to autocratic constraints. In this article, I seek to bridge these theoretical gaps with empirical evidence from Cambodia. I argue that for CSOs that operate in autocratic and autocratising regimes allowing themselves to become coopted by the regime can constitute a deliberate strategy to avoid repression, secure their survival, and exert social and political influence. However, while this strategy often seems to be effective in allowing CSOs to survive and escape large-scale repression, its success in enabling civil society to exert social and political influence remains limited, owing to structural limitations embedded in the autocratic context. Moreover, CSOs' acceptance of cooptation often enhances divisions within civil society.

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## Keywords

Civil society, autocratic regime, autocratisation, shrinking space, Cambodia, Southeast Asia

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Given the erosion of democratic rule around the world, research on political transformation has increasingly shifted from studying democratisation to exploring the dynamics of autocratisation and the conditions that enable autocratic resilience. Specifically, several works have investigated the strategies employed by autocratic incumbents to maintain or extend their power, indicating that these strategies often differ depending on whether they are geared towards the wider population, the opposition, or fellow regime elites (Gerschewski 2013; see also, e.g., Bove and Rivera 2015; Gallagher and Hanson 2015). Regarding opposition forces, the extant research largely agrees that autocratic regimes usually seek to control these forces through a combination of cooptation and repression (Bove and Riverall; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Nandong 2020; Xu 2021). However, it has barely explored how these strategies affect civil society organisations (CSOs) as one particular actor group from which opposition to autocratic rule can arise (for an exception, see Sika 2019).

Recent research on civil society in autocratic regimes has mostly employed the theoretical lens of “shrinking space” (e.g., Bethke and Wolff 2020; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; CIVICUS 2020; Poppe and Wolff 2017), often focussing on the so-called NGO laws, passed by autocratic regimes to restrict the ability of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to register, conduct operations, and receive foreign funding (e.g., Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). To date, however, only few works have investigated how these laws impact the day-to-day operations of NGOs (Springman et al. 2022, 2) and how exactly NGOs and other CSOs react to them. What is more, NGO laws constitute only one among several mechanisms, which can be used by autocratic and autocratising regimes to repress civil society, while “shrinking space” is a much more complex phenomenon that goes far beyond the passage and implementation of such laws (Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri 2023). Relatedly, the existing research on “shrinking space” has only started to investigate the multiple interrelations that can exist between declining civic freedoms, regime cooptation, and civil society development (Anheier et al. 2019). In a nutshell, both the scholarship on autocratisation and civil society research have so far failed to systematically explore how CSOs react to the combined use of repressive and cooptative tactics by autocratic and autocratising regimes.

When investigating the joint impact of repression and cooptation on civil society, the case of Cambodia is interesting to study, because the country’s one-party regime, led by the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), since the 1990s has ruled through a combination of repression and cooptation (Luo and Un 2022; Peou 2019). Concurrently, Cambodia has a sizable CSO community – owing largely to gaps in state service provision and high levels of foreign funding to NGOs (e.g., Coventry 2017; Norman 2014; Springman et al. 2022, 2) – that has been long been affected by these regime strategies. From 2013 to 2017, the country experienced a “democratic momentum”, during which the CPP’s political dominance was challenged by the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), a political opening that prompted the emergence of new, politically relevant civil society initiatives (Norén-Nilsson 2019; Norén-Nilsson and Eng 2020). Starting from 2017, however, the CPP embarked on re-autocratisation, banning the CNRP, and, once again, stepping up repression against civil society (Springman et al. 2022, esp. 5). In addition, the CPP has increasingly

coopted civil society space, including through the creation of governmentally controlled ngos (GONGOs) (e.g., HRW 2021).

Recent studies on Cambodian civil society suggest that, rather than either mobilising resistance or disbanding, many Cambodian CSOs adjust to the CPP's strategies of repression and cooptation. Mooney and Baydas (2018, 17) find that many democracy and human rights groups in the country have "begun to focus internally, especially to enhance their resiliency" and that many Cambodian CSOs have started to "seek constructive avenues for engagement" with the government, while also trying to win the government's "trust" by complying with its [repressive] laws and regulations (ibid.,18). Gemzell (2017, 8) goes further, criticising that "[i]ncreasingly few NGOs are willing to challenge power and act as a force for democracy". An unattributed article, published in Norén-Nilsson et al. (2023a), points to the increasing readiness of Cambodian CSOs to accept cooptation, arguing that "[t]here has been a widespread move on the part of NGOs [sic!] to change their engagement strategy with the government" and that "[o]ne strategy for mitigating tensions with the government has been to avoid confrontation and to work more closely with the government" (Unattributed 2023, 48). However, none of these works has thoroughly theorised Cambodian CSOs' interactions with the regime.

Against this backdrop, I ask how Cambodian CSOs have reacted to the strategies of repression and cooptation employed by the country's autocratic one-party regime in the period from 2017 to late 2022. To analyse this question, I use a systematic theoretical, analytical framework derived from the literatures on autocratisation, civil society, social movements, and "shrinking space". I argue that many Cambodian CSOs have strategically allowed themselves to become coopted by the regime to avoid repression and exert a limited measure of social and political influence in a context where more confrontative approaches would endanger their organisational survival. My empirical analysis is mainly based on interviews with Cambodian CSO representatives conducted in late 2022. For security reasons, the names of the interviewees and their organisations as well as the exact dates of the conversations are withheld.

In the following part, I define my key concepts and outline my theoretical and analytical framework. Subsequently, I discuss how the Cambodian regime has sought to repress and coopt civil society and how CSOs have reacted to these strategies. In the conclusion, I provide a comparative angle, showing how the patterns evident in the Cambodia case resemble – or differ from – civil society developments elsewhere in the Southeast Asian region. Doing so also allows me to draw some wider theoretical conclusions and present avenues for future research.

## **Repression, Cooptation, and Civil Society: Theoretical Insights**

Drawing on Alagappa (2004), civil society is the "realm in the interstices of the state, political society, the market, and the society at large for organisation by nonstate, nonmarket groups that take collective action in the pursuit of the public good" (ibid, 32). Thereby, however, the term "public good" refers to the interests of [and/or represented by] individual CSOs (ibid, 34), rather than those of the public at large. Hence, the "public good" advocated by CSOs

can be selective in nature and can, in fact, be more akin to a club good. Relatedly, Alagappa (2004, 33) also conceptualises civil society as a “realm of power, inequality, struggle and conflict among competing interests” that includes CSOs with very different social and political preferences, identities, and tactics, not all of them democratic.

I follow Boykoff (2007, 282–283) in defining *repression* as the process by which autocratic regimes “attempt to diminish dissident action, collective organisation, and the mobilisation of dissenting opinion by inhibiting collective action through either raising the costs or minimising the benefits of such action”. Repression can hence take various forms, ranging from physical violence, such as clampdowns on demonstrations or the assassination or incarceration of opposition figures, to more subtle tactics, such as surveillance, intimidation, or the denial of professional opportunities (Gerschewski 2013, 21). In Southeast Asia, for instance, many autocratic regimes have shifted from crude to “legal repression” (Sombatpoonsiri 2019, 61), such as the passing of restrictive laws and regulations, including “NGO laws” or so-called anti-fake news laws (e.g., *ibid.*). Established measures for assessing the extent to which civil society is enabled or repressed in a particular country include the Freedom House Index (FHI) and the CIVICUS monitor.

Both autocracy research and social movement studies suggest that repression can either stifle civil society or promote anti-incumbent mobilisation, making repression a double-edged sword for autocratic regimes (e.g., Bischof and Fink 2015; Sombatpoonsiri 2021). However, the nascent research on how CSOs have reacted to “shrinking space” points into another direction. For instance, a recent special issue edited by Dupuy et al. (2021) reveals that while some CSOs have indeed resisted or mobilised against autocratic regime restrictions, many others have resorted to “accommodation”, circumventing restrictive regulations, avoiding government authorities, engaging in selective collaboration with government agencies, or dropping advocacies deemed as too contentious. Similarly, Fransen et al. (2020) find that advocacy CSOs faced with political repression in Bangladesh and Zambia either “disband” or “adjust” but that the majority chooses the latter option. More specifically, some of the CSOs that Fransen and his colleagues studied shifted from advocacy to welfare delivery, while most continued their advocacy work but adapted their language, focus, and partners. Similarly, research on the impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on civic space shows that during the pandemic many advocacy CSOs repurposed to delivering social services, while, concurrently, politicising certain areas of welfare provision, leading to a cross-over of advocacy and service-delivery activism (Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri 2020; 2023). So far, however, this nascent scholarship has left the cooptation offers that autocratic and autocratising regimes make to CSOs largely unexplored.

Following Gerschewski (2013, 22), I understand *cooptation* as the strategy by which autocratic and autocratising regimes “tie strategically relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite”, with patronage and corruption constituting important mechanisms to achieve this purpose. While Gerschewski pictures cooptation as occurring predominantly “on the intra-elite level” (*ibid.*), this assumption is, to a certain extent, contradicted by the example of cooptation through [ruling] parties, which he provides (*ibid.*). Rather than merely organising elite circulation among the ruling elite, autocratic parties -

and parliaments - can also act as important intermediaries between the regime and the population (e.g., Weipert-Fenner 2021, e.g., 10; 40; 46), a function they share with civil society (Edwards and Hulme 1996a, 1996b). Accordingly, it can be assumed that, just like in the case of oppositional party leaders, autocratic regime elites might also seek to coopt civil society leaders and CSOs to make them “act in line with the ruling elite’s demands” (Gerschewski 2013, 22). This is even more so because CSOs can, at times, provide regime elites with channels to society, which they themselves lack (Lorch and Bunk 2017, 990–991).

Autocracy research further argues that enhanced cooptation diminishes repression, not only because it provides autocratic and autocratising regimes with a mechanism to control potential contenders but also because repression is much more likely to spark dissent, often making cooptation the preferred option for autocratic elites (e.g., Xu 2021; see also, Gerschewski 2013). Given their extensive experience in navigating the complex political terrains of their countries, local CSOs are bound to be aware of this calculus. Hence, it can be assumed that they may deliberately allow themselves to become coopted by the regime to avoid repression. Regarding the mechanisms through which autocratic regimes coopt civil society, Wischermann et al. (2018, esp. 98, 112) flag regime initiatives to involve CSOs in policy consultations, a tactic that can enhance CSOs’ acceptance of autocratic policies, while also allowing the regime to inform itself about social demands represented by the respective CSOs. For the involved CSOs, such consultations, in turn, present avenues for limited participation (*ibid.*). This suggests that, in addition to viewing it as a way to secure their organisational survival, CSOs may also regard the acceptance of cooptation – through policy consultations and otherwise – as a means to influence autocratic policymaking.

Relatedly, Norén-Nilsson et al. (2023b) point to the multiple possible forms of conflict, cooperation, and integration that can emerge between regime elites and civil society elites. In particular, they emphasise the phenomenon of “boundary crossing” (*ibid.*, e.g., 15), whereby elite civil society actors cross over into the electoral arena or the state apparatus to assume influential positions in policymaking and to effect social and political change.

That said, the question arises whether and to what extent the civil society strategy of accepting cooptation can be successful in achieving the aims pursued by CSOs and individual civil society actors. Wischermann et al. (2018, esp. 98, 112) are sceptical in this regard, emphasising that the space for participation that CSOs can carve out by participating in policy consultations is bound to remain tightly controlled by the autocratic regimes in which they operate, an assumption that might also be conferrable to other forms of cooptation. In addition, autocracy research shows that cooptation is closely linked to divide-and-rule, because the clientelistic inclusion of some social and political groups in preferential fora, controlled by the regime, is usually accompanied by the exclusion of other such groups (Josua 2011, 19; Ghandi and Przeworski 2006). This indicates that CSOs’ strategic acceptance of cooptation can cause, or reinforce, conflicts both within the national civil society and within individual CSOs, divisions that are likely often intended by the regime. Sika (2019, 676), for instance, shows that autocratic

regimes can fragment social movements through the strategic use of cooptation and repression and that, in so doing, they usually employ cooptation as a tool to “creat[e] internal struggles” within these respective movements.

## **Repression, Cooptation, and the Fragmentation of Civil Society Space in Cambodia**

The Cambodian constitution, adopted in 1993, provides for multi-party democracy, the separation of powers, and fundamental civic freedoms (e.g., Karbaum 2011, 117). De facto, however, the CPP has monopolised political power, as illustrated by the FHI (2022), which has continuously labelled the country as “Not Free”. Since the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, international donors have promoted civil society, leading to the mushrooming of NGOs (e.g., Coventry 2017).

The pre-2018 literature on Cambodian civil society mirrors that on civil society in other countries of the Global South, lamenting CSOs’ over-reliance on foreign funding and the tendency of international donors to equate civil society with NGOs (e.g., Coventry 2017; Ou and Kim 2014), at the expense of more informal and religious civil society entities, such as community-based initiatives in the ambit of Buddhist pagodas (e.g., Ehlert 2014; Öjendal 2014, esp. 32–33). Relatedly, several works criticised the neo-liberal donor paradigm of the “New Policy Agenda”, in place since the 1990s, which encouraged the establishment of tripartite state, market, and civil society partnerships (or so-called mixed welfare systems) in the field of social service delivery, while, concurrently, promoting civil society as an accountability mechanism to ensure good governance in a cooperative, non-conflictive manner (e.g., Norman 2014; Öjendal 2014). Öjendal (2014, 26; 27), for instance, lamented a shift “[f]rom advocacy to development” among Cambodian CSOs, which, according to him, was encouraged by “development NGO-ism”. Similarly, Norman (2014) argued that pressure from the World Bank had led NGOs to shift “[f]rom shouting to counting”. In line with the World Bank’s development paradigm, he specified, NGOs had ceased to mobilise demonstrations and other more confrontative forms of advocacy to instead participate in donor-sponsored consultations with government agencies, while, concurrently, professionalising their management systems to conform to donor demands for financial “accountancy” (ibid., 244; 251).

Others, by contrast, have emphasised the role of repression and cooptation in the aforementioned shift of many Cambodian NGOs from advocacy to development and service delivery. For instance, the unattributed contribution in Norén-Nilsson et al. (2023b, 45) argues that patterns of clientelist control have entrenched the power of Cambodia’s autocratic regime elites and limited the influence of political opposition forces already since the 1990s, while the 2005 arrest of several human rights activists already marked the limits of “political space for NGOs”. Relatedly, it also shows that international donors became sceptical about the ability of NGOs to push for democratic development already from the early 2000s onwards, leading many to cut their funding to civil society (ibid., 46). In addition, both the World Bank and various other international

donors, such as the European Union, began to promote the engagement of CSOs in policy dialogues with the regime around this time (Karbaum 2011, 126).

Traditionally, the repression strategy employed by the CPP included the defamation, arrest, and assassination of oppositional activists, leading to a culture of fear (Karbaum 2011, 119–121; 131; see also, Norén-Nilsson 2019). Recently, however, the CPP has increasingly shifted to more subtle forms of repression, such as the filing of lawsuits against its critics.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the CPP has preserved its power through cooptation, incorporating strategically relevant groups, such as businessmen, cadre officials, and local elites, into its patron-client networks (e.g., Young 2019, 39; Peou 2019). However, the overall resource base of the state has remained limited and the regime has long been highly aid-dependent (e.g., Karbaum 2011, 136), making the state apparatus primarily an instrument for the accumulation of private benefits through corruption, rather than an institution offering direct access to rents. For instance, an opposition politician claimed that civil servants, police chiefs, and local governors had to pay between 10,000 and 1 Mio USD in bribes for their placements, investments made lucrative through the bribes they could subsequently elicit from citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Between 2013 and 2017, Cambodia experienced significant political liberalisation, as the CNRP's success in the 2013 elections briefly turned the country into a two-party system. The CPP's patronage system started to weaken, while political repression decreased to such an extent that public fear started to dwindle (Norén-Nilsson 2019). These developments emboldened civil society, as exemplified by several CSOs' foray into the electoral arena (Norén-Nilsson 2019; Norén-Nilsson and Eng 2020). Similarly, the 2013 to 2017 period saw a substantial increase in street protests (Vong 2022). The opening, however, did not last long.

In July 2016, political commentator and civil society organiser Kem Ley, who had encouraged the cross-over of civil society activists into electoral politics, was shot in brought daylight (e.g., Norén-Nilsson 2019). Consequently, fear among civil society and the wider public increased again (HRW 2022a).<sup>3</sup> In 2016, CNRP leader Kem Sokha, who from 1993 to 2007 ran the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (RFA, 2020a), spent six months under house arrest, owing to a case of alleged prostitution filed against him. Illustrating the shrinking of civil society space for human rights organisations in particular, the government's Anti-Corruption Unit in 2016 detained five members of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), the so-called "ADHOC 5", on allegations that they had bribed a woman portrayed as Kem Sokha's mistress (CIVICUS, n.d.). Contrariwise, civil society representatives argued that the woman had originally been an ADHOC client, who had received legal support from the group, but had later become a state witness against ADHOC, because she had been threatened by the regime.<sup>4</sup>

In September 2017, Kem Sokha was arrested on allegations of having attempted to oust the regime through a "color revolution". In November 2017, the CNRP was dissolved on the same grounds (RFA 2020b; 2023a). Coined after the non-violent popular demonstrations that ousted autocratic regimes in the former Soviet Union,<sup>5</sup> the term "color revolution" generally has a positive connotation in democracies. The



CPP's usage of the term, however, has followed that of other autocratic regimes, such as Russia, which usually have framed the aforementioned demonstrations as coups d'états instigated by "the West" (Nikitina 2014). Accordingly, the CPP in 2017 accused the CNRP of having conspired to overthrow the government with the help of "Western" donors and aligned local CSOs. Regime representatives also implicated US-based INGOs and think tanks in the alleged conspiracy, with the most prominent being the National Democratic Institute whose license to operate in the country was withdrawn. During his five-year-long trial, Kem Sokha was also questioned about trainings allegedly conducted by a Serbian NGO to improve the capacity of Cambodian CSOs to mobilise resistance against the regime, with NGO training materials (described by civil society representatives as regular training materials, not intended to promote a "color revolution") being used as incriminating evidence (Sony 2022).<sup>6</sup> Hence, the CPP's framing directly equated civil society with the political opposition, which was accused of striving for revolutionary change, thereby making CSOs targets for political repression. The shrinking of civil society space has thus been directly related to the shrinking of political space,<sup>7</sup> with critical CSOs and their foreign donors being branded as allies of the CNRP conspiring for extra-constitutional regime change.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, the regime has increasingly resorted to legal repression, weaponising the law (West 2018) against civil society. First and foremost, independent CSO activities are hindered by the Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO), the country's restrictive NGO law. Passed in 2015, it requires all "associations", including community-based organisations (CBOs) that receive no foreign support, to register with the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), thereby criminalising spontaneous collective action and social movements at the grassroots. Registration can be rejected on vague grounds, such as allegations that a group threatens the "national unity, culture, and traditions" of Cambodian society. The law also obliges all associations to remain "politically neutral" (FIDH 2015).<sup>9</sup>

Cambodian CSOs have become increasingly divided over whether and to what extent to comply with the law. Specifically, small NGOs and CBOs often lack the capacity to fulfil the extensive reporting and accounting requirements of the LANGO, a deficiency that has led some big NGOs and NGO umbrellas to provide them with training for these purposes. This approach, however, is heavily contested by other CSOs who argue that both the LANGO's requirements *and* the participation in such training overburden small CSOs, thereby preventing them from fulfilling their original missions.<sup>10</sup>

The Trade Union Law, passed in 2016, creates considerable obstacles for trade unions to register and severely limits the rights to strike and collective bargaining (HRW 2021).<sup>11</sup> All independent media outlets have been banned (HRW 2023), severely curtailing freedom of expression, while the National Internet Gateway (NIG), which the regime plans to establish, aims at allowing the regime to control all online activities (HRW 2022b). The regime also increasingly uses the tax law to harass CSOs. Specifically, several NGOs maintain income-generating activities, such as handicraft shops, to top-up their budgets for projects. While this was previously accepted, tax authorities have recently warned several NGOs that they might be required to repay income tax for several years, a threat that, if implemented, would force many NGOs into

bankruptcy.<sup>12</sup> In addition, CPP elites, state prosecutors, and courts have filed and adjudicated false legal cases against civil society activists. In September 2018, the “ADHOC 5” were sentenced to five years in jail (suspended), an act that local and international human rights organisations have interpreted as a move to criminalise human rights work (CIVICUS n.d.; RFA 2018; 2022). The regime has also criminalised public demonstrations by promoting the filing of legal cases against protesters and civil society activists under the penal code.<sup>13</sup> The Civicus Monitor (2022) classifies Cambodian civic space as “Repressed”.

In addition, the CPP is increasingly controlling civil society space through the creation of GONGOs and other coopted CSOs (HRW 2021). The Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia, the CPP’s youth wing, which portrays itself as an NGO, increasingly engages in “regime-sponsored citizen mobilisation”, including through educational and cultural events, job fairs, and the provision of health services (Vong 2022, quote on 412). In June 2016, the Civil Society Alliance Forum (CSAF) was created by government sub-decree.<sup>14</sup> Chaired by the Office of the Council of Ministers’ Secretary of State (Tha 2019), it reportedly consists of more than 2000 coopted CSOs and receives funding from both the Cambodian and the Chinese government.<sup>15</sup> According to information published on the website of the Cambodian government, the CSAF seeks “to promote cooperation between NGOs and community associations with [sic!] the government” and has engaged in “consultations” with local government authorities, NGOs, and other “stakeholders” to channel “concerns” and “proposals” to the government (Tha 2019). The representative of a coalition of development CSOs lamented that although the CSAF did not run any real programs, it mobilised networks in the provinces; made statements in support of the regime; and “claim[ed] representative status” in consultations with state agencies and government officials.<sup>16</sup> The regime has also created coopted think tanks and research centers to influence public and academic discourse. According to critics, both GONGOs and coopted think tanks frequently receive funding from Chinese GONGOs and foundations, or directly from the Chinese government.<sup>17</sup>

The statement of an anti-corruption activist illustrates the extent to which more independent CSOs feel threatened by such coopted organisations. The regime, s/he argued, had created its own CSOs, or coopted existing ones, to pretend that it was upholding democracy. In reality, however, these CSOs acted as a “mouthpiece” of the ruling party, while independent CSOs were made targets to be silenced. “They [the ruling elites] want to remain in power, and that is why they try to coopt the NGOs”.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the representative of a CSO that engages in political dialogue opined that the regime elites had learned “to create their own actors” to compete with existing CSOs, leading to a “fragmentation” of civil society space.<sup>19</sup> Illustrating this fragmentation, the country’s labour unions, for instance, have become divided into more independent ones and so-called “yellow unions”, which are affiliated with the CPP and/or controlled by employers. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), independent unions increasingly face threats to their survival, owing to restrictive laws, “union busting”, illegal lay-offs, and the filing of fabricated legal charges, including criminal charges, against union leaders (HRW 2021).

In addition to the divide between GONGOs and more independent CSOs, civil society space has also become fragmented along other lines. Specifically, the regime usually tolerates CSOs that deliver social services, because they cater to fundamental welfare needs not met by the state, while advocacy CSOs are often repressed (Springman et al. 2022). Relatedly, it reportedly maintains a “blacklist” of six local CSOs working on human rights, anti-corruption, free elections, and democracy promotion.<sup>20</sup> A representative of a civil society-based think tank distinguished between CSOs active in service delivery, which normally had a “good partnership” with the government, and CSOs working on human rights and democracy, which were often repressed.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the aforementioned representative of the CSO working on political dialogue differentiated between “claimed spaces”, which were demanded or appropriated by CSOs in areas of their own interests, and “invited spaces”, which were created by the regime to make civil society participate in service delivery and policy consultations.<sup>22</sup>

### **Civil Society Reacts: The Strategy of Accepting Cooptation**

Given the threat of repression, several CSOs and individual civil society activists allow themselves to become coopted by the regime to secure their survival and be able to continue their activities. The representative of a CSO coalition working on public policy stated that it was “undeniable” that many service-oriented CSOs accepted cooptation because they had to cooperate with state authorities to run their projects and provide services to their beneficiaries.<sup>23</sup> Regime officials, in turn, often used these examples to put pressure on human rights and democracy CSOs, asking them, “why” some [service-delivery] CSOs “can collaborate with the government” and comply with different types of government regulations, while they [the advocacy CSOs] could not and whether the reason for this might be that they had something to hide.<sup>24</sup> However, many advocacy CSOs and individual advocacy activists have accepted cooptation as well. One interviewee stated,

Some NGO leaders who used to be critical [of] the ruling party and this current regime, now [...] have joined the government, they have joined the ruling party. It could be their personal choices, but I have seen it as sign of the three Cs – coerc[ing], controlling and coopting – [that] are going on in Cambodia nowadays.<sup>25</sup>

The resulting forms of cooptation have differed according to the involved CSOs’ areas of engagement and the personalities and interests of individual civil society leaders. In November 2022, a founder of the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture and leader of the Grassroots Democratic Party (GDP), a party initiated by Kem Ley (Norén-Nilsson 2019), joined the CPP to be appointed as Secretary of State of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Several GDP representatives welcomed the move as an opportunity to improve the lives of Cambodian farmers (e.g., ).<sup>26</sup> When the regime banned the *Voice of Democracy* (VoD), the country’s last independent media outlet in February 2023, Prime Minister Hun Sen offered its employees to apply for

positions in the civil service without having to take the usual entry examination. Twenty-five former VoD staffers reportedly accepted the offer (RFA 2023b). Around the same time, *Radio Free Asia* (RFA) reported that eight former opposition activists had joined the CPP and were about to be awarded positions in the government or the civil service, among them two well-known environmental conservationists who had formerly belonged to the CNRP and were appointed to senior positions in the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications. A bizarre photo, published in the media, showed them with a handwritten sign stating, “We no longer fall into Sam Rainsy’s traps,” referring to the CNRP’s leader Sam Rainsy, currently exiled in France. Civil society and opposition leaders alleged that the two activists had joined the CPP out of personal interest (RFA 2023c).<sup>27</sup>

Cambodian civil society elites who have joined the state apparatus have often explained their decision to engage in such “boundary crossing” with their desire to have more impact and their “belief that the state” and the political field “enable more effective engagement than the civil society field to achieve impact in relation to social change” (Haryanto and Norén-Nilsson 2023, quotes on 224, 225). However, for the aforementioned civil society leaders, this interpretation is contradicted by the existing climate of repression, which raises doubts about whether these leaders joined the state entirely out of their own choice; the limited social and political influence that Cambodian CSOs have been able to achieve by allowing themselves to become coopted (see further, below); and the fact that more independent CSOs have heavily criticised such “boundary crossing”. Illustrating the divisions that the strategy of accepting cooptation has been causing within the national civil society, a more independent civil society leader stated,

[T]hose who have chosen to be part [of the regime] or to go along, [...] I perceive them as just those who accept the status quo and try to stay relevant [...], but they ignore the violation of human rights and the decline of democracy. The way they cooperate is just [...] a way to legitimize the current status quo.<sup>28</sup>

However, even CSOs anxious to avoid direct cooptation by the regime have become eager to establish connections with state ministries and local administrations, including by participating in consultation mechanisms, such as hearings, expert rounds, law-making processes, or governmental Technical Working Groups (TWGs), which constitute mechanisms used by the regime for cooptation purposes. Several CSO representatives described their participation in such *consultations* as forming part of their wider strategy to influence public policy in a context where adopting a more “confrontational”<sup>29</sup> approach would be difficult. For instance, a member of a civil society-based research institution that provides input to policy decision-makers portrayed his/her CSO’s approach as conducting “advocacy based on evidence” and engaging the government “in a diplomatic way”.<sup>30</sup> Funded by major European donors, the research institution has also participated in an annual conference led by Prime Minister Hun Sen. His/her CSO was “always welcome by government”, the interlocutor stated, as it collected and

analysed primary data that was urgently needed by the government.<sup>31</sup> Whether their recommendations were adopted, however, was out of his/her and his/her colleagues' control. "All depends on their [the policymakers'] decision."<sup>32</sup> Talking about the LANGO, the country's restrictive NGO law, the interlocutor stated that "the law [...] has provided some kind of guideline or direction that civil society needs to come along with. [...] I think it's also a good way to have a clear direction in terms of law enforcement",<sup>33</sup> indicating his/her reluctance to criticise the regime.

Contrariwise, a leading representative of a development NGO umbrella openly criticised repressive regime regulations, such as the LANGO and the NIG, and also lamented the increasing cooptation of Cambodian civil society. Nevertheless, his/her organisation participated in ministerial consultations on the NIG and the amendment of the LANGO to improve the legislations. "We try to use that form [consultations] as much as possible to change the policy", the civil society representative said, adding that if the government made policies without the input of civil society, they were worse.<sup>34</sup> The interlocutor's umbrella organisation is also a member of the consultation process on the National Strategic Development Plan, led by the Ministry of Planning (MoP); a regular participant in the MoP's TWG on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals; and a member of the TWG on the access to information law. "We never say no" to an invitation to join an official consultation process, the interviewee conceded, framing this approach as part of a wider strategy employed by his/her organisation to gain or maintain political influence. "[T]here is some space at the policy level that we claim".<sup>35</sup> His/her CSO umbrella always attempted to discuss the content of such consultations with its member NGOs and also tried to channel the member NGOs' demands back to the government, s/he explained. "We work back and forth".<sup>36</sup> De facto, however, the CSO umbrella's success in influencing regime policy appears to have been limited. For instance, the interviewee elaborated that during the recent round of consultations on the amendment of the LANGO the MOI had accepted some recommendations advanced by the participating CSOs. At the same time, however, it had also inserted new provisions into the draft amendment that were bound to make the law worse.<sup>37</sup>

A representative of a rights-based CSO criticised the approach of participating in consultations with the regime, arguing that for most CSOs it merely constituted a "security tactic" to please the government and safeguard their projects.<sup>38</sup> Instead of providing a real opportunity for CSOs to influence public policymaking, s/he opined, "it [the consultation process] is more like chatting".<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the government used these consultations as a pretext to refute international criticism, constantly telling international donors who attempted to criticise certain laws that these laws were still being discussed with civil society. His/her CSO, s/he elaborated, had provided input on the LANGO several years ago, before it had been passed, and already back then the government had not listened to civil society. At the time of research, the CSO refused to participate in government consultations.<sup>40</sup> The representative of a CSO coalition that does participate in the consultations on the amendment of the LANGO likewise opined that the government had initiated these consultations to buy time by "show[ing] to the donors and development partners" that it had initiated a dialogue with civil society to improve the law.<sup>41</sup>

The member of another CSO that avoids taking part in consultations with the regime called them a “greenwashing ceremony” where CSOs were unable to freely discuss policies and provide genuine input.<sup>42</sup> Some CSOs had been invited for consultations on the amendment of the LANGO, s/he specified, and had participated “for the sake of invitation” but their ability to make an impact had been limited.<sup>43</sup> However, such consultations, at times, provided CSOs with an opportunity to establish personal connections to policy-makers, s/he noted, adding that the quality of the specific consultation processes also depended on these personal relations and the expertise of the respective CSOs. Allowing oneself to become coopted, through the inclusion in government consultations and otherwise, s/he said, was “the way right now”, with all civil society actors doing it to a certain extent, because “it is better than just being silenced by the government”.<sup>44</sup>

However, the regime also uses the selective inclusion of some CSOs in policy consultations to divide and rule civil society. For instance, it usually includes service- and public policy-oriented CSOs in the consultation processes, while human rights organisations are normally excluded.<sup>45</sup> Relatedly, and in line with the regime’s interest to preside over a divided civil society, rights-based CSOs often accuse service- and policy-oriented CSOs that participate in government consultations of siding with the regime. The consultations hence increase conflict among CSOs that have the “same objective but a different position [strategy]”, as the representative of a policy-oriented CSO stated. “[It is] difficult to find unity and solidarity among civil society”.<sup>46</sup> More specifically, this interlocutor also recalled how during one consultation on the amendment of the LANGO the more independent CSOs in the room had suddenly been confronted with a group of GONGOs that had echoed the position of the MOI [the ministry implementing the LANGO and the convenor of the consultation process] by stating that the LANGO was already good. When the more independent CSOs had disagreed, “the government start[ed] to question: Why? You are from the civil society. You do not have unity among yourself. [...] And then they also questioned back to us [the more independent CSOs] about the representativeness of NGO[s].”<sup>47</sup> The aforementioned leading representative of the development NGO umbrella pointed to divisive impacts that are more indirect in nature. His/her CSO coalition, s/he explained, usually shared insights from the government consultations in which it participated both with its member CSOs and with CSOs from outside its network. However, the member CSOs usually received the information faster, including through special Telegram groups established by the umbrella organisation. Consequently, the non-members sometimes accused the organisation of excluding them from information.<sup>48</sup>

Illustrating the paradoxical interplay between repression and cooptation, the MOI, which implements the LANGO and uses the consultations on its amendment to divide-and-rule Cambodian civil society, also, at times, presents itself as the patron of relatively independent CSOs that struggle with autocratic constraints at the local level. Specifically, the repression of civil society advocacy is often even more pronounced in the provinces, where local authorities and police units frequently restrict CSO events permitted under the LANGO; harass civil society activists; or demand bribes for allowing legally approved CSO programmes to proceed (Springman et al. 2022).<sup>49</sup> One CSO

representative, for instance, recalled how during an NGO training, “two policemen jumped in like [...] ninja[s] and took a photo of the training”, adding that local policemen and government officials also frequently requested CSOs to provide them with the participant lists, agendas, and materials of their events, although CSOs registered with the MOI were officially allowed to conduct activities throughout the country.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, many CSOs have stopped working in geographical locations where repression from local authorities is high (Springman et al. 2022), while others have begun to send advance letters to local government officials to inform the latter about their events and/or request permission, although this is not required by the law.<sup>51</sup>

Still other CSOs have chosen to seek help from and/or align themselves with the MOI. Specifically, when faced with local authorities attempting to block their events, some NGO leaders “make a phone call to the official in charge of NGOs at the MOI for intervention [to ask him to intervene] so that they can proceed with the meeting, training”, the aforementioned representative of a civil society think tank stated.<sup>52</sup> Illustrating this pattern, the leader of a rights-based CSO recalled how a provincial governor had tried to prevent a meeting organised by his/her CSO by requesting the group to get permission from the provincial government beforehand. The CSO had then called a high-ranking state official who had intervened on its behalf. In another case, the interlocutor elaborated, “my president [the president of the CSO] called the commune chief [and told him:] if you do not allow the [name of the CSO] meeting, I will complain to the MOI”.<sup>53</sup> Some CSO representatives described the tactic of enlisting the support of the MOI as successful in preserving civil society space.<sup>54</sup> For the MOI, however, such top-down interventions to implement enabling civil society legislation and/or force NGO programmes through, against the will of local governors and police units, primarily seem to constitute a way to strengthen its control over local state authorities in the context of autocratic power struggles.<sup>55</sup>

According to several civil society representatives, the MOI’s [selective] support to relatively independent CSOs is also linked to power struggles between some factions of the MOI on the one hand and the Prime Minister’s Office on the other hand.<sup>56</sup> Specifically, while the police is officially under the MOI, Prime Minister Hun Sen has reportedly installed a close relative as the national police chief, thereby weakening the MOI’s authority over the force. Similarly, provincial governors, who are also formally under the purview of the MOI, have been reported to frequently refuse the MOI’s directives, owing to clientelistic networks linked to the Prime Minister’s camp. While one faction within the MOI has reportedly supported Hun Sen’s initiative to amend the constitution to allow his son to succeed him as Prime Minister, another one has rejected the move, enhancing conflict *within* the MOI.<sup>57</sup>

In this context, the Minister of Interior and factions of the MOI have apparently reached out to civil society, an initiative endorsed by CSOs who consider these elite forces as more neutral and “state-like” than the Prime Minister’s camp. One civil society representative, for instance, distinguished between the MOI, which, according to him/her, emphasised “capacity”, and the Prime Minister’s Office, which practiced “Machiavellian politics”.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, another civil society leader claimed that the

Minister of Interior “cooperates with any actor” but did so not as a party representative but “as state”, adding that the MOI was “still more or less [politically] neutral” and holding “a neutral position” vis-à-vis civil society. Moreover, the Minister of Interior was “not extremist” and was also often confronted with members of the international community pressing him to open civic space, the interlocutor claimed.<sup>59</sup>

In the eyes of some CSOs, aligning themselves with the MOI hence seems to constitute not only a security strategy to secure their survival but also a means to tap power struggles within the ruling elite to promote their own interests. In so doing, however, they risk providing legitimacy to the MOI, which, at the same time, represses CSOs by implementing the LANGO and uses policy consultations strategically to divide and rule the national civil society. Illustrating how civil society actors perceived to be at the forefront of defending civic space can lend legitimacy to autocratic elites, a civil society leader, whose rights-based CSO used to be heavily persecuted but is now, to a certain extent, patronised by the MOI, referred to the Minister of Interior as someone “who knows about his duty and responsibility for the country” and “ensures that these NGOs do a good job for the country [...] and for security”.<sup>60</sup>

## **How Two Watchdog Organisations Adapted to Repression and Cooptation**

The pattern of advocacy CSOs shifting from confrontation to cooptation is illustrated by two local watchdog CSOs. The first is Human Rights Cambodia (HRC).<sup>61</sup> In the trials against the CNRP, the organisation was accused of having supported the CNRP’s alleged plans to initiate a “color revolution”, resulting in legal sanctions and severe harassment against its members. An HRC representative stated that, during the trials, HRC had been treated “like [the] enemy of the government”, with public prosecutors portraying [his/her and other] human rights NGOs as “experts” who had assisted the political opposition with financial support and strategic advice.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, s/he recalled that a judge had presented training materials from a civil society workshop, which HRC members had attended in Indonesia, one of the countries accused by the CPP of having supported the “color revolution” (RFA 2020b), framing these materials as evidence against HRC. This episode, the HRC representative stated, had made HRC activists realise that “everything we speak” could be used “as evidence against us”.<sup>63</sup>

The repression forced HRC to change its overall strategy. After the trials against the CNRP, the HRC representative elaborated, the organisation had shifted from a “confrontational” approach to one of “work[ing] with government to bring about change”.<sup>64</sup> “We reached the turning point”, s/he concluded.<sup>65</sup> Specifically, while HRC previously focussed on providing legal support to victims of human rights violations and conducted advocacy campaigns to pressure the regime to respect human rights, it now increasingly engages in dialogues with government agencies, thereby tying into the regime’s efforts to coopt CSOs by involving them in consultations. For instance, HRC now organises meetings between local communities and provincial governors or other local government



officials, where local communities are encouraged to voice their interests and concerns and exercise their right to freedom of expression through “dialogue”.<sup>66</sup> The costs of the dialogues often appear to be borne by HRC, illustrating that material resources often flow from Cambodian CSOs to the regime rather than vice versa. For instance, the HRC representative explained that when they requested local government officials to organise community workshops, the latter usually argued that they did not have the resources to do so. “[S]o we [HRC] support”.<sup>67</sup>

Given the widespread climate of fear, the extent to which local communities (are able to) openly express their views in such dialogues and workshops remains questionable. In addition, such community consultations can contribute to the survival of the autocratic one-party regime by allowing its representatives to inform themselves about pressing community needs and react to them before they might lead to anti-incumbent mobilisation (see also, Lorch and Bunk 2017). In the worst case, such dialogues and workshops may also allow local regime officials to identify oppositional figures in their localities and single them out for repression.

HRC also runs a project to monitor the judicial system. Moreover, it continues to advocate for the rights of disadvantaged social groups, such as victims of land grabbing, albeit within certain limits. “We do not accommodate with government when they violate human rights,” the aforementioned HRC representative claimed.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, HRC representatives also, to a certain extent, continue to criticise problematic government policies and regime repression in the press.

Like other CSOs, which view themselves as relatively independent and critical, HRC has recently begun to seek (and receive) backing from the MOI. It has also provided the ministry with input regarding the amendment of the LANGO, a contribution that appears paradoxical given that HRC reportedly forms part of the regime’s blacklist.<sup>69</sup> The aforementioned HRC representative described her/his organisation’s new approach as an “opportunity to bring change in [the] practice and policy of the government [...] in a soft way”<sup>70</sup> more acceptable to the regime. “Now they [the regime] are open for us. They treat us as strong partners of the government.”<sup>71</sup>

Pressure from other local CSOs and international donors seems to have contributed to the HRC’s change in strategy. Specifically, the aforementioned HRC representative interviewed stated that “some people feel [that] we work in a confrontation [sic!] way” that is opposed to the [common civil society] strategy of working with government.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, some CSOs have also encouraged HRC to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with one or several line ministries,<sup>73</sup> a recommendation that HRC has so far rejected, ostensibly to preserve a limited amount of autonomy for itself, insisting that registration with the MOI under the LANGO is enough.<sup>74</sup>

Like HRC, the Anti-Corruption NGO<sup>75</sup> has long been a “target” of the regime, owing to its expertise on corruption in Cambodia.<sup>76</sup> Previously, the NGO focussed on publicising corruption offenses and on lobbying the government to combat corruption. Recently, however, it has begun to also participate in government consultations and to facilitate trainings for local government officials. For instance, it obtained funding from the European Union (EU) to support a school of governance, located under the MOI,

which provides capacity building for local government officials. More concretely, the Anti-Corruption NGO worked with the Department of Function and Resources (DFR) and the Department of Integrity and Governance (DIG), both under the MOI, to establish the school. Officially, the main aim of the initiative was to enhance the capacity of the local administration to provide services to citizens in a more effective and transparent manner. The Anti-Corruption NGO has also cooperated with the DFR and the DIG to develop an electronic complaint mechanism - in the form of a mobile phone app - to enable citizens to convey complaints about state services to the responsible local authorities.<sup>77</sup> In light of the CPP's ongoing efforts to enhance digital surveillance, however, the initiative appears to be highly problematic.

The Anti-Corruption NGO has reportedly received backing from the MOI when it has been confronted with hostility on the part of local government authorities. In one case, for instance, a local governor reportedly attempted to block a multi-stakeholder dialogue on the aforementioned complaint app, but an intervention by the MOI ultimately enabled the event to take place.<sup>78</sup> When there are collaborative projects between the Anti-Corruption NGO and the MOI, it usually seems to be the Anti-Corruption NGO that has to provide the funding.<sup>79</sup> The CSO also works with the Ministry of Economy and Finance, including by providing thematic input regarding processes of public procurement, which are prone with corruption.<sup>80</sup>

Like other CSOs, the Anti-Corruption NGO engages in a difficult balancing act, trying not to cross the "ruling elites' red lines", while, concurrently, attempting to realise at least parts of its agenda in areas where this agenda aligns with that of individual government agencies.<sup>81</sup> "We have no choice. We try to navigate."<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, the CSO is unable to publicly criticise the corruption and patronage network that underlie the CPP's autocratic one-party regime. However, it collects and analyses relevant data, while also attempting to team up with external experts and think tanks. "We work smart", avoiding direct confrontation with the government.<sup>83</sup>

## **Cambodia in Regional Comparison**

In this article, I have shown that Cambodia's autocratic one-party regime has gone to great length to repress and coopt civil society and that many Cambodian CSOs have reacted to this double strategy by allowing themselves to become coopted to avoid repression, secure their survival, and exert a measure of social and political influence in a context where other avenues for political participation have been foreclosed. More precisely, the Cambodian regime often at first represses CSOs – or threatens them with repression – and subsequently allows them to maintain their operations under the condition that they accept varying measures of cooptation. While the strategy of accepting (partial) cooptation is often effective in enabling Cambodian CSOs to secure their organisational survival and maintain their activities, its success in permitting them to exert social and political influence tends to be limited, owing to the manifold structural limitations embedded in the autocratic political system in which Cambodian civil society operates. Specifically, the participation of CSOs in government consultations, promoted by

international donors under the labels of good governance and the establishment of tripartite state, market, and civil society partnerships since the 1990s (e.g., Norman 2014), has often provided the regime with a veneer of democratic legitimacy, while the ability of CSOs to use these fora to influence public policymaking has remained highly circumscribed. During my research, several Cambodian civil society activists argued that the alignment of local CSOs with individual state agencies, in particular the MOI, also had to be seen in the wider context of “power struggle[s] among factions of ruling elites”<sup>84</sup> and “conflict[s] within the ruling party”, which CSOs could tap in order to promote their own interests<sup>85</sup> and strengthen the state “as state”<sup>86</sup> to prevent [or stop] it from merely being a vehicle of the CPP. So far, however, there is no evidence that such manoeuvring has significantly widened civil society space.

Concurrently, the CSO strategy of accepting cooptation has created new divisions within Cambodian civil society, and enhanced existing ones, as CSOs have quarrelled over the legitimacy of this approach; the right balance between advocacy, dialogue with the government, and service delivery; and the selective inclusion and exclusion of CSOs in and from specific consultation processes, conflicts that ultimately strengthen the regime. “[T]he government is very smart,” one civil society activist stated,<sup>87</sup> while another concluded that the CPP had been “learning to prevent a color revolution”.<sup>88</sup>

Civil society developments in other autocratic and autocratising regimes in Southeast Asia illustrate that these patterns are relevant beyond the Cambodian case, although their specific constellations vary according to the specific nature of the regime, the interests of civil society, and the resource base of the state. During the time of closed military rule in Myanmar (1962–2010), for instance, many NGOs, CBOs, and faith-based groups accepted cooptation by the military to avoid repression, be able to operate, and deliver social services to their constituencies. Their ability to exert political influence, however, was close to nil, with the contributions of most CSOs remaining limited to filling gaps in state-run service delivery. Accordingly, most CSOs presented themselves as purely apolitical, a posture that also appeared logical in view of the facts that the military had brutally suppressed the 1988 student demonstrations [and, later on, the 2007 Saffron Revolution] and bottom-up liberalisation remained elusive. Given the weakness of the civil bureaucracy and widespread poverty, material resources normally flew from civil society to local communities, with CSOs often being forced to allow the regime to take some of the credit (Lorch 2006).

In Thailand, successive autocratic regimes run or backed by the military and the monarchy have managed to coopt significant sections of the national civil society. For instance, several local CSOs have subscribed to the illiberal narrative of “Thai-style democracy” and/or cooperated with royalist-military establishments to spread their communitarian visions of development and gain access to state resources (e.g., Pitidol 2016). Contrariwise, oppositional civil society movements, such as the “Red Shirts”, loyal to former populist president Thaksin Shinawatra, have long been targets of repression. In 2006 and 2014, the royalist movements of the People’s Alliance for Democracy and the People’s Democratic Reform Committee launched massive demonstrations against the governments of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, preparing the ground for military

coups (Sinpeng and Arugay 2015; see also the contribution of Bunte (2023, 6–11) in this special issue). Similarly, civil society actors loyal to the monarchy and the military have long participated in the repression of critical civil society activists (Sombatpoonsiri 2018).

In the Philippines, the cooptation of CSOs by less-than-democratic political elites began during the democratic period from 1986 onwards. Since the 1992 elections, civil society activists supported the presidential campaigns of different types of political elites and, when the presidential contenders they had backed came to power, were often allowed to “cross-over” into the government and assume high-ranking positions in the administration or the Cabinet (e.g., Abinales and Amoroso 2005; Lewis 2013). Until the mid-1990s, international donors supported the emergence of mixed welfare systems and other tripartite state, market, and civil society partnerships, enhancing the collusion between CSOs and political elites (Lorch 2022). Like their Cambodian counterparts, Philippine civil society activists have attempted to exploit factions within the ruling elite to promote their agendas and interests. Some, for instance, have prided themselves of practicing “political judo”, using the strength of their political elite opponents to realise their own goals.<sup>89</sup> However, as Arugay’s and Baquisal’s (2023, quote on 5) contribution to this special issue shows, the entanglement of “civil society in partisan conflicts between warring political elites” created divisions within Philippine civil society that later limited its ability to protect their country’s democracy against the autocratic onslaughts of populist president Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), who exploited the existing divisions among CSOs and coopted parts of the national civil society (*ibid.*, e.g., 3, 7).

These findings complement the existing research on autocratic and autocratising regimes by showing that, rather than always occurring at the elite level (e.g., Gerschewski 2013), cooptation can also be geared towards civil society. In addition, they provide evidence for recent research on “shrinking space”, which shows that, rather than either resisting repression or disbanding because of it, CSOs often adapt to autocratic constraints (e.g., Dupuy et al. 2021). More specifically, the insights presented here add to this scholarship by showing that the strategic acceptance of cooptation can constitute one specific way in which CSOs can choose to adapt to “shrinking space”. However, while the strategy of accepting cooptation often seems to be successful in enabling CSOs to survive, its effectiveness in enabling them to exert social and political influence appears to be highly circumscribed. This resonates with the existing research on autocratisation, which shows that cooptation often reduces (the need for) repression, as it is often effective in stabilising autocratic rule (e.g., Xu 2021; see also, Gerschewski 2013). Future research should further explore the multiple interactions between repression and cooptation and how they impact civil society in different national settings.

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**Notes**

1. Interview: representative of a human rights organisation, Phom Penh, November 2022.
2. Opposition politician, November 2022; place and circumstances of the statement withheld.
3. Confidential expert conversation, October 2022.
4. Interview: confidential source, Phom Penh, November 2022.
5. In particular, the Ukrainian “Orange”, the Georgia “Rose”, and the Kyrgyz “Tulip” Revolutions, often named after the colours worn by protesters.
6. Interview: confidential source; Phom Penh, November 2022.
7. Online interview: civil society activist, October/November 2022.
8. Online interview: representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
9. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
10. Ibid.
11. Online interview: trade union activist, November 2022.
12. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
13. Ibid.
14. Online interview: representative of a CSO working on political dialogue, October 2022.
15. Ibid.
16. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
17. Ibid.
18. Online interview: representative of an anti-corruption CSO, November 2022.
19. Online interview: representative of a CSO working on political dialogue, October 2022.
20. Screenshot of the names of the blacklisted NGOs; on file with the author.
21. Online interview: representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
22. Online interview: representative of a CSO working on political dialogue, October 2022.
23. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
24. Ibid.
25. Online interview: representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
26. Corroborated in confidential expert communication.
27. Corroborated in confidential expert communication.
28. Online interview: representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
29. Interview: representative of a human rights organisation, Phom Penh, November 2022.
30. Online interview: member of a civil society-based research institute, October 2022.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Online interview: leading representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.
38. Interview: representative of a CSO, Phnom Penh, November 2022.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
42. Online interview: representative of a CSO, October 2022.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Online interview: leading representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
46. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
47. Ibid.
48. Online interview: leading representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022.
49. Interview: representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Interview: representative of a rights-based CSO, Phom Penh, November 2022.
54. Ibid; see also, online interview: representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
55. Interview: representative of a rights-based CSO, Phom Pen, November 2022.
56. Ibid; see also representative of a civil-society-based think tank, October 2022.
57. Interviews: confidential sources, November 2022.
58. Interview: confidential source, November 2022.
59. Interview: confidential source, November 2022.
60. Interview: representative of a rights-based CSO, Phom Penh, November 2022.
61. Name changed for safety reasons.
62. Interview: HRC representative, Phnom Penh, November 2022.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Screenshot of the names of the blacklisted NGOs; on file with the author.
70. Interview: HRC representative, Phnom Penh, November 2022.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Name changed for safety reasons.
76. Personal opinion, anonymous source familiar with the Anti-Corruption NGO, November 2022.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.

79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Interview: representative of a human rights organisation, Phom Penh, November 2022.
86. Ibid.
87. Online interview: representative of a CSO coalition, November 2022:
88. Interview: representative of a human rights organisation, Phom Penh, November 2022.
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